Moral Rapport in Communion of the Spirit

Paul K. Moser | ORCID: 0000-0002-5036-4588
Loyola University Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, USA
pmoser@luc.edu

Abstract

The communion (koinonia) of the Spirit calls for moral rapport with God, based on the reception of divine righteousness in the “fruit of the Spirit” among humans. This article explains the centrality of such moral rapport to the koinonia of the Spirit, on the basis of insights from the book of Genesis, some of the Hebrew psalmists, and the apostle Paul. It gives special attention to Paul’s perspective on the “fruit of the Spirit,” thereby identifying distinctive evidence for the reality and the goodness of God, by way of contrast with either a purely mystical or a purely intellectual approach. Paul offers a perspective including “koinonia of Jesus Christ,” pointing to his koinonia with God in Gethsemane and thus confirming the central role of moral and volitional personal rapport with God. This approach gives moral and christological depth to the koinonia of the Spirit, enriching it with divine righteousness.

Keywords


The communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.
2 Cor 13:13
Their own conscience bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them.

Rom 2:15

1 Introduction

Psalm 42 acknowledges the skeptical question “Where is your God?,” coupled with another doubt-driven question for God: “Why have you forgotten me?” The psalmist’s questions have persisted in subsequent history, even among people who believe in God. We shall identify a widely neglected biblical answer that grounds and enlivens belief in God while underwriting morally robust ethics for the common good. The ground to be clarified is moral rapport between God and humans: that is, a constructive interchange of moral goods between God and humans in which humans intentionally cooperate with the divine moral goods on offer, such as the fruit of God’s Spirit.

A key thesis of this article is that some personal character traits, or personality qualities, of God are directly revealed in order to be found by receptive humans in some moral experiences, including in human conscience. We shall focus on such traits, including what Paul calls “the fruit of the Spirit,” as moral features integral to being worthy of worship and thus to being God. Divine revelation in such traits can occur even in some cases in which God is not acknowledged by humans. They can be aware of some divine character traits without being aware that they are traits of God in their experience.¹

Initial divine revelation can be ambiguous for humans, but salient divine power, in the relevant biblical perspective, can be found in moral rapport between God and humans. The divine power in question includes distinctive evidence of God’s reality and goodness that can be a trustworthy experiential basis not only for resilient belief in God, but also for a robust ethics promoting love for the sake of the common social good. Such an experiential basis can enliven belief in God, in thought and in practice.

¹ A general analogue to this distinction can be found in Matthew 25:31–46, where Jesus sets an important standard for accountability before God. For discussion of the underlying de re—de dicto distinction, see Paul K. Moser, “God de Re et de Dicto,” Scottish Journal of Theology 74 (2021): 135–146.
The divine power and its corresponding evidence have an interactive interpersonal feature between God and humans. This feature includes moral rapport between them that consists in a cooperative and loyal moral relationship. It engages volitional, emotional, and intellectual traits of humans, in search of full commitment from them. It thus includes the power to do God’s will, beyond any other powers. If God is perfectly caring, an interpersonal relationship of moral rapport is to be expected and valued. Indeed, it is God’s distinctive signature among receptive humans, and it is offered even to God’s enemies, in keeping with ethics for the sake of the common good. Good news is thus available to humans, despite their lingering doubts and confusions.

2 God in Human Images

Inquirers typically have neglected the key role of moral rapport between God and humans in evidence for God’s reality and goodness. This neglect stems from a distorting tendency of humans to represent God and evidence for God in their own desired images. For instance, philosophers tend to look for evidence of God in abstract philosophical arguments, such as those of familiar “natural theology.” So, they often talk about arguments for a First Cause, a Designer, a Fine-Tuner, or a Greatest Conceivable Being. They typically assume that the familiar tools of their trade, such as arguments and conceptual analyses, would be adequate for capturing available evidence of God.

Following Jesus and the apostle Paul, we should look for evidence to God’s unique personal character traits self-manifested to us, including the divine moral qualities of personality that qualify God as worthy of worship. In doing so, we will retain an indispensable connection between evidence for God and what it is to be God, namely, a morally perfect personal being worthy of worship. We also will find an experiential basis for an ethics of universal righteous love toward other people. To the extent that we neglect such character traits in evidence for God, we will neglect not only salient evidence for God but also God himself.

Genesis 3, regardless of historical details, offers a serious lesson about distorting God in a human image. God gives Adam and Eve a command regarding what they may eat: “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree

of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die" (Gen 2:16–17; biblical translations are from the NRSV, updated edition.) The woman, however, was challenged to disobey by a deceiver: “You will not die, for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food and that it was a delight to the eyes and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate” (Gen 3:4–6). Eve chooses her own perceived avenue to “make one wise” over God’s will, and Adam follows suit in their joint disobedience toward God. They assume that their own desired path to become wise will save them from a divine deficiency, including God’s not wanting them to be “like God.”

Adam and Eve suffer a failure of trust in God, and their disobedience is a result. They do not trust God’s goodness in relation to the divine prohibition on eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. We can ask why they do not trust God’s goodness, but the book of Genesis does not pursue this question. They seem to be afraid of missing out on something good for them, namely, being “like God” in “knowing good and evil.” They try to hide from God in the wake of their disobedience, and their hiding arises from their being afraid of God: “The man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, ‘Where are you?’ He said, ‘I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself’” (Gen 3:8–10).

God responds not by destroying Adam and Eve but by blocking them from access to the tree of life on their human terms: “At the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life” (Gen 3:24). We shall see that God, in divine mercy, has not given up on wayward humans but seeks their restoration on terms suited to God’s unique moral character, coupled with distinctive evidence of divine goodness.

A central lesson is that human distrust of God’s goodness distorts God’s wisdom for humans and leaves them fearfully alienated from God and thus at odds with divine righteousness. Such distrust leads people to adopt their own alter-
natives in portraying and relating to God, and those alternatives miss the mark of God’s intended divine-human relationship of moral rapport. In their disobedience, Adam and Eve show that they are deficient in moral rapport with God, owing to an underlying distrust of God’s goodness. We need to clarify a divine way of correction for humans alienated from God.

3 God in God’s Image

Paul presents a corrective alternative to “human wisdom” in relating to God: “My speech and my proclamation were made not with persuasive words of wisdom but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God” (1 Cor 2:4–5). A pressing issue concerns “the power of God.” What is this power, in this context? In addition, how are humans to receive this power? Answers to these questions depend on God’s purpose in relating to humans.

Paul points to a divine purpose with a question: “Do you not realize that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?” (Rom 2:4). He thinks of repentance as a person’s turning to God for a life of illumination, righteousness, and reconciliation in Christ (2 Cor 3:16–18, 5:19–21). This goodness of God, according to Paul, emerges not only in Christ but also from divine activity in human conscience, seeking the turning of humans to God in loyal cooperation. Paul thus comments on a witness to God in humans for whom “their own conscience [συνείδησεως] bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them” (Rom 2:15). God thus self-manifests a witness to God’s reality and goodness in a human conscience that can approve or disapprove of human actions and tendencies toward actions.

Paul speaks of his conscience confirming by the Holy Spirit the truth in Christ (Rom 9:1; cf. 2 Cor 4:2). Since God renews the human mind in Christ, in Paul’s perspective (Rom 12:1–2), the renewal of conscience as a morally relevant part of the mind is a live option. P.T. Forsyth thus suggests a distinction between

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an “evangelical conscience” guided by God in Christ and a “natural conscience” without such guidance. The divine goal in this context is an ongoing interactive relationship of mutuality (but not equality) with God in intended righteous reconciliation, as God self-manifests divine character traits to that end in moral experience, including conscience.

God’s power is temporally prior and morally superior to any subsequent human power or wisdom. The writer of Psalm 139 precedes Paul in giving God priority in human knowledge of God, via the priority of divine searching of humans:

O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways … You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it … Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

Psalm 139:1–3, 5–6, 23–24

The psalmist acknowledges that he cannot attain the desired powerful knowledge of God on his own. It is “too wonderful” and too “high” for his self-sufficient efforts.

The relevant knowledge depends on God trying to set some moral boundaries for the sake of a righteous relationship with a human: “hemming me in.” Such boundaries do not require God’s coercing a human will. They can bring moral influence by moral attraction suited to voluntary human responses, as

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one’s "heart," including one’s conscience, is searched. The same kind of intervention is acknowledged in Psalm 23, as part of God’s being “with” the psalmist: “Your rod and your staff, they comfort me” (Psalm 23:4). The rod and the staff are those of a shepherd seeking to guide his sheep toward what is good and away from what is bad. Divine moral searching of human conscience has that moral aim, and it seeks full human cooperation, individually and collectively. The extent to which God can successfully reveal knowledge of our moral standing before God to us will depend on our receptivity to God in moral rapport.

God takes the initiative toward the searching knowledge, and it engages the psalmist in a way that prompts his cooperation. His cooperative attitude is shown by his plea, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me.” A similar attitude of human cooperation arises in Psalm 16: “I bless the Lord, who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me. I keep the Lord always before me” (16:7–8). Likewise in Psalm 73: “Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel” (73:23–24). As God seeks to “be with” the psalmist, so also the psalmist, in voluntary cooperative response, seeks to be “with” God, despite the difficulties of life.

The psalms in question indicate moral rapport between God and the psalmists, given the agreeable mutuality involved toward righteousness. God initiates moral guidance, thereby manifesting divine righteousness and grace, and the psalmists respond with cooperation and appreciative loyalty toward God as their moral guide. With such divine-human rapport involving human moral conscience, the desired knowledge from God is not just personal but also interpersonal and interactive. In addition, it is morally directed toward removing “any wicked way” within a person. In that regard, God’s morally purifying power resides in divine moral rapport with humans, and such power can create discomfort and dissonance as well as comfort and harmony in humans. Paul, as indicated, advises the Corinthian Christians that faith in God be based on such power in moral rapport and not on “human wisdom” (1 Cor 2:4–5).

In the light of divine moral power in human experience, Paul states that “God ... is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil 2:13). In Paul’s perspective, God empowers humans in divine-human moral rapport by a self-manifestation of divine righteous love in human experience: “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Rom 5:5; see also 2 Cor 5:14). This divine love is a per-

sonal character trait of God, and we should recognize it as such, rather than as something abstract and amorphous. It empowers not only divine-human moral rapport but also unique evidence of God’s reality and goodness in human moral experience.

Human experience of divine love is familiar, if often misdescribed, from the moral give-and-take in our conscience (no accident of nature there), and our conscience, as suggested, is a key part of what Paul calls our “heart.” As a result, Paul suggests, hope and faith in God do not leave us “disappointed” or “ashamed” from a viewpoint of supporting evidence. We thus have, in human moral experience, a concrete alternative to the abstract philosophical arguments of traditional natural theology. This alternative includes experienced divine love that grounds and promotes belief in God and thereby an ethics of love for the common good.

The psalmists cited assume that God’s character is self-revealed directly to humans in the potentially motivating values of righteousness in their moral experience. Paul thinks of those values as the direct “fruit” of God’s Spirit, and not as abstract concepts or principles or as subjective human feelings or preferences: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal 5:22–23). Paul regards this fruit to be a direct expression in human experience of God’s character traits of perfect righteousness. He understands it in terms not of a remote effect of God but of direct divine self-manifestation to humans, in keeping with his quotation from the book of Isaiah about God and Gentiles: “I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me” (Rom 10:20, citing Isa 65:1). This fruit yields potentially motivating power from God in conscience that nudges or prods people, without coercion, toward rapport with God in divine righteousness. This intentional power thus seeks the kind of interpersonal mutuality characteristic of moral rapport.

The fruit of the Spirit is inherently person-based because it expresses divine intentional directedness for humans toward righteousness and divine-human rapport in it. As a result, many people testify that their conscience has “led” them to undertake a good line of action, such as for the common good. Paul thus remarks that “all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God” (Rom 8:14). The direct fruit of the Spirit enables God to self-manifest directly

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to humans in God’s own moral image and thereby to avoid distortion from various human images of God.

4 Motivating Divine-Human Rapport

Given the central place of love (agapē) in the fruit of the Spirit and in the biblical love commands, God cares about human motives and not just human actions. Our motives bear on who we are, including inwardly, and not just on what we do. They reveal our moral character, thus allowing us to be measured against God’s perfect moral character. We do not fare well in the comparison, given our selfish tendencies, but we can benefit from it nonetheless.

If God wants people to love unselfishly as God loves, in God’s unique way, which includes love of enemies, they will need a motivating instance of love from God. Paul holds that God provides that instance in the hearts of receptive people and in the self-giving life of Jesus Christ. The divine inward influence fits with the following response to God by the psalmist: “You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart … Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me” (Psalm 51:6, 10). Such deep wisdom is thus morally renewing, courtesy of God’s empowering Spirit of righteousness (Rom 8:10, 1 Cor 2:10–13).

Paul represents God as loving God’s enemies in Christ through divine reconciliation of them (Rom 5:10), and he expects people to follow suit in such love (Rom 12:20–21, 13:8–10). Such human reciprocity in divinely initiated love, including love of others, is central to robust moral rapport with God, including loyalty to God, and it is central to discerning God’s will for human life (Rom 12:1–2). Paul’s expectation is clear, and it follows the love commands from Jesus that demand a robust ethics stemming from agapē reflective of God (Mark 12:28–31). It is also demanding for us, and it thus prompts the question of how we are to proceed in satisfying it. We cannot simply “try hard” on our own, as if we were offered a moral self-help program. In addition, our moral rapport with God does not include our equality with God or that our moral power be equal with God’s moral power; we are thus at a moral disadvantage relative to a divine standard.

The key to our responding to divine moral challenges in our experience emerges from our ongoing moral rapport with God. Paul prays for such rapport

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with his aforementioned prayer for the “communion” (koinōnia) of God’s Spirit with God’s people (2 Cor 13:13). Moral rapport with God is morally robust communion with God whereby humans self-conform, aided by divine power, to God’s experienced moral character and will. Even if Paul also has in mind the “community” of God’s Spirit, the individual members, in his thought, must have communion with God to belong to that community. Membership is thus not by proxy; it calls for individual responsibility and responsiveness in relating to the Spirit of God in human experience (as suggested by Rom 2:4, 8:5–6, 13–16).

The best example of moral rapport with God is Jesus in Gethsemane, facing his coming death in Jerusalem. His initial tentative response asks for an alternative plan, but his settled response goes to the heart of his moral relationship with God, showing his moral rapport in prayer to God: “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me, yet not what I want but what you want” (Mark 14:36). Jesus thus self-conforms his will to God’s morally perfect will, courtesy of divine power, despite the pending result of his death in Jerusalem. His use of the second-person “you” for God (similar to the shift to the second-person in Psalm 23) is indispensable. Suitable moral rapport calls for such use of the second-person for God, given its direct interpersonal interaction between a human and God. Paul’s talk of the koinōnia of Jesus Christ (1 Cor 1:9) should be understood to reflect Jesus’s exemplary moral rapport with God.

God’s moral power for humans is to be found in the obedient cooperation exemplified by Jesus as self-conformity to God’s will found in moral experience. This lesson emerges in the context of Paul’s talk in Philippians 2 of koinōnia

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of the Spirit coupled with his characterization of Christ, thus having Christ's character inform his talk of the Spirit.\textsuperscript{15} Christ's character includes “the mind of Christ,” and that mind led to his obedience of the cross: “Being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:8). This obedience emerged from Gethsemane, thus suggesting that Paul would regard Gethsemane as central not only to the communion of Jesus Christ with God but also to wider communion with the Spirit characterized by Christ. Paul relates such obedience to the aforementioned idea that “God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil 2:12–13). He also relates it to “being of the same mind, having the same love,” with Christ as the authoritative personal standard from God (Phil 2:2). Given that personal standard set by Christ, Paul thinks of the needed communion to include moral rapport with God.

Communion with the Spirit of God, according to Paul, is anchored in divine righteousness. Such righteousness is inseparable from the Spirit of God and communion with the Spirit: “The Spirit is life because of righteousness” (Rom 8:10). This Spirit, according to Paul, “bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,” thus representing the role of God as “Abba, Father” expressed by Jesus in Gethsemane (Rom 8:15–16). In this regard, human communion with the Spirit is to be filial with God, in the manner of Jesus relating to God in Gethsemane as God's beloved child.

The disciples of Jesus are to follow him in moral rapport with God. As a result, Jesus taught them to pray to God: “Your will be done” (Matt 6:10), as the way in which God's moral kingdom and power come to humans. If we look for divine moral power in places at odds with God's will, we will not find it. We may find counterfeits, but they will not sustain us in divine righteousness. The promised divine moral power is, at bottom, the power to do God's will in moral rapport with God; it is not the power to do our own will apart from God. Analogously, we might look for evidence of God's reality and goodness on the basis of “human wisdom,” but that evidence will fall short. It will fail to indicate the divine power characteristic of a God worthy of worship. As a result, Jesus and Paul do not rely on abstract philosophical arguments to present their God of perfect righteousness. Instead, they rely on the power of God's perfect character and will revealed in their moral experience. They thus exemplify and recommend moral rapport with that God.

The filial model set by Jesus goes beyond a self-help program, given its distinctive moral rapport and evidence involving God. It brings people to the unique power of God as “Abba, Father” in perfect righteousness, including righteous love. Jesus and Paul cooperatively experienced that righteous love firsthand, in their moral rapport with God as Father, and that experience enabled them to be empowered by that love for the sake of the common good. The moral rapport enabled them to receive and to represent God’s righteous love with their lives, including for the good of other people. The subsequent followers of Jesus are to take the same opportunity for empowerment by God and for receiving corresponding evidence of God’s reality and moral power.

By cooperating with divine power of righteousness, in moral rapport, humans enable that power to come to fruition in what it is intended by God to be: power to draw them to God’s perfect moral character in self-conformity to it. This power seeks human cooperation that puts God and God’s righteous kingdom first, above all else. It thus seeks the transformation of moral renewal for human lives, individually and socially. The power of such transformation in righteous love offers people grounded hope in God and in God’s righteous future society that transcends familiar exclusive divisions of race, nationality, and ethnicity. Moral rapport with God thus underlies the divine redemptive plan to unite the world in divine righteousness. An ethics for the common good thus emerges. We face, however, some real obstacles.

5 Obstacles to Moral Rapport

The most harmful obstacle to moral rapport with God is, I suggest, human neglect of divine influence in conscience toward righteousness. This neglect blocks divine corrective guidance of humans in a way that leads to their alienation from God. It includes ignoring God’s effort to initiate moral rapport with wayward humans for their good. Such neglect hinders God’s moral power in conscience from coming to fruition in human cooperation with it. As a result, the fullness and the salience of this power are blocked from being realized in a person’s moral experience. God gives humans this kind of veto power over divine moral guidance in their experience, because God seeks responsive and responsible moral agents among humans and not mere manipulated pawns.

Some humans prefer a life without moral intervention from God, and they acknowledge this. They favor what they call their “autonomy” over divine moral influence and guidance. This kind of desired self-sufficiency by humans conflicts with God’s having an acknowledged role as a moral guide needed by them. Indeed, it conflicts with God’s being an active moral agent in human lives.
So, it runs afoul of God's being Lord in human moral life. Such a response to God refuses to let God be God in the domain of moral life. It can lead to the moral corruption of human conscience whereby one's conscience becomes misleading without divine corrective guidance. So, human conscience is not the unqualified "voice of God." God is needed to give it divine value in its renewal for human moral guidance, and this is a cooperative process between God and humans.

Jesus presented the parable of the sower to identify some human motives behind opposition to divine intervention in human lives. He summed up some of these motives in terms of "the cares of the age and the lure of wealth and the desire for other things, [which] come in and choke" God's intervention (Mark 4:19). He contrasts such motives with those of people who "hear the word [from God] and accept it and bear fruit" (Mark 4:20). That word can penetrate human conscience and leave people with a definite moral challenge for their lives, calling for a life-directing decision from them. Even so, the initial intervention leaves room for human disregard or opposition, thus preserving genuine human agency and responsibility in relation to God's moral challenge toward human renewal.

The writer of Psalm 81 acknowledges God's disappointment with human neglect of rapport with God:

My people did not listen to my voice;
Israel would not submit to me.
So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts,
to follow their own counsels.
O that my people would listen to me,
that Israel would walk in my ways!

Psalm 81:11–13

We have here a repeat of the problem noted in Adam and Eve: human failure to cooperate with God, including a substitution of human counsels for God's. This is an ongoing obstacle to human rapport with God, and it brings individual and social harm across religions and cultures. In the face of human opposition, God can withdraw and hide divine presence from oppositional people for a time, in order to challenge their wayward, harmful tendencies, while waiting for their repentance (Isa 45:15, Rom 1:28, 10:21). God also can bring wrath in judgment, as Paul mentions (Rom 1:18), but we cannot digress.16

16 For discussion, see Stephen H. Travis, Christ and the Judgement of God (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), chaps. 4 and 12.
Moral rapport with God often suffers from an additional obstacle: a human emphasis on good gifts received rather than on the divine gift-giver. The gifts tend to be less elusive and less challenging than God and therefore easier to embrace and to control by humans. As a result, human recipients of divine gifts often neglect the priority of their gift-giver. This tendency is found even in the moral domain. I can value a needed conviction in my conscience but disregard its source in God, from whom it comes as a needed gift. That tendency can depersonalize my conscience and corresponding moral experience in a way that omits God’s intentional, personal role in my moral experience. This occurs if I put stress on moral “laws” or “principles” to the exclusion of the superior moral lawgiver. Secular ethics tends to move in this depersonalizing direction, and the result is a deficit in motivational vitality, especially for hard moral cases (such as those akin to Gethsemane). We see the same deficit in various treatments of religious ethics. This deficit leaves human complacency and fear as serious obstacles to a robust moral life.

A common impediment to moral rapport with God is human half-heartedness toward divine righteousness. Jesus is clear on the importance of striving for whole-heartedness in his first love-command, and this priority coheres with a promise from God in the book of Jeremiah: “When you search for me, you will find me, if you seek me with all your heart” (Jer 29:13). A kind of moral complacency infects a half-hearted approach to God and divine righteousness. It detracts from God’s moral supremacy over all else and thus robs God of due moral authority. As a result, Jesus commanded: “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Matt 6:33). In that case, Jesus also promised: “Seek and you will find [God]” (Matt 7:7). So, if we want moral rapport with God, we should seek it whole-heartedly rather than half-heartedly, given God’s supreme value for a good human life with God. We can begin by attending sincerely, and then cooperatively, to the nudging from God in our conscience toward righteousness. This is a promised and promising avenue to communion with God, courtesy of the guiding fruit of God’s Spirit.

6 Conclusion

Moral rapport with God requires that we face the challenge to become righteous as God is righteous, or as Jesus put it: “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48). Even when we fall short, as we often do, the needed goal is still in place, and it is to be approached in moral rapport with God. In such rapport, we participate in, and have communion with, God’s powerful moral character and become children of God with lasting goodness. We also receive
interpersonal evidence of God’s reality and goodness. So, the challenge of moral rapport with God is its own reward, and such rapport is unmatched in robust value for human lives, individually and socially.

Moral rapport with God enlivens religious commitment to God in a way that nothing else can, because it enables God to empower the needed enlivening, thereby countering any debilitating complacency and fear. We can know that this rapport is God at work, because over time it shows God self-manifesting divine perfect righteousness with directedness for our good. It thus lets us know we are meeting God rather than some counterfeit. Courtesy of God, we have enough of a grip on what is righteous to distinguish righteousness from unrighteousness in many cases presented to us. So, we can discern the genuine article in contrast with counterfeits, at least typically, in a manner adequate for maturation in communion with God.

A final issue is whether we are willing to be conformed, with aid from divine power, to the divine goodness presented to us, without begrudging God for it. History has been mixed on the matter, but we now can say where God is to be found: in the moral rapport unique to the God of perfect righteousness. So, we no longer find ourselves hunting the snark. We now find ourselves in a world alive and illumined with the moral activity of a righteous God, including in conscience and, on that basis, in our social world at large. Ethics for the common good thus finds a ground in our moral experience, courtesy of God’s unique and active moral character of universal love for people, even for enemies. A concluding issue, then, is whether, and if so how, we value the moral values representing God as divine character traits and thus the fruit of God’s Spirit in our experience. Those divine values, in any case, now take on an importance second to none, and our response is similarly vital.17

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