In the mid-1990s, airwaves across North America were monopolized by Canadian pop diva Alanis Morissette’s “All I Really Want.” The lyrics ramble through a hodgepodge of seemingly disconnected preferences and competing desires that the singer finds present within and around her. Morissette bemoans life in a world populated by superficial people, and she desperately yearns for a soul mate, a kindred spirit, someone who truly understands. Like many others of her generation, sixteen-year-old Aminah McKinnie of Madison, Miss., spends much of her non-school waking hours on the Internet. She lives in a strangely paradoxical realm in which the opinions of peers and relationships are crucial, and yet social groups are fluid, friendships change over a period of months or even weeks, and the possibility of lifelong “best friends” is not even on the radar screen. The fluidity characteristic of the contemporary ethos is epitomized by the Internet chat room. Here participants are able to be whomever they want, to try on new identities with ease, even to the point of becoming a different person with each foray into cyberspace.
Do the resources of Christian anthropology have anything to offer in the realm described by Alanis Morissette or inhabited by Internet devotees and chat-room dwellers? The answer to this question requires a theological conversation involving Scripture, read within a particular hermeneutical context, and the intellectual underpinnings of the postmodern condition. The goal of this essay is to indicate how such a conversation might proceed. The first section sets the context by surveying the intellectual trajectory that lies behind both the advent of the centered self and its dissipation. Part two then introduces the central theological resource that Christian theology brings to the conversation, namely, the biblical concept of the *imago dei*, understood as God's intention for humankind from the beginning, embodied in Jesus Christ and finding its fullness in the eschatological new creation. The final, constructive section connects this understanding of the *imago dei* with contemporary developments in trinitarian theological and relational philosophy to propose the ecclesial self constituted in relation to the triune God as the model for forming the self in the face of the fluidity endemic to the postmodern condition.

The Context: The Rise and Demise of the Self

No concept has been more important for the understanding of the human person in Western intellectual history than the "self." The idea that every human being is a self belongs to the standard vocabulary of Western society. The "self," however, is a modern invention, one that stands at the apex of a long intellectual process. Moreover, it is now under attack from a variety of quarters. The intellectual trajectory that includes both the rise and demise of the self provides the background and forms the context for a constructive theological conversation with the contemporary anthropological situation.