Looking for God

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> *If God had a name, what would it be?*
> *And would you call it to His face?*
> *If you were faced with Him in all His glory,*
> *What would you ask if you had just one question?*
> *Yeah, yeah, God is great.*
> *Yeah, yeah, God is good.*

God has made a comeback in pop music in recent years. In her song "One of Us," Joan Osborne wonders what we might ask God if we stood face-to-face with Him.{1} Writer Tom Beaudoin sees a spilled pitcher of milk in the music video for R.E.M.'s "Losing My Religion" as a symbol of the loss of religious authority in the lives of Gen-Xers.{2} Madonna's video for the song "Like a Prayer" is full of religious symbolism: an altar, a crucifix, candles, and other icons.{3}

Tom Beaudoin, a member of Generation X himself, says his generation is "strikingly religious." They express their spirituality through pop culture rather than through institutional religion.{4}The shift from the word *religion* to *spirituality* is significant here. Having lost confidence in institutional religion to provide satisfactory answers to important issues, Xers look elsewhere; often mixing ideas and religious expressions from a variety of sources as each person chooses for him or herself what to believe.

Beaudoin says Xers are on an "irreverent spiritual quest." Feeling abandoned by parents, churches, politicians, and even technology, they seek their own path in finding meaning for their lives. Campus minister Jimmy Long writes, "Xers are twice as likely as people in [the Boomer] generation to be children of divorce. Between 1960 and 1979 the American

divorce rate tripled." He continues, "Fifty percent of today's teenagers are not living with both birth parents."{5}

Looking outside the home, Xers feel let down as they look at what the Boomer generation left them.{6} They were alarmed by the TV movie *The Day After* that was about the results of nuclear war. The spaceship Challenger blew up shortly after takeoff; Watergate was fresh in our cultural memory; environmentalists were pointing to the severe damage to nature caused by technology. Xers thus see themselves as fixers, as those who have to clean up the mess preceding generations made. But since their own backgrounds were often so difficult, many simply hope to take charge of their own lives.

Finding little stability around them to give them any confidence that there is such a thing a objective truth which remains the same, and thus no ultimate truth which makes sense of everything, they feel the burden of providing their own meaning of life and establishing their own moral standards. Jimmy Long quotes Eric, a Gen-Xer who speaks of the stress this puts on him. "There's too much pressure from outside," he says.

> *"Life gets pretty complicated when you have to think carefully about everything you do, deciding for yourself whether it's right or wrong. In the end there can be so many conflicts going on inside of you that you can't do anything, it becomes impossible to be happy with what you think at any point."{7}*

As a result of all this, when they want to find their place in this world, Xers turn to friends. Their small communities of friends provide a structure for truth and meaning. Consensus means more with respect to "truth" than logic and facts.{8} "Busters process truth relationally rather than propositionally," say Celek and Zander.{9} The emphasis on community in Xer culture reveals their desire to get along,

not get ahead; to connect, not conquer.{10}

The modernistic search for utopia without invoking God has been turned on its head with the Buster generation. Their horizons and ambitions might be smaller than those of their parents, but they have an openness to the transcendent that their parents didn't have. Spirituality is now an accepted aspect of life; Xers are open to a sense of fellowship with something bigger than themselves.

In his collection of short stories, *Life After God*, Doug Coupland allows a man he calls Scout to tell about himself and his small group of friends. Scout tells about the early, carefree days of fun and camaraderie, a time of living in paradise in which "any discussion of transcendental ideas [was] pointless."{11} As time went by, however, they all saw their dreams fade in the realities of everyday life. Scout had this to say about his life:

> *Sometimes I want to go to sleep and merge with the foggy world of dreams and not return to this, our real world. Sometimes I look back on my life and am surprised at the lack of kind things I have done. Sometimes I just feel that there must be another road that can be walked—away from this person I became—either against my will or by default. . . .*

He continues:

> *Now—here is my secret: I tell it to you with the openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again, so I pray that you are in a quiet room as you hear these words. My secret is that I need God—that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem to be capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love.{12}*

This first fully postmodern generation needs to understand that they aren't alone: we *all* need God.The good news is that God has not left us wandering in a dark place but has come looking for us. He is not aloof, off making other worlds, or too busy gussying up heaven to notice us down here. He has taken on our flesh and become one of us. What if God *was* one of us, Joan Osborne? He was! He looked like us, hurt like us, laughed like us. In this article I'm going to look at some of the characteristics of this God who became like us, to show how He has the answers Xers need.

God: A Person Who Sees and Feels

> *If God had a face, what would it look like?*
> *And would you want to see,*
> *If seeing meant that you would have to believe,*
> *In things like Heaven and in Jesus and the Saints,*
> *And all the Prophets and . . .*
> *Yeah, yeah, God is great.*
> *Yeah, yeah, God is good.*
> *Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah"* {13}

What *does* God look like? He doesn't have a physical body. But what does He "look" like character-wise? Those of us born before Gen-X have a hard time understanding that many in this generation have no real understanding of the God of the Bible, the one in whom we ask them to commit their very souls. Who *is* this God, anyway? Let's consider some of His characteristics.

A Person, Not a Force

First of all God is a *Person*, not some Star Wars "force." Because we're created in His image we can learn some things about Him from looking at ourselves. As we are persons, He is a Person. "He possesses life, self-consciousness, freedom, purpose, intelligence, and emotion,"{14} just like us. Thus it

could rightly be said that the Old Testament patriarch Abraham could be called “the friend of God” (James 2:23). One cannot be a friend with a “force.” Because God is a Person He can be involved in our lives, unlike a force, which cannot relate to us on a personal level.

One Who Sees . . .

Furthermore, this is a God who *sees*. The Bible teaches, “The eyes of the Lord are in every place, watching the evil and the good.” (Prov. 15:3) We’re told that He knows completely. God knows when the sparrow falls from the sky; He even knows the number of hairs on our heads! (Matt. 10:29-31)

More importantly, God knows our hearts (Acts 1:24). Those who recognize their need see this as great news. If, on the other hand, this makes us fearful because we know the badness in our hearts, we’re also told that “He knows how we are formed; he remembers that we are dust” (Psa. 103:14). God doesn’t look for those who meet His standard, for none of us can. He looks for the one who will believe and then obey. In fact, it’s at the place of our greatest need that He meets us.

. . . With a Father’s Eyes

Beyond that, God presents Himself to us as a father, as *the* Father. Unlike many fathers today, God takes His fatherhood seriously. He provides for our needs (Matt. 7:11). Like a shepherd looking for a lost sheep, God looks for the one who strayed away; not wishing that any should remain lost. There’s a story in the New Testament about a father whose younger son asks for his inheritance only to squander it on wild living. He winds up feeding pigs to earn his food. Finally, he comes to his senses and returns home, prepared to be as one of the hired men, to give up his rights as a son. As he is

approaching his home, his father sees him coming down the road. In his joy, the father gathers up his robe and runs down the road to embrace the son (and in those days men didn't typically act in such an undignified way), and he welcomes his son home. The father in the story represents God the Father.

One Who Feels

Even more than seeing, God *feels.* He truly "knows our pain." In Jesus, we see a God who weeps over the hardness of His people, who has compassion on those who are sick and on those caught in sin. He knows the feeling of rejection, having been rejected even by those who were close to him. When he was put to death by crucifixion he felt the weight of sin even though he had never sinned. And while bearing our sin, he felt forsaken by God, alienated, as it were, from his own Father.

In short, God is a Person who reveals Himself as the Father who knows all about us, as one who understands our hurts and who cares. This is a God who is in touch. This is a God to believe in.

The God Who Reaches Out

Loves and Cares

The character Scout in Doug Coupland's book, *Life Without God,* says he needs God. One reason, he says, is "to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love."{15} The implication, of course, is that God has the capacity to help people love. To do this He must be a God of love Himself.

The Bible says that God *is* love (I John 4:8,16). It is a part of His very *nature* to love. This love is shown throughout Scripture in God's dealings with His people. Some critics see

God in the Old Testament as angry and vengeful. But they are selectively focusing on the actions of a just and holy God in responding to wrongdoing. They overlook the love of God poured out on His people as He cared for them, protected them, and provided for their needs. *Lovingkindness* is a word used many times in descriptions of God. “But You, O Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness,” (Ps. 86:15).

This love isn’t just for the elite, for “super people.” God cares for the “regular people.” “For there is no partiality with God,” the Bible says (Rom. 2:11; Acts 10:34). In fact, He chastises His people for treating the influential differently than others (James 2:1-7), and for attending to all their religious duties, but not demonstrating true love to those in need. “Learn to do right!” He says. “Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow” (Isa. 1:17). The second greatest commandment, in fact, is to love our neighbor as ourselves (Luke 10:27-37), and our neighbor is anyone who is in need. Jesus reached out to the outsiders: the prostitutes, the lepers, and the poor. Those who knew their problems were the one’s most drawn to him.

Reaches Out by Identifying and Drawing Near

What this reveals is a God that doesn’t stand aloof, but who draws near. From the beginning of the human race, He has been reaching out to us. When the first people sinned, God took the initiative to repair the breach. He established the people of Israel, and constantly sought after them, even when they were in open rebellion. This was all a precursor to God’s most astonishing move. His love for us was so great that He chose to become one of us; He didn’t stay apart from us, but rather He identified with us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Although he was God, He emptied Himself, and was “made in

human likeness," and became a servant (Phil. 2:7).

As the shepherd searches for his sheep, God came looking for us. "Being in very nature God," the Bible says, Jesus "did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (Phil. 2:6-8). Jesus became a man so he could bring mankind to Himself. And He did it by becoming one of us. This is a God to believe in.

The God Who Receives, Redeems, Reconciles, and Restores

Receives

One of the problems many Gen-Xers have is the feeling that they aren't acceptable. The child saw the departure of a parent through divorce as a personal rejection. Such familial rejection, whether real or just perceived, colors a child's attitude about himself and his acceptability. Sadly enough, many Gen-Xers deal with feelings of shame, thinking they aren't good enough. "If Dad or Mom left, I must not be worth much," they think.

Even in cases where both parents were present, children were often left to raise themselves because of their parents' jobs. "They were the first full-blown 'latchkey children,'" say Celek and Zander, "coming home to a house where nobody was home."{16} What might at first seem like wonderful freedom often resulted in fear and a sense of aloneness. Even day care wasn't always enough to relieve the sense of being alone. Again, this felt like abandonment to many kids.

God isn't like fallen people, however. He receives anyone who

will come to Him. He never turns anyone away, and He never leaves. We need not fear enemies from without, difficult tasks ahead, or the lack of provision for our needs (Deut. 31:6; Josh. 1:5; Heb. 13:5). “I will never fail you or forsake you,” is His promise, a promise that has been affirmed by His people for centuries.

Redeems

The value God places on us is revealed by the fact of Jesus’ death by crucifixion. By His death He *redeemed* us; He bought us out of slavery only to make us children of God. We are no longer “owned” by our old way of life. The slave standing on the block has been bought and paid for—not to remain as a slave but to become a child! The price we couldn’t pay, Jesus did.

Reconciles

Gen Xers can have problems getting close to people because of the rejection they have felt. After all, for many, even parents were aloof from them; why should they get close to others? They may not feel like they *can* get close to others.

We’re told in the book of Romans that God has taken the initiative to bring us close to Him, to reconcile us to Himself. Whereas formerly we were alienated from Him, now we can come near to Him in open communication. “We have peace with God through our Lord, Jesus Christ,” the apostle Paul wrote (Rom. 5:1). God breaks down the walls for us.

Restores

Once our sin is taken care of through faith in Christ and we are reconciled with God we begin the process of being restored in the image of Christ. There is a fundamental change in us when our spirits are made alive through Christ. Building upon that, the Spirit of God begins slowly changing us from the inside out, conforming us to the image of Jesus, and making us

like Him. This restoration will be complete when we are with Him.

Summed Up in the Cross and Resurrection

All this is summed up in the work of Jesus on the cross. He paid the ultimate price for us, and enabled us to be reconciled to the Father. And we're told that in His death He called all people to Himself (John 12:32). Furthermore, when He rose from the grave, coming to life never to die again, He showed us what our hope is: our own resurrection, revealing our full restoration in His image. This restoration begins here on earth through the work of God's Spirit in us. It will be made complete when we are raised up, never to die again.

In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we see God receiving, redeeming, reconciling, and restoring. God has done the work. This is a God to believe in.

The God Who Can be Trusted

When those who are the most important to them have lied to people, they become distrustful. David Hocking tells of a woman who, after her parents had divorced, had been put in a special institution. Her parents rarely visited. When she was old enough to be on her own she began wandering from town to town, experiencing abuse and broken promises. As a result she didn't trust anyone. Rev. Hocking says, "As I began telling her of God's love for her, she asked, 'Can He be trusted?' I answered, 'Of course. He's God!' She countered, 'Why should I trust Him? Everyone else has let me down!'{17}

What does it take to build trust in a person? Hocking gives three factors: telling the truth, doing what is right and fair, and being reliable. Do these characteristics describe God?

Tells the Truth

Because God is holy or separate from all that is sinful, He is morally pure. As such He cannot lie. “It is *impossible* for God to lie,” says the New Testament (Heb. 6:18). If He says He will do something, He will do it (Num. 23:19). The people of Israel discovered that God was true to His word in fulfilling His promises. He gave them the land He had promised them, and over and over He spared them when they turned away from Him because of the covenant He had made with their forefathers. And because He cannot lie, those who believe can rest in the promises of His constant presence and of eternity with Him (Titus 1:2; Matt. 28:20).

Does What is Right and Fair

We also can count on God to do what is fair or just. If He couldn’t be depended on to do that, we would have no reason to trust Him. What if He arbitrarily changed the rules on us and judged us by a different standard? A student complains that his teacher grades inconsistently. She seems to be arbitrary in assigning values to projects, and often gives no clear word on what she expects. He says she isn’t being fair. A boss shows favoritism among his employers, advancing those who are his friends, while leaving the truly worthy behind. Not fair, we say.

God is not like this. He plays straight. He tells us what He expects, and He shows no partiality in His judgments. “Righteous are You, O Lord,” says the Psalmist, “and Your laws are right,” (Ps. 119:137). Likewise, He demands justice of us: “How blessed are those who maintain justice, who constantly do what is right,” (Ps. 106:3).

Can Be Depended Upon

Finally, God can be counted on. He is faithful to His word and His character. Knowing what He is like teaches us what He does. And one of His characteristics is being always the same: “For I, the Lord, do not change,” He says (Mal. 3:6). He is

the one “who does not change like shifting shadows” (James. 1:17). God is faithful forever to his own nature.

He is also faithful to his decrees and his promises. “I foretold the former things long ago, my mouth announced them and I made them known;” He said. “[T]hen suddenly I acted, and they came to pass,” (Isa. 48:3). He promised Sarah a child in her old age, and He gave her one (Gen. 21:1). King Solomon said, “not one word has failed of all the good promises he gave through His servant Moses,” (1 Kings 8:56).

God can be trusted. He tells the truth, He does what is fair, and He can be counted on. This is a God you can believe in.

Notes

1. Joan Osborne, “One of Us,” on the album *Relish*, Uni/Mercury, 1995. Downloaded from http://lyrics.astraweb.com:2000/display.cgi?joan_osborne%2E%2Erelish%2E%2Eone_of_us, Feb. 17, 2001.

2. Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Question of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 53.

3. Cf. Beaudoin, 74-75.

4. Beaudoin, xiii-xiv.

5. Jimmy Long, *Generating Hope: A Strategy for Reaching The Postmodern Generation* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1997), 43.

6. See Jerry Solomon, “Generation X“, an overview of this generation.

7. Long, 48, quoting Andrew Smith, “Talking About My Generation,” *The Face*, July 1994, p. 82.

8. Tim Celek and Dieter Zander, *Inside the Soul of a New*

Generation: Insights and Strategies for Reaching Busters (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 46.

9. Celek and Zander, 51.

10. Celek and Zander, 31-32.

11. Douglas Coupland, *Life After God* (New York: Pocket Books, 1994), 273.

12. Coupland, 310, 313, 359.

13. Osborne, *One of Us*.

14. David Hocking, *The Nature of God in Plain Language* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1984), 65.

15. Coupland, 359.

16. Celek and Zander, 55.

17. Hocking, 145. I am indebted to the author for the outline of this section.

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