

Religion or relationship?

Introduction

God, as we know, is always present, but at times he manifests – reveals, himself, or allows himself to be felt and experienced, in tangible, discernible ways. It is also true to say that we can drink from the well of salvation or dig our own well. As the Bible says in Jeremiah 2:13:

*My people have committed two sins:
They have forsaken me,
the spring of living water,
and have dug their own cisterns,
broken cisterns that cannot hold water.*

We can rely completely on the Lord or live in our own strength. There's no middle ground! If we look for meaning, purpose, security, direction and satisfaction outside of God (even in legitimate things), then we're likely to be drinking from polluted wells. To be consumed with a passion for Jesus depends on an ever-increasing appreciation of God's grace in our lives, a desire for God's presence and a capacity to drink deeply from God's well.

Relationship or simply a set of beliefs?

Have we signed up for religion or relationship? Or put another way, have we simply subscribed to a set of beliefs (as important as these are), or are we seeking to develop a relationship with our heavenly Father and his Son through the person of the Holy Spirit? In other words are we led, experiencing, and empowered by the Spirit, or simply going through the motions of ritualistic religion? Whilst we may think the answer is obvious, and even be a little offended that I should ask such a question, let me suggest we take a moment to reflect.

Christianity without the Holy Spirit?

From the Scriptures we know that it's possible to have all the trappings, reputation and outward show of successful, charismatic Christianity, and yet be about to forfeit the life of the Holy Spirit. The Apostle John, writing to the Church at Sardis, says:

These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead (Revelation 3:1).

The Pharisees, the evangelical fundamentalists of their day, didn't understand God's heart for relationship, and as a result, missed the time of his visitation. Contrary to popular belief, the Pharisees were not intrinsically evil men. They knew what was right and wrong, they upheld the moral Law, religious traditions, and knew the Old Testament from cover to cover. Sadly however, they had put God in a box. They had all the form of religion without the heart.

Jesus said of them:

You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life (John 5:39-40).

We can be pharisaic too, even putting the Bible before a relationship with God. Rick Joyner in his book: 'The Prophetic Ministry' says:

The Lord didn't say it was to their advantage that he was going away because he was going to give them a book! The Lord said his sheep know his voice; he did not say that his sheep know his book.

As precious and wonderful as the Bible is, knowing the book of the Lord is not our goal. Our goal is to know the Lord of the book! A.W.Tozer said:

If the Holy Spirit was withdrawn from the church today, 95% of what we do would go on and no one would know the difference. If the Holy Spirit had been withdrawn from the New Testament church 95% of what they did would have stopped and everyone would have known the difference.

Think about that for a moment! Would we notice the difference if the Holy Spirit withdrew himself, or would we carry on regardless? Or should I say religiously? If someone we're in relationship with withdraws from us we notice it, don't we? Relationships are like that.

The genuine article

In terms of our relationship with the Lord, do you sometimes wonder what the genuine article is like? We're so accustomed to what we know that we can become locked in to our current experience. Does God only seem to be involved in the big moments of crisis, or in making the big decisions, whilst letting us get on with our own lives the rest of the time? Or do we experience his presence and leading on a moment by moment basis?

So how can we measure the genuine article? Do we measure it simply based on our own experience or that of other Christians? Or is the Bible our yardstick and if so does our experience match up to the Bible?

So what does the Bible promise?

I think we'd all agree that the Bible is the plumb-line so what does it promise?

If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you for ever - the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you (John 14:15-17).

All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you (John 14:25-26).

When the Counsellor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me (John 15:26-27).

Now I am going to him who sent me, yet none of you asks me, 'Where are you going?' Because I have said these things, you are filled with grief. But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you (John 16:5-7).

I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you (John 16:12-15).

Let's look now at the Book of Acts to see how this all worked out in practice. The following is a brief overview of some of the key events taken chapter by chapter:

Chapter 1: Jesus appears to his disciples.

Chapter 2: a violent wind and tongues of fire fill the room where the disciples are gathered; the Spirit is given and the church is born.

Chapter 3: the man at the gate called Beautiful is healed.

Chapter 5: Ananias and Sapphira die, having lied to the Holy Spirit. An angel frees the apostles from jail.

Chapter 7: Stephen has an open vision of Heaven and sees Jesus at the right hand of the Father.

Chapter 8: an angel gives directions to Philip. The Spirit carries him supernaturally to a different location.

Chapter 9: Jesus appears to Saul on the Damascus Road. He then spoke to Ananias telling him to go and minister to Saul.

Chapter 10: an angel appears to Cornelius and tells him to send for Peter. Peter has a trance and you know the rest of the story.

Chapter 12: an angel visits Peter in Jail.

Chapter 13: the Spirit speaks to the church at Antioch. Paul releases God's judgement on Elymas who loses his sight.

Chapter 14: Paul heals a man lame from birth.

Chapter 16: the Spirit forbade Paul to enter Bithynia. Paul has a vision of a man in Macedonia asking for help.

Chapter 18: the Lord speaks to Paul in a night vision.

Chapter 20: the Spirit warns Paul that suffering awaits him further down the road.

How does our experience compare?

So how does our experience compare and what does this tell us about the kind of relationship Jesus wants to have with us? John 15:15 tells us:

I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.

God wants to be our friend, our supernatural friend at that! So why does our experience fall short of what is promised? What stands in the way? Is it because we've settled for second best? Or that we're lacking in faith? If so, we've settled for habitual religious activity over and above a genuine relationship.

The way forward

So what can we do? How can we make progress? How can we get more in touch with the Holy Spirit? How can we strengthen our relationship with God? We may not be where we'd like to be, but with the Lord's help we can all make progress. So in closing, let me suggest 6 simple biblical steps that will help, and that we can all take:

1. The first thing is to humble ourselves. It is clear throughout the Bible that relationship (our ability to hear God) and humility, go hand in hand:

Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth (Numbers 12:3).

*When a prophet of the Lord is among you,
I reveal myself to him in visions,
I speak to him in dreams.
But this is not true of my servant Moses;
he is faithful in all my house.
With him I speak face to face,
clearly and not in riddles;
he sees the form of the Lord (Numbers 12:6-8).*

God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble (Proverbs 3:34)

Though the Lord is on high, he looks upon the lowly, but the proud he knows from afar (Psalm 138:6).

In other words the Lord is intimate with the lowly, but keeps the proud at arms length.

2. The second thing is to discover the joy of living under the grace of God. John Noble explains this so well:

When the flesh is in control it always produces a certain kind of fruit, the spirit produces a completely different kind. These sources never vary, one produces life, the other death - always! Most Christians are going about trying to improve their flesh, when they really need to recognise that Christ came to crucify it!

All our efforts to live good lives in the flesh are doomed. Our prayers, bible reading, church going, refusal to drink, smoke etc., if done in the flesh will encourage pride, whilst every failure to do these things will bring guilt. Satan has you beaten both ways, 'Heads I win, tails you lose.'

So what can we do about this? In chapter 3 of Galatians Paul asks a question, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit by obeying the law or responding to the Gospel?' 'You begun with the Spirit, now you are trying to work it out in the flesh,' he goes on. The Gospel is good news, it brings us face to face with the incredible grace of God, when we see this we can respond if we want to. Before we were shown the law and we could not respond, we were helpless; but grace sets us free to choose. Now I can obey a God so full of love if I want to, but he will never take away my free will.

Once I am seeing grace, I am free to obey the new law of the Spirit of life now within me. My will is being set free, I am no longer the servant of sin, now I serve righteousness (Romans 6). The will, sorry well, is unblocked - hallelujah! But immediately I lose sight of grace and put myself under law I fail, because sin will revive. The moment I say, 'I must . . .' I find I can't. If on the other hand, I put myself under grace (begin to enjoy God's forgiveness) deep within there is a response, the well springs up.

When I know, really know that he cares and understands, when I know, really know that there's no condemnation even when I've failed 70 x 7, then I can live in victory because the power of love is at work within me. If you can't find grace, seek it, oh yes, seek it with all your might, it's the most precious gift you'll ever have.'

3. The third thing is to be available. To give time. All relationships need time. Not because we must or have to, but because we want to! Jesus never had to find time for his Father because his time was already his. Jesus was never in a hurry and he never needed more time. Because he only desired his fathers will, he was always in the right place, at the right time, doing the right thing.

So often our approach, if we're honest, is to get the 'God slot/quiet time' over as quickly as possible, or worse still to do it from a place of guilt. Grace sets us free from guilt. Jack Deere says:

Availability to God is the first priority in ministry and the first requirement for hearing his voice.

Can you imagine saying to our spouse, child or friend that you're only available for half an hour a day and at a specific time decided by us? Of course not, we see them because we want to. That's true relationship and friendship, and it's friendship the Lord desires.

The Apostle James says:

Draw near to God, he will draw near to us (James 4:8).

4. Fourthly, desire relationship more than anything else. The grace of God spurs us on here too. Again Moses is our example:

Then Moses said to him, 'If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?' And the Lord said to Moses, 'I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name' (Ex 33v15-18).

5. The fifth thing is to embrace the fear of the Lord:

*The Lord confides in those who fear him;
he makes his covenant known to them (Psalm 25:14).*

6. Sixthly and finally, walk in radical obedience:

You are my friends if you do what I command (John 15:14).

Jesus said: I seek not to please myself but him who sent me (John 5:30 Part).

Have we settled the issue of whom we're going to please?

Conclusion

In conclusion, do we want religion or a relationship? Will we settle for anything less than a supernatural relationship with the Father and the Son through the person of the Holy Spirit? We have a choice, what's it to be?

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