

When we gather to worship, or really, when we think about following Jesus, we talk in terms of "having a relationship with God". It's a good phrase, but what's funny to me is *how* we live that out.

In other words, what does it *mean* to "have a relationship with God"? You ask the question and people start throwing out lists of actions or beliefs.

- You have to believe Jesus died for your sins (he did).
- You should be a good person (you should).
- You have to believe in God and that God loves you. (God does)
- You have to believe the Bible.

In fact, if someone were to ask, "How do you become a Christian? How to you get to be a part of the Church? What does it take to join in God's kingdom?" we'd rattle off all these beliefs. That you're a sinner. That Jesus died for you. That you need forgiveness. And we'd say, Agree with these beliefs and... you're all set!

That's how you have a relationship with God! You have to have a revelation, a realization, an understanding, and then you get to participate in God's Kingdom. Believe, then experience.

In that model, we expect people to learn about God in classroom settings like Bible studies or lectures sermons.

Which is silly, because that's not how you learn a relationships. Classrooms are great for some stuff, but not for building relationships.

If I want you to meet my wife, Amanda, I could technically put together a class about her. Amanda 101. I could write a beautiful, thought provoking and moving sermon about her. I can tell you that her favorite color is purple and she's about the kindest person you'll ever meet.

Now, there are a couple of ways you might respond: You might not be totally convinced that Amanda is one of the best persons ever. (in which case I'll fail you) Or maybe you believe me. But the reality is, you don't *know* because you haven't experienced Amanda. Either way, you still don't have a relationship with Amanda. Whatever your beliefs are, if they come without experience, they're empty.

But if I have you over to our home for dinner, or we meet up at a festival, things are different. Spend even an hour with Amanda and you'll know the things I said are true. Your *experience* of her as a person informs your beliefs about her. You'll know whether what I said about her is true or false. Because you *know* her. Your experience of her informs your beliefs about her.

That's how people work. It's how relationships work. Experience precedes belief.

But for some reason, that's not how we approach God. That's not how we talk about God with other people. To listen to most Christians, you have to believe in God before you can experience God. Before you can serve, before you can participate in mission projects or trips, before you can lead worship or facilitate a small group, you have to agree with us. Before you can join in with what God is doing, you have to have a full, complete knowledge of God (as if any of us has that!)

Oh, you can come to our Sunday gatherings. You can attend bible studies. You can do any of those classroom things that help convince you. But as far as participating in the life of the Church? Before you can help build God's kingdom, you have to believe in God. Before you participate, you have to have experienced.

Wherever we got that idea, it's not from the Scriptures. People meet God in the Scriptures in a classroom. Over and over, the Scriptures show us people who *experienced* God before they knew who God was. They got to know God slowly. They get their hands dirty. They sink their teeth into what God is doing. They taste, and they see that God is good. And their *experiences* with God shaped their knowledge of and belief in God.

Take the person we're meeting on our Road Trip today, Samuel, learned about God by immersion. His mom, Hannah, dedicated him to God's service, so when Samuel was about five, she brought him to the Temple at Shiloh and gave him over to Eli, the high priest, to be trained.

For the next several years, Samuel was raised in the Temple, by the high priest. Here's what the Scriptures tell us about him:

The boy Samuel served the LORD by assisting Eli. Now in those days messages from the LORD were very rare, and visions were quite uncommon. -- 1 Samuel 3:1 (NLT)

When we read this story, find that Samuel was serving God, we assume that Samuel was already an insider, that he already had some sort of relationship with God. Why? Because Samuel is the priest's intern, more or less. He's training to become a priest. He's doing what today we would consider very pastoral duties. Samuel is *deeply* involved in the day-to-day life of God's kingdom, in leading the worship of God's people. So *of course* he has a relationship with God!

But we quickly learn as the story moves forward he didn't. God speaks to Samuel, and Samuel doesn't recognize God.

Samuel has been participating in worship, serving God in the Temple, without what we would call today a 'conversion experience'. Samuel has been participating without revelation.

His experiences of God preceded his belief in God. He knows *about* God, knows all the things he's supposed to do. But he doesn't know God. His participation precede his knowledge and belief.

This is tough for us to grasp because we think of faith as a light switch. It's either on or off. But the Scriptures present faith as a relationship, and relationships are always on a continuum. We start out not knowing someone at all. There was a time I didn't know God. There was a time I didn't know Amanda. But then I gradually learn more, have experiences, that move me closer and closer to that other person. I hear about God's love. I experience something that speaks to my soul, that whispers there's more out there.

My participation in relationship with Amanda or God or anyone is what leads to a fuller understanding, a more accurate belief, a more whole knowledge of them.

When Jesus called people to follow him, he didn't give them a doctrine quiz first. In fact, he didn't even tell them he was God. In John 1, John the Baptizer tells two of his disciples that Jesus is worth paying attention to. So they start stalking Jesus, more or less. Look how Jesus responds:

Jesus looked around and saw them following. "What do you want?" he asked them. They replied, "Rabbi" (which means "Teacher"), "where are you staying?" "Come and see," he said. -- John 1:38-39 (NLT)

He didn't say, Hey guys! I'm God! Do you believe you're a sinner and I'm going to die for your sins and rise again?

He said, Hey guys! Come check out what I'm doing!

One of those guys, Philip, went to get one of his friends. Here's how their conversation went:

Philip went to look for Nathanael and told him, "We have found the very person Moses and the prophets wrote about! His name is Jesus, the son of Joseph from Nazareth." "Nazareth!" exclaimed Nathanael. "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" "Come and see for yourself," Philip replied." John 1:45-56 (NLT)

Philip didn't meet Nathaniel's skepticism with charts and graphs and proofs of Jesus' divinity. When Nathaniel said, "Are you sure?" Philip just responded, "Why don't you come check him out!"

Jesus began a relationship with his disciples, and it took them a long time to figure out this guy was more than just some really smart teacher. They had to participate, to experience Jesus for a while before they came to believe.

That messes with our heads, doesn't it? A lot of us have been told that God only speaks to Christians, that God only hears the prayers of Christians. That you have to believe a long list of confusing doctrines before you're good enough for a relationship with God.

But none of that's true. Jesus extends the same invitation to you that he did to those guys in Galilee all those years ago: Come and see!

Here's what I know:

God is love. God created you and loves you more than you can fathom. God's love for you is so huge: so deep and wide and strong that it defies comprehension.

And that love wants to rescue you from the patterns of death you have in your life. Because none of us is perfect.

And you can choose to follow God, to dedicate your life to him, to participate in his death and resurrection.

I know these things are true. But you might not. And that's okay. You don't have to agree with me. You don't have to commit to a belief in God before you start serving. Samuel didn't. None of the disciples did.

You might say, I'm not good enough. There's no way God could love me.

I understand. That's a painful way to see yourself. Why don't you come and see how much God loves you? Why don't you start serving somewhere?

You might say, I'm not even sure I believe God is real. I don't belong in a Church.

I get that. The claims we make here are astounding, and the decision to commit your life to Jesus is costly. Why don't you join a small group, meet some people who have similar questions, who are on the same journey as you? You can all learn from each other.

You might say, This sounds good, but the God I've always heard about is an angry, judgmental god who likes to smite people.

I know where you're coming from. And I'm sorry that someone has misrepresented Jesus to you. Why don't you start serving with us? Come and see how wide and how deep and how utterly unfathomable is the love God has for us?

You don't have to have everything figured out to be a part of this Church. You don't have to have all the answers or even know all the questions. You don't have to agree with everything we believe.

Just come and participate with us. Come serve. Read scripture. Try out prayer. Give something that costs you. Join a small group. Join the band. Come and do these things with us. Come and see. Here's what Jesus promised:

Keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you. -- Matthew 7:7

Response Song

We're going to sing a song now, and it's one we sang earlier. It may not be one you agree with. You may not believe all the words.

But if you're here, then here's what I know about you: you're at least curious if the claims Jesus made could be true. If it really is possible that he rose from the dead and now there's this whole new reality, a whole new way of life opened up for us. You at least hope that maybe that's true.

If so, then sing along. Even if you don't necessarily agree. You're not faking. You're not pretending. You're just participating. You're doing what God's people do.

Participation leads to revelation. Experience informs belief. So you don't have to have all the answers. You don't have to understand everything before you join it. Just come and see. No strings attached. No expectation.

You are free to join in, to sink your teeth in to what God is doing. To taste and see how good God is.