

Understanding Seeking Faith

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Acts 19:1-7

“On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.”
Epiphany / Baptism of our Lord

Movement 1 – Seeking Knowledge Seeking Faith

There is an element of searching in human nature. We wonder, we are curious, we question and ponder and search for truth. Some view life as a stroll down a library full of books containing the deep and spiritual truths, which many yearn to obtain. We can pull one down, read it and understand what it means to be a human. We can pull another down, read it, and understand what it means to die. All of the answers to life’s persistent questions can be found here in this library of tomes. All we have to do is search for the right amount of knowledge, the right book, and the answer will be ours.

This searching is a basic part of human nature that is more pronounced in some than in others. It leans heavily on the intellect and the powers of the mind for hope in finding answers. Take the magi that went to see Jesus. We have no evidence that suggests they were on a faith journey, or a religious pilgrimage. They did not have any visions until after they saw Jesus. Instead they studied the skies, they saw a star, they read about the star, and they decided to follow the star because of what they read. Curiosity and intellect lead their search and journey for knowledge. They have understanding but they lack faith.

This is where we can end up in our searching. We can end up as many of my colleagues in academics have with a lot of knowledge and a little bit of faith. They read about religion to learn about its beliefs. They pick up on aspects of religion that are interesting. They follow the star because they are curious about the star, not because of a faith in the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. In the classic book *The Great Divorce* by C.S. Lewis, one of the characters is an Episcopal Priest who loves the inquiry and the questions more than his faith. He has searched for the truth behind the crucifixion, he has searched for the truth behind the divinity of Christ, and he has searched for the truth behind God. He has great knowledge but little faith. In one part of the book a person who has achieved salvation through faith, and who knew the Priest in a former life was trying to convince him to go to “Heaven” and find faith in a loving and forgiving Lord. He reminds the Priest that, “There was a time when you asked questions because you wanted answers, and were glad when you have found them... Thirst was made for water; inquiry for truth. What you now call the free play of inquiry has neither more nor less to do with the ends for which intelligence was given you than masturbation has to do with marriage.” (from *The Great Divorce* by C.S. Lewis, page 44 – 45).

There is an element of searching in human nature, but the danger is that we suspend our faith and rely upon our knowledge. There is a danger that we will live by rational rules and let faith come when it wants if we want it at all. There is a danger that we will never accept belief and suspend our questions and doubts because the searching always drives us for that greener grass on the other side. This is where our desire and our searching can lead us.

Movement 2 – The Disciples Following the Rules

Paul found some believers who had understanding but were seeking faith. These were a group of people, twelve of them, who have been given some knowledge and were using that knowledge to find faith. They had heard about Jesus Christ, they had been baptized, but something was missing. Maybe Paul noticed the lack of gleam in their eyes; maybe Paul noticed something missing in their speech when they talked about being a believer. Maybe they were emphasizing the moral behavior over the spiritual life or the repentant heart over the changed heart. Maybe these disciples spoke about the person, Jesus, but did not profess the power of the cross. The biblical scholar, Howard Marshall, suggests that these were in fact John’s disciples, who experienced a different sort of baptism; a baptism through John that was preparing them for Jesus. Maybe Paul picked up on the difference when they talked about Jesus. It didn’t seem like they really knew him. It is like talking to someone who read some of Tony Campolo’s books and claiming to know Campolo well – although

they have never meet. That person will never know Campolo as well as his children, his wife, or his college roommate. There is something missing, something personal, and something, which cannot be filled by pure and basic knowledge. You can read as many of Campolo's books as you would like, but they will never add up to the person.

This is how it is with Jesus. You can read as much as you want, but unless you have a relationship with Christ, you will never truly know him.

Imagine that these disciples were baptized by John, and then they heard about Jesus second or third hand. Wouldn't they be something missing as well? Wouldn't they still be living in the baptism of repentance and preparation instead of this new and mystical baptism that Paul is offering; the baptism of new life through Christ. They were one teacher removed from the expert; they were like sheep without the shepherd going the way they thought the shepherd would want them to go.

I remember in music school we all had to learn to compose in the style of Bach. We learned the rules, the nuances, the stylistic aspects that made Bach so great, but no matter what, no matter how closely we mimicked Bach's style our pieces never had the beauty that Bach offers through his compositions. We had all the knowledge but something was missing. We didn't have the gift, the blessing from God that Bach had. That is where these disciples are. They know about Jesus, they have been taught about Jesus, but something is missing, a spark, and a faith that digs deep into your essence. And you can imagine that these sheep were searching for the shepherd, the one who would offer comfort, hope and peace. I imagine that they were searching for that faith with their own knowledge and understanding. Paul finds them, believers desiring help with their unbelief. Searching for faith.

Movement 3 – The Breaking through the Marathon Wall

When Jesus calls, then the searching stops. What is it that is missing but the call of Jesus and the washing of the Holy Spirit? What is it that is missing but that faith which cannot be explained, that cannot be understood and illuminated through smart theories and proofs? What is missing is the baptism of the Spirit in the name of Jesus Christ. For it is through the movement of the Holy Spirit that our relationship with Christ is established. Maybe you have experienced this baptism. Maybe you have found yourself in prayer, with your hands clasped tight and your eyes shut and you feel the Holy Spirit fall upon you. Maybe you have found yourself moved to tears for no reason in your moments of prayer. Maybe you have found yourself moved to laughter in your prayer for no reason. This is the baptism of the Holy Spirit that washes over you, takes over you and makes you God's child.

Jonathan Edwards, one of America's greatest theologians, and advocator of feeling the affects of the Holy Spirit preached this kind of baptism and experience. Edwards preached the experience of falling into the warm embrace of the Holy Spirit with your whole body. But it was his wife who experienced this. Her love and desire for God led her to a whole body experience of the Holy Spirit that changed her connection and desire for God. Like that moment in *The Blues Brothers* when both Jake and Elwood donned an electric blue sheen in the church listening to James Brown preach the word as it has never been preached before. The baptism of the Spirit changes you, convicts you, and leads you out with new vision, new sight, and a new faith. The Pentecostal movement, including some of the Holiness churches, the Assembly of God, and others, rest on this idea that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is essential in one's faith. Through the Holy Spirit, Christ is known in the hearts of these believers.

There is a joke from Louisiana about two men who go to a small country church and find the members passing around a snake. Row after row the snake came closer and closer to the two. The first one leaned over to the second and said, "are we gonna havta handle that snake?" "Uh huh." Not excited about the idea of snake handling, the first one, wanting to leave then said, "Where's the back door?" "They don't have one." "Well then where do they want it?"

Reason says that handling snakes does not make sense, and you may criticize the Pentecostals all you want, but there is nothing reasonable about faith. It is a wall we break through, a moment when reason is suspended and all we know is that we can hear the call of the shepherd, the call of Jesus crying out our name. This is the faith, which understanding seeks, and which understanding will never be able to fully obtain. We search and search, but when we hear Jesus calling, then the searching stops.

Movement 4 – The Problem of Experience

Yet Jesus' voice can sound so differently for each one of us. Maybe some of us don't feel moved to speaking in tongues. Maybe some of aren't called to handle snakes but instead to create back doors in churches. Maybe some of us experience the spirit in the quiet and solitude, while others experience the spirit in the loud rush of the crowd and the waves of high tempo music. Today we no longer debate about doctrine but about spiritual experience and worship. In the Pentecostal movement, some churches would claim that unless you speak in tongues, you have not fully experienced the Holy Spirit. Moving outside the Pentecostals, some churches would have you believe that unless you put your hands in the air you are not fully worshipping. Other churches would have you believe that unless you keep your arms at your side you are not fully worshipping.

It is like some are claiming to hear Jesus' voice better than others. Or that some churches can offer a better experience of the Holy Spirit than other churches. And have you noticed that the searching for faith through knowledge has given way to the searching for faith through experience. The 19th century philosopher, Friedrich Schleiermacher, claimed that experience was an authority in religious knowledge and truth, and we have bought this claim. If we can offer that experience of the baptism of the Spirit, then we are a 'successful' church. If we can emulate the experience of the Holy Spirit leading us to bounce, sing, shout and chant, then we are the true Christians. And churches split, Christians go their separate ways, and boasting over religious experience escalates. All because we don't know what to do when Jesus' voice sounds so different for each one of us.

Movement 5 – The Varieties of Experience

The differences in the spiritual experiences need to be upheld. The diversity is important for the sake of the body of Christ. It may just be that some people experience the Holy Spirit with their arms in the air, and others experience the Holy Spirit with their arms at their side. It may just be that there is diversity; a variety of experiences and none are more valuable than others. Paul does not dismiss John's baptism. He does not claim it as invalid, but only different from the baptism of the Holy Spirit and invites the disciples to a deeper experience. In the C.S. Lewis story I mentioned above each person is trying to get to heaven, and he or she has a different guide according to that person. Someone is lead by a good friend. Another is lead by a brother, and another by his mother. Each guide challenges the individual seeking salvation and each one is right only for that individual. Yet they are all going towards the heavenly city where the Lord of hosts dwells. We all hear Jesus calling in different ways, in different languages, and in different tones. We all experience the Holy Spirit in different ways, through different forms of worship and with different stories. In Rudolph Otto's work *The Idea of the Holy* the experience of God is described, among other ways as "the feeling of the uncanny." Yet what is that like? It is the uncanny feeling you get when you are with a large group of people and you all join in the same chorus. Or it is the uncanny feeling you get when you are by yourself, and you realize that there is a divine, infinite presence that loves you. Or the uncanny is that feeling you get when you look at the cross and you realize that the sacrifice on the cross was to give hope to you and the world. Paul baptized many, and many spoke in tongues, but not all. We are a large family with a variety of experiences, and in those experiences are differences. The differences need to be upheld.

Movement 6 - The Unifying Hope of the Baptism

But there is one faith, one Lord, and one Baptism that unites us. There are a variety of experiences, but something must keep us together. Something must unite us. Otherwise we will go off claiming to be followers of the Baptism of John, others of Paul and others of Apollo. Otherwise we begin to worship our style of worship and not Jesus. Let me say that in a different way. When we neglect the unifying aspect of our faith and fall away to our different forms of worship, then we begin to hold up a style of worship over a lifestyle of faith. We hold up the praise over the one we are praising. We worship our liturgy and not our Lord. So what do we do but ask with Paul, have you encountered that one baptism, the one when the Holy Spirit washes upon you? Have you undergone that one baptism, the one where you said "yes" to Jesus? Do you follow Jesus? Then I don't care if you do it by jumping and shouting or by sitting and being still, as long as we both understand that we both follow Jesus. We may be on different orbits, but we still circle the Son. We may be going different directions at one time or another, but we are still drawn to our Lord. Can we respect and hold up the different forms of worship and experience of the Holy Spirit? Can we make the room for those different forms of worship and experience? Can we recognize that we all find ourselves saying at one time or another, "Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me?" It may be in Spanish, Chinese, French, Russian, or Sign Language. But we all ask the Spirit of the Living God to fall afresh on you and me. We may do it alone or with two or three, or with the thousands, but we all find ourselves asking the spirit of the living God to fall afresh on you and on me. It may be once or it may be daily, but we all ask the spirit of the living God to fall afresh one you and one me. Melting, molding, choosing, and using, the one spirit of the one God falls on us all and makes us one.

AMEN