

Dialogue 2

A Personal Relationship with God in Christ

By B. Patrick Williams

At the end of spring term 2002, I left Professor Chris Anderson's CS Lewis literature class with the sense that both Lewis and Tolkien had rehabilitated Christianity for me. In Lewis's *Surprised by Joy* and Tolkien's essay "On Fairy Stories," each author articulates a vision of the spiritual life that struck me as authentic – a life grounded in experiences of joy and loss of self-consciousness to encounter what is real. By the end of the term, I had the feeling that both authors had called me to the edge of a cliff. To step off the ledge was to acknowledge that full life – the life I was meant to live – meant accepting Christ as my Lord and Savior. This seemed an intellectual insight – as though it was something that was "true," but I didn't go beyond that.

For my master's thesis, I interviewed evangelical protestant Christians about how their faith is integrated into their lives. As the summer wore on, I grew tremendously impressed with the majority of my thesis interview subjects' efforts to surrender to God as known in Christ. For all of their failings and areas where I felt they may not have thought their beliefs through far enough, I was quite taken by their determined focus on God – the effort to put God first in their lives. Even as I respected this, I maintained some critical distance from it. But, I couldn't help but be impressed.

Also during the summer, I found myself curious about NW Hills Baptist church. I asked my friend Jenn (a Starbucks co-worker), what was it like? Jenn and I spoke briefly, but it wasn't long before I dismissed the idea of attending. In the meantime, I felt dissatisfied with the Roman

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Catholic Church where I had been going off and on. The liturgy did not “do it” for me – I felt disconnected there. I’ve recently realized that one of my big draws to Catholicism had been Chris Anderson, who taught and spoke with me deeply about the spiritual life. However, when I stepped away from Chris and other Catholic friends, I found myself left hollow with the liturgy, mass, and Catholicism. At any rate, a bit later in the summer, I felt an urge to go to NW Hills – almost a compulsion, really. So, I went, and while my reaction was mixed, I liked it overall. The worship songs were simpler and more direct than I’d heard before, yet I really appreciated that directness and the way we sung to God, not just about God. I was also taken by the pastor’s sermon. While I could tell the belief system was underpinned by biblical inerrancy and exclusive salvation (two things I resisted), I liked the message about living one’s full life for Christ - that the point of life is to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, who is the source of authentic existence. I began to attend NW Hills regularly and by the fourth or fifth Sunday, I felt something I’d never experienced in any church before – a feeling of being “at home.”

Another important event was reading Tozer’s *The Pursuit of God*. I was quite taken by Tozer, an evangelical mystic. Wow. I didn’t know there was such a thing. Moreover, there was a ring of authenticity about Tozer that just blew me away. Tozer wrote that the Bible by itself was just a book, but illuminated by the Spirit it was the Word of God. He indicated that we ought to make Christ the center of our lives; the relationship with God must take precedence over everything else. Tozer’s treatment of pride also deeply affected me. He explained how painfully destructive the sins of selfishness and self-absorption can be in isolating us from God and each other. Tozer’s words were electrifying to me. I was blown away.

Another piece in Tozer really connected with me. Roughly 2/3 or more into the book, Tozer refers to how “intellectual difficulties” can become a “smokescreen.” I don’t recall the

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actual context, but somehow those words spoke to me about my own relation to the Bible.

Generally speaking, I see two approaches to the Bible – the “historical” and the “spiritual.” The historical is governed by naturalistic presuppositions about what is possible (like any history) and does not traffic in the supernatural. The spiritual deals with the things of God and is not subject to the same constraints. Well, even though the spiritual is not subject to the same constraints, I still constrained it with what I thought was possible. Thus, when I read the Bible in a spiritual light, I really subjected it to a rigorous historical scrutiny. Instead of surrendering to God through the Bible’s words, I was too busy deciding what I did and did not want to believe. In doing so, I kept God at arm’s length.

Over the next few days after reading Tozer, I began to rethink the way I’d been viewing the Bible. Instead of a literal-factual approach (where the text means exactly what it says) or a metaphorical approach (where the text does not mean what it literally says but speaks meaning through its imagery), I began to think of “more than literal” as a way of seeing the Bible. Thus, my new orientation became one of not trying to ascertain exactly what happened at all, but to trust that the will of God was somehow in, and able to work through, the pages of scripture. Hence, my job was to open myself to, and surrender to, the God that spoke through the Bible. I was not to analyze, but to listen. I had been blocked by intellectual defenses that kept me closed.

During the same time period, one day at Starbucks while talking to my friend Megan Brown, it just hit me – God is real, God is right here, I can pray to God, God is listening. I felt a conviction in my guts that this was true as well as a fire in my guts that it was true – both of these were mixed in with a peace and confidence. Suddenly, I seemed to have “got it.” Now I knew what evangelicals meant when they advocated a “personal relationship with God in Christ.” No longer did I even care about the historical or all the efforts I’d put into ascertaining

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the truth or falsity present in the Bible. Instead, I found myself wanting to turn to God – to focus on God, as best I could. Also, I realized that Jesus really is my Savior – that I need Jesus to be who I am truly supposed to be. Even more, I saw that I'm not supposed to follow my own ego or my own lights, but to do my best to follow God as known in Christ; thus, Christ is also my Lord.

Suddenly, I began to see things differently. The passage in Ephesians (5:22-33) that indicates wives are to submit to their husbands and husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church – a passage that I used to see as sexist nonsense - struck me differently. The passage is different because I now see the God-factor – that it's the husband and wife first submitting to God, and then to each other. It's like, suddenly, I'm taking seriously this idea of God as not an idea anymore, but as a present reality – as a factor integrated into life that should be taken seriously.

Professor Gary Ferngren loaned me an amazing book titled *The Future of Evangelical Christianity* by Donald G. Bloesch. First, Bloesch provided words for what I'd thought but was not sure if anyone else had articulated – and Bloesch articulated himself more thoroughly than I could. For instance, Bloesch spoke of how the Bible itself is not inerrant, but inerrancy comes from the presence of Christ as mediated to the believer through the text. This leads to the Bible's accurate communication of truths about God and life as well as the Spirit's speaking directly into the context of a believer's life.

Bloesch also cited Karl Barth's reference to the "superhistorical," which appears to be the functional equivalent of my term "more than literal," in describing Genesis. Bloesch's point (using Barth) is that it's not merely literal or merely mythical – but more than either. Bloesch also talks about how the church must stand as a check on culture – when the dominant culture and politics swing left, the church should swing right, and vice versa. Reading Bloesch, I was

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reminded of Professor Marcus Borg's view of Jesus' compassion as originating in experiences of the Spirit of God, a transcultural Spirit who calls people to compassion beyond themselves. As I look out upon the world, I'm struck with the sense that people need this life-giving Spirit more than ever.

All of this has really spoken to me. The events I've mentioned are the key ones, but there have been others – namely a lot of seeming coincidences when various evangelical Christians have come into my life at the right time – supporting and encouraging me or simply showing me what they are about. While I'm not convinced that those who are not saved in Christ are damned, and I only see the Bible as inerrant in the qualified way I mention above, I do see the evangelical emphasis on the authority of Scripture and salvation through Christ in a new light. I've needed this focused evangelical orientation through which to break through the bonds of my ego so as to surrender to the Spirit. And, even then, I don't think this is ultimately something I've done at all. That day in Starbucks when I felt Christ was real as my Savior and Lord – when that evangelical language suddenly made sense to me – it wasn't about me, but about grace, a positive occurrence occurring outside of my sphere of control. While I'm sometimes still a little baffled by all of this, I have to say that becoming an evangelical Christian and disciple of Jesus Christ is probably the most important thing that's ever happened to me.