

## God Experience as the Center

Our approach to Evangelism at Central Moravian is that it is centered on relationship with Christ (thus making it available to all) who becomes Companion in life and enables where we need to go and who we need to be. The following expands on this to provide greater understanding. As with other literature provided you, explore this as a journey in which you can discover many contributions to your life. Do not feel pressured by time, as in all explorations of knowledge you have a life-time. The journey is yours. Enjoy.

We have met a person who can offer all. It is God. This meeting shapes our past and future, encourages our reflection, and for it we offer thanks.

We often think of knowing God as knowing *about* God, being able to describe God and to provide and understand a great deal of information. But God is encountered as a person -- not a system of information. Certainly there is information related to knowing a person, but it usually doesn't start there. Personal knowledge starts with interpersonal contact and awareness, often initially involving only very limited information. In fact, it could be as simple as knowing that a person whom we have encountered exists, which encounter invites us to more extensive knowledge.

The New Testament is clear about this concerning Jesus. Jesus brings us Jesus and Jesus brings us God: it is person centered. The description about Jesus involves a great deal of information (four Gospels), but each Gospel has its own perspective and body of knowledge, and the reality of the person of Christ transcends the information. So many of the New Testament stories indicate the importance of the interpersonal relationship with Jesus which knowledge may inform and transform but not replace the person at the center. Certainly there is the Gospel of Matthew which makes it sound as if the ultimate concern is the three chapter new Law (Matthew 5-7) which Jesus is said to have provided, but in much of the New Testament material Jesus' teaching brings us to Jesus. Thus to have faith and knowledge starts with a person and grows in the process of listening to the person. When one realizes the perspective the New Testament has on knowledge, it becomes clear that the essence of knowledge is interpersonal and information is secondary. This means that the essence of what God wishes us to have is the person of Jesus, and if that is all that we presently have, that is enough. Luke (1:39ff) tells of the response of John the Baptist as an embryo in his mother to Jesus who was then also an embryo. One might speak of this as a spiritual encounter, but perhaps it might be better to consider it a "heart" encounter because Luke intended it to be understood as a real, physical encounter between two persons who now knew each other in an intuitive way though there was nothing they could verbalize. Knowledge of God either starts with or ends with interpersonal knowledge. It is a wonderful place to start. It is the goal of all religious knowledge because it is that to which all religious knowledge leads. To know God, to know Christ, to know God's Spirit is ultimately the essence of what we need.

To center knowledge on the person of Christ and God means that knowledge can be directed to relevance in context, for Christ can interact with us in context and help us to explore what is right for us to do, which is not necessarily the thing for some others to do, perhaps in a different context or even the same context.

Our encounter with Christ and God and context may not always be apparent until we begin to pay attention and God interacts and awareness of the presence of God is enhanced. Definition of the God we meet takes a while to dawn and to become clearer in the light of both our experience

and the history of religious traditions to which we relate and which function as aids to understanding. Sometimes it is helpful just to listen to the truths and understandings of our religious traditions and explore their possibilities, especially something like “grace” which might be forgotten without our traditions. But we must remember that religion and relationship with God is an interpersonal process, and while we will have experienced aspects which agree with our religious traditions, each relationship is also personal including elements unique to each who is willing to engage. Thus do not hesitate to treasure some of your experiences and insights while you also explore what goes beyond them in the treasures of your tradition. .

## GOD APPEARS NOT AS KING BUT COMPANION

Many of the Old Testament, and even some New Testament, descriptions of God see God as living the life of a king or emperor in a heavenly palace or temple, judging and punishing failure and rewarding obedience. This was not only the use of a political image from the culture, but fitted the development of the centrality of obedience to the Law in Judaism and some parts of early Christianity. This use of cultural understanding indicates that our models of God may not be adequate or that we have not listened to the way Jesus transformed God’s image into an image of love and grace.

There are accounts in the Bible where God appears in forms describable as Father, Son and Spirit. In the Moravian tradition God as Father not only received that name because of the importance of Father as metaphor, but because of Jesus’ teaching about God as Father expressive of love and care and the use of “Abba, Father” in the Lord’s Prayer, expressive of familiar and loving relationship. Son and Spirit then became ways of describing the experience of God in history: Jesus was the historical revelation of God, center of God’s revelation and symbol of God’s presence and closeness. Because of Jesus’ historical life with persons who came to know him and recorded his history, he became the expression of the way God works in history. Moravians in the 18<sup>th</sup> century called him “Companion,” someone with whom they went around with in life. The Spirit, or the post resurrection experience of God, was often called “Mother,” because she cared for the Church like a mother. All of these descriptions of God presented significant interpersonal ways in which God functioned, and the names were experiential because they described experience, not just ideas. Relationship is also a model for grace, for relationship is not possible without *the mutual gifting of one to the other*.

## AS WE BECOME SO GOD BECOMES IN GOD’S PROCESS WITH US

Relationship is a process, not only because we do not know everything at once but because we are always learning new things in new contexts where God responds to us and we respond to God in ways appropriate to context. And we are always learning new things as we respond to the responses of life and God. Becoming is a very important part of life, and the essence of understanding of a human is that we continue to grow and change, especially to be prepared for God’s world in heaven which now only impinges upon and penetrates the world in which we live, but is still there as a crucial component of the future.

## SOURCE AS PERSON

God comes as person, with all that represents, to meet us as person. This not only limits attempts to define knowledge conceptually, but it means that at the center of knowledge is the personal encounter which we often characterize as grace --- and interpersonal interaction is of its essence. We relate to the Source of our faith in a personal way and keep in mind that our faith is most effective where there is mutual, personal, interactive faith. The basic paradigm then involves the

need to interact, respond, experience, and learn. The personal paradigm does not mean that there is a biological basis to God as there is with us, affecting psychological responses. Our religious resourcing and interpersonal reaction are not peripheral but essential in our relationship with and knowledge of God.

## ENCOUNTER AND IDENTIFICATION

We come to know and identify God by entering experiences of encounter which will identify God to us and shape our understanding. We can always listen to others experiences of encounter, but cannot really avoid the need to encounter and gain our own wisdom and sense of God's reality. There is no such thing as understanding and identification of God without engagement. God can be treated abstractly, but that is not God.

## EXPLORATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF ACQUAINTANCE

Interpersonal acquaintance develops in encounter with God and involves not just definition of God but also of our experience. This mode is presented clearly in the Gospels. Such a Gospel as John's understands knowing Jesus as "coming, seeing and staying with him," as described in chapter 1. Almost every story in John is interpersonal in character. The Gospel of Mark was originally written to enable the readers to enter into the experiences described by the text. For example, the messianic temptations of Jesus in Mark 1 are eliminated because if this is not done the readers can't identify their experience with that of Christ. Thus knowledge of Christ entails living with his experience so that it becomes our experience. In the original ending of Mark 16:1-8 the young man in the tomb speaks of Jesus again leading his disciples and entering into their experience as a Shepherd, but the fulfillment of this has not yet come. It was only promised by the young man in the tomb and only appears in the second or longer ending with the background of the tragedy of the Jewish-Roman War. One cannot know the story merely by reading but by entering into the story so that his story becomes ours -- and this is particularly so where one finds within the texts struggles over the resolution of issues.

## INTERACTION WITH PERSON AND CONTEXT

The Bible presents God as belonging to heaven but in some sense Jesus belongs to earth and history, as evidenced in his life and ministry. Both heaven and earth provide contexts for functioning and understanding. Spirituality has often understood the appropriate context for communication with God as silence and focus on God without the distraction of world and life. It is true that silence helps one avoid distraction where one's own processes seem to diminish the reality of God, but it is important to remember that interaction with God and context -- and oneself -- may also express an important methodology. Interaction also indicates that answers cannot be simply secured without reaction and engagement with all that one's self and world would inform.

## FORMING OF A TRADITION TO MEDIATE HISTORY AND PERSON

As Judaism birthed its tradition to transmit to the future its insights, as the early Christian community began a community in Jerusalem sharing the memorized oral tradition and origin of the Gospels, as the story of the early church was remembered and recorded, the mediation of these traditions became resource for the future. Amazingly, both in Judaism and in early Christianity the traditions were preserved in several forms, e.g. the four Gospels, even preserving dynamic change within the Gospels due to the rethinking of the church. Dealing with differences and the processes which result from reflection upon the tradition and ongoing experience, we

mediate our experience to others, cherishing within it the wealth and insights which can be shared. In doing this we change and learn.

For some process makes judgment on the tradition which some think should be unchanging and argues for consistent conceptuality. For some process is exciting and stimulates both life and mental growth. We must decide on what we are looking for and what nourishes us. To see interpersonal life as center of the tradition and faith introduces profound dimensions to the tradition. To argue for interpersonal process is not to neglect the truth of the tradition but to affirm its life and even its process as expression of truth.

## EVANGELISM: OTHER RELIGIONS AND JESUS

It is easier to speak of the person Christ who encounters a variety of humans in various ways within our churches than to present the relationship of Jesus to the variety of religions. The task of evangelism must be formulated in a way to come to terms with this -- besides exploring the uniqueness of individuals and Christian communities and their forms of faith. To try to say that Christianity is right and all others are wrong and that all must be converted away from their tradition is an oversimplification and impossibility. It has not happened, except for limited ways, in the 2000 years since the beginning of Christianity and where it has happened it was accompanied by profound suffering. The New Testament establishes an approach to this as it treats the relationship of Christ and Christianity with the many religions: Jewish, Greek, Roman, Asian, Egyptian, etc. And rather than ideas Christ becomes the Mediator of ultimate reality, spirituality and grace.

In the Old Testament there are two religious myths having to do with creation narratives and religious perspectives on the world derived from them: Genesis, 1:3-2:3, and Gen. 2:4-3:24. Psalm 8 functions in much the same way. These stories, along with the Abraham, Exodus, Sinai/Torah stories, and stories of the prophets become foundational for religious understanding within Judaism and are reflected in the New Testament. There are also three creation narratives in the New Testament presenting foundational religious ideas: John 1:1-18, Col. 1:3-20, Hebrews 1. John 1 is actually an interpretation of Genesis 1 and Hebrews 1 makes extensive utilization of Psalm 8. The relationship of God to creation creates a universality of religious ideas and realities as does the relationship of Christ to the recreation of the world. In John 1:1-18 extensive use is made of the Jewish understanding of Wisdom as agent in creation (as in Genesis 1) and in Psalm 8 and Hebrews extensive use is made of "Son of Man," Jesus' favorite term for himself, which Philo used in Platonic fashion for the "Man" created in Genesis 1 who was viewed as the ideal "Man" after the pattern of which the "Man" of Gen. 2-3 was created.

In the Moravian tradition Zinzendorf recognized that the New Testament clearly presented Jesus as agent of God in creation and heart of all religious experience. In John 1:1-18 the Word became flesh in Jesus and so all creative and redeeming activity of the Word was traced to the preincarnate Word/Jesus. Thus Jesus is related to both the creative and redemptive action of God all throughout history. All religious experience has a common basis in him. In Colossians Christ is "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation..." "... and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth and in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross." (1:15, 19-20).

When dealing with the understanding of Jesus' relationship with God and his revelation of ultimate spirituality, one encounters an interesting problem. Differences are not just between Christian and non Christian religions, but also within Christianity. Key here is Jesus' differences from and arguments with his disciples. The primary issue was that Jesus did not fit the

expectation of God as manifestation of power. His arguments with James and John in Mark 10 and Peter in Mark 8 are telling. His disciples will not buy into his commitment to suffer and share the difficult conditions of existence. His willingness to let the Romans into the Temple only a few years before the Jewish-Roman War is also telling (Mark 11:17). Jesus' quotation from Isaiah 56 clearly includes that God's house shall be called "a house of prayer **for all nations**," a phrase eliminated from the quote in other Gospels. A careful study of the New Testament also indicates the great variety of views of the early church on such as eschatology and the handling of the Jewish tradition and Law. Differences were not only between Christians and others but extensively within Christianity and the debate about power was central. In fact the first ending of Mark (16:1-8) has no use of power while the revision of the second ending includes miracles, revelations, drinking poison, handling of snakes, etc.. And the resurrection visions absent from the first ending are omnipresent in the second. Amazingly early Christianity, with some hesitation, preserved variety of perspective as legitimate (e.g. four quite different Gospels), something that seemed to bother Christianity from the late first century on and experienced some modification. Is there not some way that Christianity can preserve not only its variety but that of religion in general?

There is also something else. The essential reality manifested in Christ was not a theological system or commitment to certain perspectives, but it was a commitment to a reality which transcended language, embodied the reality of God, and transformed persons. For example, Christ is "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created... in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (Col. 1:15-20). In John 1:1-18 the Word who was in the beginning, created all, was active in history, became flesh, was the living expression of God, full of grace, and not a conceptual system. In Hebrews Christ is "the imprint of God's very being." (Heb. 1:3) In all of the key creation and redemption passages one encounters not ideas but the reality of God God's self, mediated in various ways. Thus common experience of God, in spite of some differing use of words and description, may express a common allegiance to reality even though all is not precisely and similarly described. Can we not find a common bond with other religions though descriptions may differ and leave the resolution of mysteries to the eschaton? Cannot our difficulties over our expectations of God's use of power make us sensitive to the struggle of others to understand and survive. Or perhaps we could use Abraham as a commonality who appears in Christianity, Judaism and Islam, and whose common response to God is "Here I am." Would it not be interesting if our common response to God were obedience rather than knowledge and definition? Would it not be interesting if we took seriously what is said in John 1:3-4: "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the life of all people." "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." (Col. 1:19) Indeed, in him the reality which forms and transforms encounters us even though to eternity we will be discussing details --- until we settle for the reality rather than the description. And perhaps what is called for now 'midst the variety of other religions is a kindness and love we have learned from Christ, accompanied by a realization that the "Temple" is affirmed by Christ as a house of prayer for all nations.

One central perspective we must preserve is that what Christianity has to offer is the gifts which enable life rather than enable escaping condemnation. The fires of hell are often our own creation. Perhaps in dealing with other religions we can share insights and experiences as God's gifts without the demands for change of that which evidently God has long tolerated.