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ENCOUNTERING GOD 1

In an earlier essay you may remember that I said that baby boomers and X-generationers do not have denominational loyalties. What they seek in a church is an **ENCOUNTER** with God. I did not explain what I meant by this, so I thought that I would tell you what this assertion really means to me. Though the Bible makes it plain that we can encounter God if we want to do so, most of the church has forgotten what it means. This occurred, though the reformers and 18th century theologians like Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards saw it as a normative experience for true believers. The experience of encountering God as a *sine qua non* of faith is no longer emphasized in modern theological teaching. Rationalism and the attacks on the authority of the Bible are the cause of its neglect.

To define what we mean by encounter, let's start with scripture. Interestingly the word encounter occurs only three times in the Bible. Perhaps it does so since the word encounter does not always include intent. Most often the Bible speaks of meeting God. Meet does suggest intent most of the time.

In the Old Testament, during and after the Exodus, God prescribed a specific place and the specific circumstances required to meet with a few of his people. They were the priests chosen from the tribe of Levi. The bulk of the Israelites could not come into His presence. He did, therefore, set up elaborate ceremonies by which the people could praise and worship Him. Ordinary men and women did not encounter God unless he had some special need or purpose for them. They could only go through their chosen representatives.

This had not been God's purpose in creation. It was His purpose that all of his children have free access to Him as creator and Father. Adam spoiled it all! Therefore, the average person had to live without communion with God. God then chose a small insignificant tribe to be his people to live in communion with Him. He was with them constantly never deserting, always communing with them, though they rejected him often. Still, this was an unsatisfactory arrangement because His people could not or would not remain in communion with Him. Then He changed it all. God sent his son Jesus. After His death and resurrection, the Holy Spirit was given to make communion possible again. By communion we understand he will come and live with us and in us (John 14:20). All we have to do is receive Him by faith as our Lord and Master. When He enters, He gives us the testimony of the Spirit (Rom. 8:16). This bonding is akin to the bonding established between our father and mother before birth, and develops further during the first years of our lives. God truly lives in us and we in him.

This is all possible because we were created with the capacity to install others in our lives. We can do this because God is Spirit, and we are spirit. Let me explain.

Who we are is what we call our self. Self is profoundly influenced by our body, but self is only found in our mind. According to scripture our self exists above and beyond our body. Even after death we still exist. We dwell in a spiritual body until our body is resurrected (1 Cor. 15:44).

Our mind is like unto that of God. This is the reason we can have eternal life. We do not have to have a three-dimensional body to live eternally.

A statement like this creates a huge amount of controversy in the philosophical and scientific world. There are many scientists and philosophers called monists. They believe that the body and mind are inseparable. They believe that when our body dies, our mind dies with it. There is no afterlife. In contrast there are others who believe (with variations) that body and mind are separable. They believe that the mind develops in the body, and that while the body lives they interact. This construct is called the dualism-interactions theory. People like Karl Popper, Sir John Eccles and Wilder Penfield are its strongest modern supporters. The Bible supports the latter philosophical viewpoint.

I hope you can understand from the foregoing brief discussion that it is possible for the Holy Spirit to dwell **in** us. But what does He do there? William James observed in his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* that the person who encounters God for the first time, and is converted, senses his presence. This encounter is accompanied by a strong and sometimes overwhelming emotion of love. Many of his subjects characterized it as immersion, either continuous or periodic. In the latter case they described it as waves of love sweeping over them. This often occurred at the time of their conversion or subsequently when they were baptized in the Holy Spirit. Following this there is a long lasting state of joyfulness. Other changes accompany this emotional change.

For most persons who have encountered God, (1) The world seems objectively changed. There is a sense of cleanliness within and without. (2) The new or Spirit baptized Christian perceives truths that they have not perceived before. (4) There is a loss of worry. (5) There is evidence of the change in that one or more old habits are broken. The person may stop drinking or smoking, cursing, committing adultery, fighting, or losing control of their anger. They most often become more altruistic in that others are considered before themselves. If they do not go to church they may start going. If they have left the church earlier in their life, they may go back. All will give more money to the church if they have it. In time they will give up their worldly friends.

Do these changes last? According to James they are essentially permanent. He documents the lasting effects of conversion in his chapters on saintliness. Billy Graham documents the long lasting effects of salvation in the section called

"Where are They Now" in *Decision* magazine. Without question they transform the personality and make a new person. But do these changes provide the person with continued access to God? Do they encounter Him frequently after their conversion? Again the answer is yes. Where and how do they do this?

God made it plain to us that he is available. In the 29th chapter of Jeremiah he makes a statement that documents his accessibility. "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart (Jer. 29:11-13). After the Holy Spirit was given, it was made clear that all we had to do was to remain in Christ, and He (the Holy Spirit) would remain in us (John 15:5). **How do we remain in Him?** We obey His commands (John 15:10). You remember that these commands are to Love God with all our being, love our neighbor as ourselves and love one another as He has loved us. The evidence for our obedience is manifest in our feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, clothing the naked and visiting the sick and prisoners (Matt. 25:35,36). Love has, however, a tendency to grow cold if it is not nurtured. Therefore, the question arises, how are we to keep our love "hot?"

Love of God is initiated with our salvation. God's love revealed to us usually produces a reciprocal love. But love to grow and mature has to be fed. The food that nourishes love and makes it grow is communication. How can we communicate with a noncorporeal Spirit? No one can see God, for he is Spirit. Therefore, there can be no growth because of physical contact, but we can contact him spiritually if we initiate and frequently converse with him. Lovers cannot be with one another all of the time, but in our age they can write letters or talk on the telephone. When they do so, their love grows as they reveal their "selves" to one another.

In the same way we can "telephone" God. We "telephone" God when we pray, read his word, sing hymns and spiritual songs and by celebrating the Eucharist. He responds by putting thoughts in our mind in response to the things that we have said to him. Sometimes he reveals his words to us through pictures he puts in our minds eye (eidetic imagery). He also illuminates certain passages of the Bible to convey His thoughts. And in the Eucharist he communicates with us by helping us to understand the price he paid at Calvary to redeem us from our sins. We worship him by doing these three things in the company of other believers. We come together wanting to encounter him in an environment where we are freed from the distractions of the world. Worship is an active response to God by which we declare his supreme worth. When we do so He responds by revealing himself.

In all of these activities he refills us with the Holy Spirit. It is then that his Spirit joins to our spirit and we are reaffirmed in His love. This is why we call these activities the "Means of Grace."

It is in these activities that persons who are seeking want to encounter God. I now ask you the most critical questions of our present time. Where is a believer most likely to encounter God? What conditions are most likely to result in an encounter? The answer to the first question is-**THE CHURCH!** The answer to the second question is-**IN SPIRIT EMPOWERED WORSHIP!**

Sadly most churches have exchanged art for worship. Worship is not the state of the art, but a state of the heart. Psalm 73:26 says that "God is the strength of my heart, and my portion forever." Worship is not only a grand organ playing Bach or Handel. It is not a highly trained soloist singing classical church music. Worship is not a preacherly prayer that includes a mini-sermon. Worship is not liturgical recitations that have no meaning for the person reading them. Worship is not kneeling because that is what you are required to do. Worship is not crossing yourself. Worship is not celebrating the Eucharist with grand flourishes and ritualized gestures. Although worship may include all of these things, it really is opening you mind up to God and asking him to come in. When He does, you encounter Him.

Nevertheless, church is not the only place where you can meet him. Perhaps that the best description of meeting Him elsewhere is found in the old hymn called "In the Garden." The first verse reads like this.

"I come to the garden alone,
While the dew is still on the Roses,
And the voice I hear, Falling on my ear,
The son of God discloses.
And he walks with me, and He talks with me,
and He tells me I am his own.
And the Joy we share as we tarry there,
None other has ever known."

The words of the other verses are equally descriptive of an intimate relationship with Him.

I personally meet God in my prayers, in my time of Bible study, in when I meditate on his presence in my life and the wondrous ways he has interacted with me. The most recent was when I contemplated his presence during my operation and in the two weeks after I had the operation.

Are there any special circumstances where we are more likely to meet God? Again, the answer is yes.

I suspect most of you have heard of the Toronto Blessing. If you have not heard of it, I will briefly describe some cogent facts about it. There is in Toronto a church called the Airport Vineyard Church. In this church there has occurred a move of the Holy Spirit accompanied by manifestations of the Spirit not found in most churches. These manifestations are not new. They have been present throughout all time somewhere in THE body of Christ. Some of those who attend rest in the Spirit, are seized by episodes of laughter, roar like lions, are drunk with the Spirit, are healed and filled with inexpressible Joy. Many of them take the same phenomena back to their own churches all over the world where it infects other believers who have not been to Toronto.

This renewal event has gone on for many months and shows no signs of abating. Thousands of saved and unsaved persons attend each night seven days a week. PEOPLE HAVE COME FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD TO ATTEND. Almost all go away blessed in some way. What they are seeing is not an evangelism outreach. It is a renewal event that has brought new meaning to the lives of the thousands who have attended whether they are affected by the manifestations or not. I am sure that the reason that God is met in South Africa, Lakeland FL, St. Louis, Greensboro NC, London England, or in Toronto is that people expect to meet Him there, and have shown their willingness to seek Him in earnest. You have to be earnest if you travel thousands of miles to encounter Him.

The point I am making is that spiritually hungry people will go almost anywhere to encounter God. They will fly across oceans, they will climb mountains and they will drive long distances for another taste of His love. They want their lives changed. They want to be healed of their spiritual deadness. They want to live the abundant life that He promised them. They want to be empowered to do His will. They want to encounter Him now! Why can't church leaders understand this need? Why can't seminary professors see that Christianity is not emotionless faith. Love is not just a word. It is an emotion that moves us to think great thoughts about God, to do great things for God, show great boldness for God and have great contentment in God (J.D. Packer *Knowing God*). We only have a burning love when we encounter Him every day. Jesus said, "I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled (Luke 12:49)!"

Is it possible to stir up the embers to get a roaring fire. Yes it is. Do these things (1) Desire to be on fire. (2) Absolutely surrender to God. Tell Him you will go wherever he wants you to go and do whatever he wants you to do. (3) Mean it when you say it! (4) When he calls, be prepared to go to the Gaza Road, to Macedonia, to Jerusalem, to Russia, to Siberia, to Africa to South America or wherever he asks you to go. I would remind you that he asks only a few to go great distances. Most of the time He wants you to go no further than the local coffee shop or to your neighbor's house to witness for Him. When you get there

do whatever he tells you to do. Remember that obedience is evidence of you love, and that when you are obedient you will remain in His love. Then you will encounter him over and over and over again.