THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY OF KNOWING THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY OF KNOWING – Rocky Mountain Conference of Seventh-day Adventists (rmcsda.org)

In

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By John Skrzypaszek — In a stimulating article titled "Knowing God or Knowing the Idea of God," Connie J. French, a former Seventh-day Adventist, raised a thought-provoking question related to the spiritual journey of knowing God. She argues, "God cannot be explained or identified by religious teaching. No matter how well-intended, religious teaching is (usually) the communication of ideas." [1] Raised in the milieu of distinctive Adventist beliefs, which were presented to her as the truth, she began to search for a deeper understanding of God. In this context, she referred to the "well-intended, religious teachings" as a blockage of her ability to discern God's presence in real-life experience. She mused, "What I was taught about God blocked my ears from hearing God telling me the truth that would make me free." [2]

Her story begs the question of whether, in a world of rapid changes, the current resurgence of a dogmatic defense of Adventism's established doctrines and prophetic interpretations responds adequately to people's concerns regarding the reality of God's presence in day-to-day struggles.

About ten years ago, Michael Pearson identified the polarizing impact caused by the volte-face to the safe haven of traditional beliefs to re-establish the primary identity of[3] Adventism. This named reversion to traditional beliefs, communicated through the lense of propositional terminologies, breeds a dogmatic and a distant view of God.

Eugene Peterson offers relevant advice. He warns against a static descriptive rationalization of God's story as our story about God, our doctrines, our moral codes and our life of ministry. He maintains that such rationalization takes one "out of God's presence and activity." He calls instead for "continuous re-immersion in the story itself"—the gospel story—the story of God's presence in the reality of human life.

Margaret Guenther describes life with all its challenges as a journey on which it is difficult for travelers to endure a lengthy voyage in comfort without hospitality. She writes, "However prudent their planning and abundant in their supplies, if the journey goes on long enough, they will need the care of a host, someone who offers a temporary home, as a place of rest and refreshment." [4] The search for secure, life-refreshing space of hospitality, the search for knowing and understanding God in the space of such rest opens the human mind to discover God, not as a remote Being but as a Host who offers weary travelers, life-transforming hospitality in Jesus.

Even if expressed in the most sublime language, conjectural descriptions of God fail to convey the gravity of His communicative, redemptive and hope-inspiring self-revelation through Jesus (Hebrews 1:1–3). In Jesus, God touched the dirt of human life. This was not to define himself in terms of human logic but in revealing instead the full measure of His incomprehensible and unconditional love.

Jesus' life corroborates God's propinquity to and empathy for human struggles, fears, and unrest caused by ambiguous and unexpected circumstances. While the ensuing feelings and challenges generate a void space of uncertainty, doubt and insecurity, at the same time, the voice that once called "where are you?" to the fear-stricken hearts (Genesis 3:8–9) delineated a stirring definition of knowing: "Now this is life eternal that they may know you the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3).

Jesus made even clearer the pathway to knowing God. "I am the way the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well" (John 14:6–7). Jesus is identified as the conduit to a more profound and meaningful understanding of God which interweaves the journey of knowing with an interactive, dynamic and faith-oriented intimacy with Jesus. Moreover, as Leon Morris asserts, "To know God means more than knowing the way to life." To know God means much more than a technical elucidation of specific elements of faith. He maintains, "It is life." In the light of Christ's definition, to know "does not mean to know fully but to learn to know." It means to know intimately and relationally. The journey of coming to know God involves an "ever-increasing knowledge, not something given in its completeness once and for all." [5] Paul exclaims that our knowledge is just a poor reflection but one day we will see and know in full. (1 Corinthians 13:12).

The relational experience of knowing God is progressive, subject to the patient discernment of His voice as it speaks through Scripture and life experience. Speaking from the depth of her own search for knowing God, Ellen White wrote, "Everyone needs to have a personal experience in obtaining a knowledge of the will of God. We must individually hear Him speaking to the heart. When every other voice is hushed, and in quietness, we wait before Him, the silence of the soul makes more distinct the voice of God. He bids us, 'Be still and know that I am God' (Psalm 46:1)." [6] It is evident that the process of knowing requires attentive listening and full immersion in the metanarrative of God's saving and redemptive acts. It also leads to the discernment of His guiding presence in the flow of life events.[7] As expressed by Morris, "To know Him transforms a man and introduces him to a different quality of life." [8] The effects of such relational intimacy are transformational and life-changing.

The Living God—the Creator, Communicator, Saviour and Healer—cannot be locked in a cage of dogmatic statements. Bertil Wiklander asserts, "The vision of the ultimacy of God must transcend any written expression of doctrinal position." 9 As argued by Sterling, it is dangerous to reduce the process of knowing God to the level of an

intellectual exercise: “By its very nature, the conceptualized format of theological expressions form a kind of intellectual cathedral, an open target for a kind of intellectual guerrilla warfare and a criteria based on rationality.” [10] In the space of the intellectual quest to know the truth, it is easy to set aside the vision of God’s truth as revealed in Jesus.[11]

Jesus engraved in the domain of human life a memorial of God’s presence, prompting us to remember that in the space of God’s love, “there is no fear” (1 John 4:18). This assurance offers courage to embrace the trustworthiness of God’s unfailing promises and a space to rediscover identity, purpose and hope, nested in the framework of God’s inspirational and visionary self-revelation of truth in Jesus.

The spiritual journey of knowing anchors the development of Christian identity in the hands of the Potter. At the level of relational and faith-oriented experience of knowing the formation of identity moves beyond the exercise of propositional definitions. Robert Mullholand explains this process as “being conformed into the image of Christ, a journey into becoming persons of compassion, persons who forgive, who care deeply for others and the world, persons who offer themselves to God to become agents of divine grace in the lives of others and their world—in brief, persons who love and serve as Jesus did.” [12] Christian identity matures in response to the outflow of God’s creative and redemptive expression of His love in Jesus. It is a vibrant, transformational process, a metamorphosis of values, feelings and emotions.

Theological assertions and formulated doctrines, significant as they are, do not constitute the quintessence of Christian identity. Erikson observes that man’s identity finds its locus in God—“the fact that God created Him.” [13] Such a stance encompasses much more than a well-defined construct of doctrinal beliefs, for it links with God’s life-transforming hub. Here, individuals rediscover personal worth, uniqueness and potential, which are the supporting and consequential spokes of Christian identity designed by God’s redemptive work through Jesus. “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us that we should be called the children of God! And that is what we are. Dear Friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known but we know that when he appears, we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is.” (1 John 3:1,3). Anchored in a secure space of God’s hospitality in Jesus, Christian identity reflects the heartbeat of Christ’s attitude by amplifying the spirit of unity rather than conformity. It empowers believers to act and serve as Jesus served.

Ellen White described Christ’s attitude so adequately. “He [Jesus] made no difference between neighbors and strangers, friends and enemies. That which appealed to His heart was a soul thirsting for the water of life. He passed no human being as worthless but sought to apply the healing remedy to every soul.” [14] In the space of His encounter with people, who struggled with the common issues and challenges of everyday life,

Jesus provided a temporary home as a spiritual place for rest and refreshment—a place of knowing God.

As for Connie French, her spiritual journey of knowing God matured in the wilderness of personal real-life experience—the place which helped her discover that the "truth of God is a relational truth." [15] In Jesus, one finds the essence of the spiritual journey of knowing.

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[1] Janet French, Knowing God or Knowing the Idea of God https://atoday.org/ what-sort-of-truth-is-the-truth-of-knowing-god/

[2] Ibid.

[3] Michael Pearson, Millennial Dreams and Moral Dilemmas: Seventh-day Adventism and Contemporary Ethics (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[4] Margaret Guenter, Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1992), 9.

[5] Leo Morris, The Gospel According to John (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1971), 719.

[6] Ellen G. White, The Desire of Ages (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1940), 363.

[7] Petersen, Subversive Spirituality, 5.

[8] Morris, The Gospel According to John 719–720.

[9] Bertil Wiklander, "The Truth as it is in Jesus" https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1996/02/the-truth-as-it-is-in-jesus

[10] David Sterling, "Not a Wisdom of This Age," in Theology and the Future, eds. Trevor Cairney and David Starling (London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), 83.

[11] Wiklander.

[12] M. Robert Mulholland, Invitation to a Journey (Downers, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 25.

[13] Millard Erickson, Christian Theology(GrandRapids:BakerBook,1985),488.

[14] Ellen G. White, The Ministry of Healing (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1905), 93.

[15] French.