

Transactional Faith?

John 14:8-17
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Back when corporate downsizing was a thing, the satirical tabloid *The Onion* reported on similar plans for the Holy Trinity. The article quoted God as saying, “Given the poor economic climate and the unclear nature of the Holy Ghost’s duties, I felt (it) ... sensible and necessary ...” to phase out the third Person of the Trinity. The Holy Ghost will be given fewer and fewer responsibilities until his formal resignation from Trinity duty” No word yet on how well things are going now that it’s just the Father and the Son on the job, but rumor has it neither is thrilled with their new name: the Holy Duo.¹

It’s a silly little piece of satire with serious implications. Can you imagine if God Almighty were so transactional as to weigh the effectiveness of the Holy Spirit, find it lacking and give him the boot? Thank heaven that ours is not a transactional God. And yet, that’s just what the earliest disciples thought about God – that he was transactional. The Apostle Philip says to Jesus during the Last Supper, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” It’s a rather transactional approach to take with Jesus, right? You do this for us, and we’ll do that in return.

Now, truth be told, we can’t be blame them for approaching God in this way. After all, our faith was built upon the covenant – or transaction – between God and Noah with the Flood, God and Abraham with his Offspring, and God and Moses with the Promised Land. But Jesus changes all that. Jesus was never at his core transactional with us. Rather, Jesus is relational. It’s our relationship with Jesus that brings any blessings, wisdom and abilities we have.

Jesus says as much in his response to Philip. He says, “Have I been with you all this time, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, “Show us the Father?” “... Have I been with you all this time...,” says Jesus, “and you still do not know me?”

The time we spend in relationship with Jesus – in church, Sunday school and Christian service, through the Bible and devotionals, in our prayers and conversations with and about God – that time well spent.

It moves us from a transactional relationship with God to an actual relationship with God, which is so much more powerful and meaningful. Right? Because that way our faith is truly about God and God alone, rather than what God can or should do for us.

¹ theonion.com/content/node/31330/print. Retrieved December 6, 2006.

Sadly, these days, people are spending less and less time with church and the Christian practices that go along with it. Oh, they still want that relationship with Jesus and all the blessings, wisdom and strength it brings. They just don't want to put in the time and effort, time and effort that would take them away from the world they love, the activities they love. And when I say "they," of course, I mean we – you and me.

Do we truly believe in Jesus, that he can bring blessings, wisdom and strength beyond our natural abilities, beyond our worldly ways? Or do we believe more fully in this transactional world of ours, relying only on what we can earn, what we can accomplish, what we think is fair?

We know what we get from relying only on our own sense of fairness, our own strength, our own way of valuing ourselves and others. We get whatever we get, whatever the world serves up. And lately, that has not been so good, has it? If this world is going to get any better it's going to come about – not from what we know – but rather who we know, the relationships we nurture, beginning with our relationship with Jesus.

If all our relationships in life were focused on honoring our relationship with Jesus, there would be no earthly limit to the blessings, wisdom and abilities we'd see, the miracles we'd see. But to do that, we have to truly believe in Jesus and all that he promises.

Jesus says to Philip, "Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves."

How sad that Jesus has to make even the apostles' belief in him transactional. "If you do not (believe in me), then believe ... because of the works themselves," the miracles you've seen. How many times have we asked Jesus or God to work a miracle in our lives, and then based our belief and faith in God on the outcome. We allow our faith to waiver when bad things happen to us.

The thing to learn here is that it's not the miracle that matters – the transaction – but rather it's our faith in Jesus Christ that matters. We need our faith to be stronger than anything in this world. And we get that by pouring our time and energy into our relationship with Jesus. "Very truly, I tell you," says Jesus, "the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do – the miracles I do – and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father."

If you don't see great things happening in your life – in this world of ours – it's not because God has abandoned us. It's that we in so many ways have abandoned God, as a society, as families and households, as communities.

It's almost as if we need a do-over that would set things right, put us back on the right path. And what better day to realize that than on Pentecost Sunday, the day we celebrate the birth of the church through the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus promised to send us the Holy Spirit, saying, "... I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him."

So, you see it should be no surprise that the world runs contrary to the will of God. The world as we know it cannot receive the Spirit of God. We are all caught up in the transactional nature of this world – can't help but be. It's just the way of the world. But it's not the way of God, not the way of Jesus, and not the way of the Holy Spirit. Their way is one of grace and mercy. And because God has sent the Holy Spirit upon us, we live in that Spirit of grace and mercy – grace and mercy for us when we've strayed from the path, and grace and mercy for others when they've wronged us.

It's the only way, the only way for us to do anything that is right and holy in God's eyes, the only way for us to have right relationships with our loved ones, our neighbors, the strangers we meet and even the enemies we make.

So let us all commit ourselves right now to spend a bit more time on our relationships starting with our relationship with Jesus, drawing closer to God, relying more fully on the Holy Spirit. It won't be easy, but it will be fruitful, as we come to know and enjoy and share the Spirit of grace and mercy, the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the blessings of God the Father. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

O God of rushing wind and fiery tongues, your wisdom is beyond our ability to understand it. You break into our world and reveal yourself that we might know of your gracious love.

Receive our praises to your holy name and give ear to our thanksgiving.

In every way you have cared for our needs. The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand, and we are filled with plenty.

We thank you for instilling in us a spirit of giving, that as we receive further blessings, we eagerly and graciously share them with others.

Thank you for the gift of health and vitality – both for our church and our church members and friends. Be with those who need your Spirit of wellness and renewal.

We pray all this in the name and Spirit of Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray as we do now, raising our eyes to heaven and our voices in song, praying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,

as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.