

TESTING AND GROWING

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We need to remind ourselves just how unique each of us is. No two individuals are exactly alike. Even identical twins grow up into unique and different individuals. The factors that shape us are endless: temperament, thought processes, family upbringing, life experiences, geographical location, culture, to name just a few. We are equally as different when it comes to our perceptions, what we see and understand through our senses.

My wife and I can watch the same video and we see different things. "How come you laughed so much? It wasn't that funny." Same movie. Same screen. Yet, despite being exposed to the very same thing, we each interpret and respond to it differently. And these differences occur when we see and hear all the information together, at the same time. Most of the time, however, we do not see the whole picture. We know that there is a bigger picture. We want to know what it is and how we fit into it. Using the limited information available to us, over the course of our lives, we develop a unique framework of personal meanings by which we interpret the world and our place within it. It is like our road map. It helps us find our place in the world, and gets us to where we want to go. But if our map is out of date, it is no longer helpful. So, in our constantly changing world, the more our meanings are tested and updated, the more useful they become. They help us to interpret events around us and to deal with change in effective ways.

People make sense of life in many ways. For Christians, meaning is very much about a deep, intimate relationship with a personal God. This relationship with God is a dynamic and interactive journey involving every part of our being: mind, body, and soul. It also requires us to be actively involved in deeply loving relationships with other people. Jesus stressed the importance of relationship when He gave us the "new commandment," which He repeated sixteen times in the NT. For example, John 13:34 declares, "Let me give you a new command: Love one

another. In the same way that I loved you, you love one another."¹ The map must also involve a regular reading of scripture and an openness to the Spirit.

I would like to illustrate this ongoing nature of our faith journey and the need to continually test our new thoughts and experiences in light of the gospel by referring to the experience of Peter with Cornelius and the early church. According to Peter's spiritual road map, the good news of Jesus was for Jews only, and there were certain Gentile foods that he was forbidden to eat. However, one day he fell into a trance and saw a sheet being lowered full of these forbidden foods. Then he heard a voice telling him to eat. With this new information he had to make a choice. He could have ignored it and stuck with his existing meaning or understanding of the Jewish scriptures or he could reflect on this experience and test out his beliefs. He chose the second of these two alternatives. And a second incident occurred, namely, he was invited to eat with Gentiles. Again, he was faced with a choice that tested his belief system.

Peter believed that the Spirit was telling him to go. So he went, still uncertain as to what all this meant. It was only as he talked with Cornelius and learned how God had also been working in his life, that everything fell into place, and Peter was able to include Gentile Christians on his life map. And that is not all. Other Jewish Christians, who had gone with Peter, were also forced to develop their meanings as they saw the Spirit of God fall on these Gentile believers. Peter then took the corporate dimension seriously by presenting the issue to church leaders in Jerusalem. Although they initially criticized him for his actions, the believers there were also challenged to grow in their understanding as they discussed these late-breaking events.

Peter's experiences describe some important steps in the whole process of interpreting and reinterpreting Scripture.

1. As Christians we start with certain "givens," or scriptural principles that form the basis of our belief system. We then encounter a whole range of experiences that often challenge these beliefs and force us to reinterpret Scripture, or look at it in new ways. Jesus often encouraged His listeners to do this. In psychological terms, this reinterpretation is known as the "loosening" phase, where we question or come to see our traditionally held beliefs in new ways. It affects how we make sense of something.

2. The second phase occurs when we take action on the basis of our understanding. We have before us a range of possibilities but we choose one and act on it. In Peter's case, he not only ate with Cornelius but he took others with him, and finally, he shared the whole experience with the leaders in Jerusalem. This is called "tightening," or committing ourselves to a particular meaning which we then act on. This is typically a real step of faith, where we have to put ourselves on the line. But we must remember that "faith without deeds is dead"

¹Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the NIV.

(James 2:26). In this cycle of loosening and tightening, our view of God will mature and our faith will grow.

Actually we go through this creative process most days of our lives. At the very basic physical level, it occurs when we try new food. For example, imagine that I am a Jollibee fan and I arrive in a small town with no Jollibee, just one Korean restaurant. Since I have not tasted Korean food before, I look carefully at the menu and explore various possibilities. This is the loosening phase. I am not sure. I just imagine what each dish tastes like. I may look around and see what other people are eating, or I may ask the waiter a few questions. Based on this limited information I decide what might taste good and place my order. Now I have started on the tightening process. Once the meal arrives, I test out my selection. Using all the information available to me, such as my senses of smell, touch, sight, and taste, I decide if I have made a good choice. The proof is, literally, in the eating. If it is tasty, I may order the same meal another time. I may visit another Korean restaurant. If I do not like it, I may choose a different meal next time, or I may just stick to Jollibee. However, while deciding to eat at only Jollibee may be more predictable, it does not help to expand my understanding of food or help me to creatively adapt to circumstances where there is no Jollibee.

Dealing with food is one thing, but dealing with people is quite another. With people there are a lot more uncertainties, since we do not know what people are hiding inside. But understanding, making decisions, and acting in the physical and social realms is relatively easy compared to doing it in the spiritual realm. It is very challenging to build a relationship with God, whom we cannot physically see, hear, touch, taste, or smell.

The nature of the God of the Bible is unchanging and predictable, and the basic principles of our relationship with Him and with others are laid down in Scripture. But we have seen from the example of Cornelius that the ongoing nature of our relationship with God and how we understand the Scriptures are not so predictable. God was revealed to us very clearly through Jesus Christ, and all our spiritual insights must ultimately be tested by Jesus' life and teaching. But God is also revealed to us today through the Bible, prayer, dreams, people, situations, and nature, to name just a few. In other words, through almost everything! So relating to this God whom we cannot clearly see or hear is "a totally different ball game." It involves all our being. Far from being a simple passive process, deepening our understanding of God is a complex and active one. The apostle Paul talks about this in 1 Cor 12:1-2:

What I want to talk about now is the various ways God's Spirit gets worked into our lives. This is complex and often misunderstood, but I want you to be informed and knowledgeable. Remember how you were when you didn't know God, led from one phony god to another, never knowing what you were doing, just doing

it because everybody else did it? It's different in this life. God wants us to use our intelligence, to seek to understand as well as we can.²

To use our intelligence to discern what the Spirit is saying and seek to understand or make sense of things as well as we can is possibly one of the most creative and difficult processes in life. Yet this is exactly what is required if we are to experience full spirituality. And like Peter, we need to be part of a faith community where we can test out what we believe this Spirit is saying to us, always keeping the Scripture as our reference point.

There are two ways for our growth in faith to get stuck. One way is to get too loose or vague as we try to find meaning in God's word. We can get caught up in entertaining endless possibilities, asking question after question, without ever committing ourselves to action. It is sometimes easier to talk about prayer than to actually pray. We can remain students all our lives, not doing anything. Remember, "Faith without deeds is dead." Peter could have developed many D.Min. projects from his vision without ever acting.

The other way to get stuck is to be too tight or rigid, or too set in the way we relate to God. We can get stuck in a narrow doctrinal framework. This is a trap into which Peter would have fallen if he had continued maintaining the letter of the law, that is, if he had refused to enter a Gentile home and continued to say that Christianity was only for the Jews.

If we only experience God in one particular way, it is a little like continually choosing the same item from the menu. If we try anything else it throws us into a state of anxiety. So, to reduce the anxiety levels, we maintain a certain ritual and keep things just as they are, reciting the party line and not trying out any new thoughts or possibilities. We end up only wanting to relate with others who see things exactly the same way we do. This leads us to an "us" and "them" approach to faith. It is not by chance that Jesus asks us to relate to those different from ourselves. How do we keep a balance? How can we avoid the two extremes? How do we become spiritually mature? In order to develop and mature physically and socially we must be involved in the rough and tumble of the world, in which we take risks, can be hurt, and can make mistakes. In order to mature spiritually, we must be willing to risk a real relationship with God. We must listen to Him speaking to us through His word. We must test out new thoughts. We must stick close to a community of faith where we can test our thoughts and meanings. We must be doers of the word. We must play an active part in our relationships with people and with God. We must foster this creative process where we are *part* of the world but not *of* it. We must continually take risks and have the openness to see things differently and test out new possibilities. If we do this, our road map

²Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1994), 356.

will be constantly undergoing revision. Remember, "Faith without deeds is dead."
I challenge you to grow.