



Roadblock #1: Theoretical Knowledge of God

“Many people say that they go to church to pray and to praise, that they praise and thank God, but that it does them no good. This means that they sing and praise God with their lips, but stand apart from Him in their hearts. God says of them: This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with lips; but their heart is far from me (**Matthew 15:8**), and that through their lawless manner of life dishonor and disparage the Name of God. Do they really believe in God? No. True faith brings forth good fruits, and distances us from evil works, while they, according to the Apostle, they profess that they know God; but in works they deny Him... (**Titus 1:16**).” (St. Tikhon of Zadonsk)

Two people go to church to pray. Both sit, stand and cross themselves at the appropriate times. Both sing along with the choir. Both repeat all the prayers and recite the Creed without flaw. Both listen to the sermon and nod in agreement. One goes home having made incredibly intimate contact with Christ; the other heads home unfulfilled, feeling as lifeless as when he went in.

Why?

I believe that one of the most pervasive problems in the pews today is a willingness to rely on **theoretical knowledge** alone. We may know the doctrines of the church inside out, but we fail to develop a relationship with the only truly important Person we need to know ...

“The greatest sickness of the soul, its ruin and perdition, is not to know God, who created all things for man and gave him the gifts of intellect and intelligence. Winged through these gifts, man is linked to God, knowing Him and praising Him.” (Attributed to St. Antony the Great, *The Philokalia*, Volume One, p. 344)

...and apply His commands to our lives.

“‘Christ died on account of our sins in accordance with the Scriptures’ (**I Cor. 15:3**); and to those who serve Him well He gives freedom. ‘Well done, good and faithful servant,’ He says, ‘you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things: enter into the joy of your Lord’ (**Matt. 25:21**). He who relies on **theoretical** knowledge alone is not yet a faithful servant: a faithful servant is one who expresses his faith in Christ through obedience to His commandments.” (St. Hesyhios the Priest, *The Philokalia*, Volume One, p. 176)

“Those who, because of the rigor of their own ascetic practice, despise the less zealous, think that they are made righteous by physical works. But we are even more foolish if we rely on **theoretical** knowledge and disparage the ignorant.” (St. Macarius of Optina, *The Philokalia*, Volume One, p. 126)



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“My brother, do you consider yourself spiritually learned? From your deeds you can perceive the actuality of this character trait; for, exactly as the body is dead without the breath, so any knowledge, without accompanying spiritual works, is dead and of no benefit. So if it is wrong for a Christian not to know Scripture, it is doubly wrong when he knows Scripture, but nevertheless disdains it by not applying its teachings to his life.” (From *The Ancient Fathers of the Desert: Section 3*)

“He who neglects action and depends on **theoretical knowledge** holds a staff of reed instead of a double-edged sword.” (St. Mark the Ascetic, *The Philokalia, Volume One, p. 116*)

“Understand the words of Holy Scripture by putting them into practice, and do not fill yourself with conceit by expatiating on **theoretical ideas**.” (St. Mark the Ascetic, *The Philokalia, Volume One, p. 116*)

If our “worship” is flat and lifeless, it stands to reason that we haven’t moved from **theoretical knowledge** to actual faith. As St. Cyril of Jerusalem wrote,

“... there is one kind of faith, the dogmatic, involving an assent of the soul on some particular point... But there is a second kind of faith which is bestowed by Christ as a gift of grace... The faith then which is given of grace from the Spirit is not merely doctrinal, but also works things above man’s power.” (St. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures: Lecture 5*)

Theoretical knowledge is definitely a roadblock to worship: Theoretical knowledge of God isn’t enough. How can we possibly worship Someone we don’t wholeheartedly believe in, have faith in, or adore?

“Faith, like active prayer, is a grace. For prayer, when activated by love through the power of the Spirit, renders true faith manifest – the faith that reveals the life of Jesus. If, then, you are aware that such faith is not at work within you, that means your faith is dead and lifeless. In fact you should not even speak of yourself as one of the ‘faithful’ if your faith is merely **theoretical** and not actualized by the practice of the commandments or by the Spirit. Thus faith must be evidenced by progress in keeping the commandments, or it must be actualized and translucent in what we do. This is confirmed by St. James when he says, ‘Show me your faith through your works and I will show you the works that I do through my faith’ (cf. **Jas. 2:18**.)” (St. Gregory of Sinai, *The Philokalia, Volume Four, pp. 240-241*)

It’s not the kind of “faith” that the Father’s looking for. If it’s not, then what is? What does God expect from us above all? When the question was put to Jesus Christ, He responded:

“Then one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, and saying, ‘Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?’ Jesus said to him, “‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: “‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 22:35-40)

Deep in my heart, I’m *convinced* that He responded without *any* hesitation whatsoever!



I CAN'T BELIEVE HOW MANY TIMES YOU HAVE MISSED CHURCH ... YOU WOULD NEVER SEE MY FAMILY SKIPPING

Unfortunately, this kind of heartfelt faith and devotion is far from our ordinary view of religion. In fact, the vast majority of people in this world – even the most pious – rarely worship God with this kind of enraptured self-abandonment despite a perfect attendance record at church! In my younger years, *I* never did!

When I was a child, my Mom always took me to church on Sundays. I faithfully (by force!) attended Sunday School, learned the lessons and the stories, and thought that I knew the basic religious beliefs of her church – even though I had them badly mangled at the time!

I’d endured far too many Sunday School classes where we did things like making little houses out of construction paper and learning that the people back then could sleep on the roof at night. It sounded nice but it didn’t answer any of my questions. It didn’t explain anything I was experiencing as a child or make it less frightening. It didn’t wash away all the feelings of worthlessness and guilt inside either.

Then came my years as a teenager. Each year, we had a Youth Sunday, where the youth of the church controlled the content of the service. Each year, without fail, someone played guitar and we all sang,

*“The answer, my friend, is blowing in the wind.
The answer is blowing in the wind.”*

God was a distant, disinterested deity, indifferent to the pains of adolescence that we were enduring. For me personally, there was no joy inside. I wasn't at peace with God, the universe, or whatever I wanted to call it at that point. It was all far too nebulous to relate to. I was living for myself, with little thought of eternity.

Then came college.

During my freshman year, I came to know several Christians who really *did* have joy inside despite any circumstances. And that bothered me. When I asked them why they were always so happy, they told me it was due to the Lord in their lives. They didn't just know *about* God; they *knew* God!



Thanks to Benoit Paquette

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THIS NEXT SONG'S GOIN' OUT TO THE NICE LADY IN THE FOURTH PEW WHO SUGGESTED I ACT MORE "PRIESTLY" ... I KNEW WHAT YOU MEANT !



A God you could *know*? What was this???

“When Christianity says that God loves man, it means that God *loves* man: not that He has some ‘disinterested,’ because really indifferent, concern for our welfare, but that, in awful and surprising truth, we are the objects of His love. You asked for a loving God: you have one. The great spirit you so lightly invoked, the ‘lord of terrible aspect,’ is present: not a senile benevolence that drowsily wishes you to be happy in your own way, not the cold philanthropy of a conscientious magistrate, nor the care of a host who feels responsible for the comfort of his guests, but the consuming fire Himself, the Love that made the worlds, persistent as the artist’s love for his work and despotic as a man’s love for a dog, jealous, inexorable, exacting as love between the sexes.” (C. S. Lewis, *Readings for Meditation and Reflection*, p. 3., quoting from chapter 3 of *The Problem of Pain*)

They were never at a loss for words when it came to talking about God’s love for me. Among the many things they told me, one stands out in my mind:

“For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (**Romans 8:38-39**)

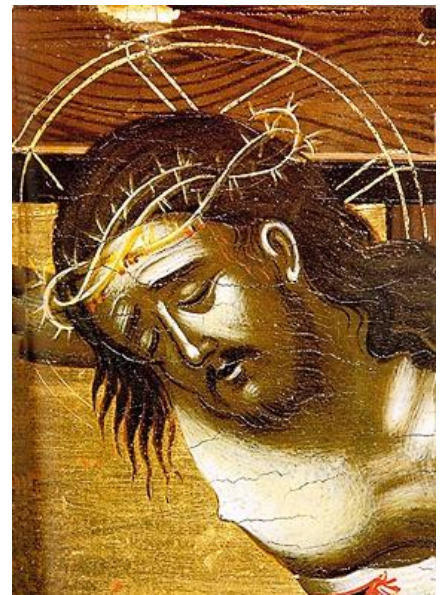
It sounded appealing, but it wasn't enough to convince me. “Give me something *concrete* that I can understand. Give me *proof* that He loves me!” They calmly countered with,

“But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (**Romans 5:8**)

“In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” (**I John 4:9-10**)

“But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved).” (**Ephesians 2:4-5**)

I was skeptical to say the least. If this was so important, why hadn't I heard about it before? I turned them off and walked away from their preaching. I wanted the peace that they had, but definitely *not* the religion! It was back and forth for me that year: distancing myself from their preaching, yet drawn constantly to the source of joy in their lives.



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Despite my almost daily rebuffs, they were always there for me, encouraging me and telling me that there was a solution to the senselessness and emptiness in my life. They told me, “The peace and the fulfillment you’re searching for can only be found in a relationship to God that Christ can bring. ‘Peace I leave with you,’ He said, ‘My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you.’ (John 14:27).”

“Our whole being by its very nature is one vast need; incomplete, preparatory, empty yet cluttered, crying out for Him who can untie things that are now knotted together and tie up things that are still dangling loose.” (C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, chap. 1, para. 7, pp. 13-14)

They told me that “God is more than a Good Buddy. He’s more than a Cosmic Santa Claus. He’s asking for our hand in marriage. We’re His bride; He’s our Bridegroom. Judging by His actions, we believe without hesitation that this is what He deeply longs to be. It speaks of God’s personal and intimate love for us, a love that craves to be consummated in a marriage relationship between Him and each one of us. It’s foreshadowed in the Song of Songs and many other Old Testament texts which project the mystical view of God entering into marital union with Israel. In the New Testament Christ is identified as the Bridegroom. The kingdom of God is even depicted as a marriage feast and Christ’s union with the Church is compared to human marriage.

God’s love for us is so perfect and so complete that it’s best expressed through the image of a marriage that’s fulfilled in His death on the Cross. Being deeply in love with us, the bridegroom is coming down from Heaven to seek us. He uses *everything*, including being nailed to the cross, to convince us of His unstoppable love.

“It’s the marriage of Christ – the Bridegroom – to the bride which is my soul. As C. S. Lewis once said, ‘God is so masculine, we are all feminine in comparison. We are merely *responders* to His light and love.’”



My reaction? If ever an image spooked me, this was it. This wasn’t a distant, impersonal God Who created us and then skedaddled across the cosmos, leaving us to carry on alone, by ourselves. This was a God Who enjoyed being with us, the Bridegroom Who loved us in a very personal, very *intimate* way.

They told me that Jesus, in effect, proposed to me on the Cross, and that He’s waiting for my reply. Christ didn’t die for people who already loved Him. He died for sinners – people whose lives were bound up and directed by sinful desires that went contrary to His will. It was the *sick* He came to cure, not the *healthy*. He died for *me*! Whoa!



People tell me “Big Gulp” is a drink. I say “Big Gulp” is responding to a proposal like that from God!

“To believe that God – at least this God – exists is to believe that you as a person now stand in the presence of God as a Person. What would, a moment before, have been variations in opinion, now becomes variations in your personal attitude to a Person. You are no longer faced with an argument which demands your assent, but with a Person who demands your confidence.” (C. S. Lewis, *The World’s Last Night and Other Essays*, “On Obstinacy in Belief” (1955), para. 14, p. 26)

It all came to a head one Sunday morning in their church in Lincoln, Nebraska. I was confronted by a loving God Who would never betray me, never abuse me, never shame me or ridicule me. I was one step away from finding the Father I had never had.

And it was the hardest step I had ever taken.

“Before anything else one must believe in God, ‘that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him’ (Hebrews 11:6).” (St. Seraphim of Sarov, *Spiritual Instructions*)

When I gave my life to the Lord that morning, I met a loving God Who became the Father I never had. When I’m unskilled, He teaches me. When I’m scared, He puts His arms around me and always has the right word for me. When I’m hurt, He understands the pain inside me and the problems around me. He doesn’t shame me for what I’m feeling; He helps me find a way to deal with it. I can count on Him to be there. He doesn’t shame me for what I’m feeling; He helps me find a way to deal with it. When I’m unsure, He encourages me. When I’m wrong, He corrects me – in love. And when I’m sick, He’s there with me, loving me and reassuring me. And He gives me a joy that no one else can. That’s all I can give as an explanation. He gives me a joy that no one else can.

I used to feel that the image of “clinging to God” was a sign of weakness. Now, I don’t think so.

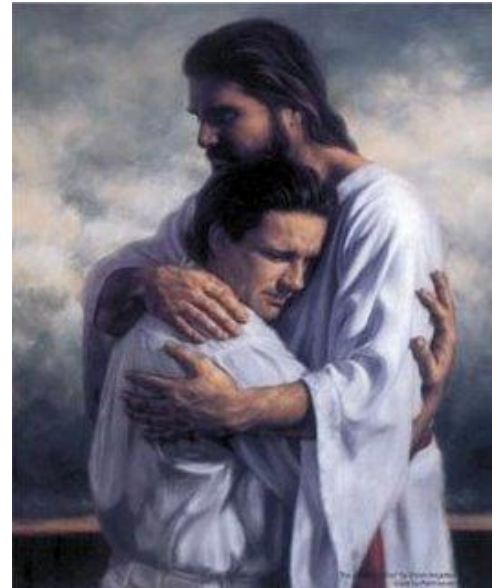
“For as a sash clings to the waist of a man, so I caused the house of Israel and the whole house of Judah to cling to Me, so as to become a notable people to Me, as a boast and a glory...” (**Jeremiah 13:11**)

“Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good.” (**Romans 12:9**)

“You shall fear the Lord your God; you shall serve Him, and hold fast to Him, and take oaths in His name.” (**Deuteronomy 10:20**)

“I will cleave to Your testimonies; O Lord, do not disappoint me.” (**Psalms 118 [119]:31**)

“I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you: I set before you life and death, blessing and cursing. Therefore choose life, that both you and your seed may live and love the Lord your God, obey His voice, and cling to Him.” (**Deuteronomy 30:19-20**).



So, as you see, based on God’s Word, this seems to be the most reasonable course of action. And based on the love that I’ve found in Him, I just want to wrap myself around Him in gratitude and use my whole body to express that love and thankfulness.



Reach Out and Touch Someone: The psalmist beautifully blends worship of “heart and hands and voices.” In David’s prayer to God for mercy, he says: “Hear the voice of my supplication when I pray to You and when I lift up my hands toward Your holy temple.” (**Psalms 27 [28]:2**). Here we see his words of petition conjoined to his action of lifting his hands as a suppliant, expecting mercy to come from the God Whose mercy is revealed in the “Most Holy Place.” Later in this same poem, David finds that God’s great grace has been extended to him another time. Now heart and voice conjoin in exultation: “The Lord is my helper and my champion; in Him my heart hoped, and I was helped, and my flesh revived; and I will give thanks to Him willingly.” (**Psalms 27 [28]:7**).

You may have seen me worshiping God through sign language during the Liturgy. I may not have the musical or vocal skills of Paul McCartney or Michael W. Smith, but the Lord brought me up in an environment where I could learn sign language and use it as a way to worship Him with my whole body. Like David, I live to worship Him in heart and hands and voice.

Perhaps the best example of this is when I’m signing in a situation where self-consciousness isn’t an issue. During the summer of 2001, I participated in a Promise Keepers convention in Providence, Rhode Island. When I returned to Rochester, I wrote to my friends:

“I love music. Since I can’t sing or carry a tune, I use sign language to sign the songs. That’s how I lose myself in worship. Once I have the lyrics memorized, I just close my eyes and sign directly to the Lord. There were over 7,000 men at the conference, but when I’m signing, it’s just me and the Lord, somewhere up on the clouds, lost in the moment with Him. I was caught up in signing one of the songs, just enjoying this means of worshiping, when the following lyrics came on the screens, surprising us with the words:

‘With my hands, Lord, be glorified, be glorified today.’

My buddy and I got a good chuckle out of that! While I’m honored by his admission that he’s blessed just watching me sign unto the Lord, it really doesn’t matter to me. All I want is that connection – between the Lord and my whole body in worship. When I sign His ‘strength,’ I can feel the power up and down my arm. When I sign what He ‘gives’ us, I can bring it right down from Heaven to Earth in my hands. When I sign His ‘glory,’ I can encircle the heavenly throne with the sparkling of the glory. When I sign my ‘soul,’ I can make it rise right up into His presence. When I sign my ‘longings,’ I’m truly pulling it in from out there and can feel it all up and down my forearms. And when I sign ‘heaven,’ it’s HUGE!”

In church, on the other hand, my eyes are transfixed on the icon of the Lord (our window into Heaven) above the Royal Doors.

The movement of the signs helps me to visualize His presence and focus my mind on interacting with Him on an intensely intimate level. When I sign “Grant it, O Lord,” I’m physically receiving the response from God up above down to me. When I sign “To Thee, O Lord,” I offer it back up to the Lord. When we “lift them up to the Lord,” I’m physically lifting my heart up to Him above.

Because I have to translate everything I’m signing, I have to think about the meanings behind the words. It doesn’t allow me to use words without understanding what they mean. When I choose the signs to use, I select signs that not only flow together but create an emotional and physical expression of my love for the Lord as well.



Conclusion

Is this the type of relationship that you’d like to have with the Father? Do you want to make contact with Christ every time you’re in church (or outside of it, for that matter!)? Would you like to lose yourself in worship? Let’s look back on what we covered.

Develop that relationship: All relationships take time, commitment and investment. Ask the Lord for His help. As the father in the Gospels confessed to Christ, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!” (**Mark 9:24**)

“I ask you to put this order into practice: as much as you can, try to cultivate your love toward Christ’s own person. You must reach the point that whenever you mention His name, tears run from your eyes. Your hearts must be truly ablaze. Then He will be your Teacher, your Guide, your Brother, your Father, your Elder.” (**Elder Amphilochios of Patmos**)

“He who loves God consciously in his heart is known by God (cf. **I Cor. 8:3**), for to the degree that he receives the love of God consciously in his soul, he truly enters into God’s love. From that time on, such a man never loses an intense longing for the illumination of spiritual knowledge, until he senses its strength in his bones and no longer knows himself, but is completely transformed by the love of God. He is both present in this life and not present in it; still dwelling in the body, he yet departs from it, as through love he ceaselessly journeys towards God in his soul. His heart now burns constantly with the fire of love and clings to God with an irresistible longing, since he has once and for all transcended self-love in his love for God. As St. Paul writes: ‘If we go out of ourselves, it is because of God; if we are restrained, it is for your sake’ (**2 Cor. 5:13**).” (**St. Diadochos of Photiki, The Philokalia, Volume One, p. 256**)

Obey His commands: When you’re truly in love with the Lord, you want to do everything you can for Him. Making Him happy makes you happy; making Him upset makes you upset. You may start out obeying Him because you’re supposed to, but you’ll find as your love for the Lord grows, you’ll be obeying Him because you enjoy pleasing Him.

Cling to Him: There’s nothing embarrassing about it. He’s your Bridegroom. Wrap yourself around Him as you would around your spouse. He’s also your Father. Hide within the protection of His arms. Trust that He’s always guiding you and protecting you, come what may.

Lose yourself in worship: Use your body. Kneel, perform prostrations, kiss the icons (especially those of Christ!), cross yourself with a grateful heart, lift up your hands, ask me to teach you the basic signs. Don’t feel embarrassed! Worshiping with your body comes with practice and soon you’ll find it feeling more and more natural! And above all, remember the words of Christ and seek to follow them:

“Then one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, and saying, ‘Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?’ Jesus said to him, ‘“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.’” (**Matthew 22:35-40**)

(All passages of scripture are from the Orthodox Study Bible unless contained within a larger quotation.)