

A friend in Jesus? Faith is not a personal relationship: Faith is not a personal relationship

by [John Suk](#) in the [September 6, 2011](#) issue



Attribution [Some rights reserved](#) by [Leah Gregg](#)

During a yearlong journey through North America, my wife and I attended many different churches. One of them was a Methodist church in rural Louisiana. Early in the worship service the pastor insisted—not once but several times—that "the meaning and purpose of life is to have a personal relationship with Jesus."

The claim irked me. As a child I was taught, in keeping with the Reformed bent of my tradition, that the purpose of human life was found in the cultural mandate: it encourages us to rule the garden and love each other to the glory of God (Gen. 1:26). This take on the meaning and purpose of life suggested that creation was somehow incomplete and culturally raw, and both needed to make progress to become all that God wanted them to be. In a sense, the cultural mandate made humans co-regents, even cocreators with God.

At the same time, I was also taught that Christians were supposed to seek justice and defend the cause of the poor, the widows and the fatherless (Isa. 1:17). Jesus himself taught that the purpose of life is to love God above all and our neighbors as we love ourselves (Matt. 22:36–40). These notions, as honest as they were about human failure, also spurred great bouts of institution-building as we sought through

political action groups and church relief agencies to do just these things, in as thoughtful and effective a manner as we could imagine and plan. Jesus also taught—and most of the New Testament illustrates—how Christians are supposed to make disciples and teach them how to obey Jesus; in other words, we were taught that we were supposed to grow the church as an institution. But I never heard while I was growing up, though it may have been whispered, that Christians were supposed to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Such talk would have struck us as soft—probably Pentecostal.

And yet this sort of language is now very common, even among Christians in the Reformed tradition. I think they take their cue, in part, from the tenor of evangelical Christianity. Rick Warren says: "This is what God wants most from you: a relationship!" Henry Blackaby, in *Experiencing God*, writes: "Knowing God . . . is a relationship with a Person. It is an intimate love relationship with God." A *Newsweek* /Beliefnet poll suggests that 75 percent of Americans say that a "very important" reason for their faith is to "forge a personal relationship with God."

At the outset, I should say that there is a way of interpreting these words that makes some grammatical sense, though this isn't the sense in which most evangelicals use them. That is, according to orthodox Christian doctrine, Jesus is a person, both human and divine. Thus, when we relate to Jesus the person—through prayer perhaps, or through obedience to his command to love God and neighbor, or even by accepting the proposition that he died so that we could live—it might be said that we have a personal relationship with him. But I don't think that's what most people mean when they say they have a personal relationship with Jesus. Most often people use the phrase "personal relationship" in a much plainer sense: they mean that they relate to Jesus very much like they relate to other people they know.

Philip Yancey's discussion of a personal relationship with God is a good example of this common usage, but also of its problems. In his book *Reaching for the Invisible God*, Yancey echoes a long list of evangelical leaders since the Great Awakening by describing a personal relationship with Jesus as if it really were a "two people physically in the same room experience." Yancey writes that "getting to know God" is a lot like getting to know a person: "You spend time together, whether happy or sad. You laugh together. You weep together. You fight and argue, then reconcile."

But a little later he notes that this is not as easy as it sounds. Jesus is not, after all, physically present. So Yancey adds that with God we shouldn't expect a relationship

between equals. The problem, he says, is that we want God to be like us—tangible, material, perceptible, audible—while God "shows little interest in corresponding on our level." But if God shows little interest in corresponding on our level, then how do we spend time together, laugh together, weep together, fight and argue and reconcile? Why would you call such a relationship a personal relationship?

To give Yancey full credit, he does feel the weight of these awkward questions. He tries to resolve the problem through indirection. A relationship with God, he says, is like a relationship with a spouse you love but are not with. You miss your spouse; your heart grows fonder, so much so that you feel the absence of the spouse as a sort of presence. Well, perhaps. But again, this absence of someone you love as a mysterious presence sounds more like postmodern rhetorical criticism, like a search for what is lost in the traces, than the sort of personal relationship Yancey began by describing.

As pervasive as the language of personal relationship has become, it confuses many Christians. As a pastor, I met quite a few people who experienced doubt, or perhaps anger, because they didn't experience Jesus the way their Christian friends seemed to. They can't say they've felt his presence, listened to his voice or argued with him. After a while they begin to feel left out, like the only person at a Pentecostal worship service who isn't speaking in tongues. I've counseled people who are caught between worship that wasn't connecting for them and a spouse for whom exactly the same kind of worship was the *sine qua non* of life. They feel deficient, as if they're missing something essential to their well-being. And they feel like frauds, because the very frequency and offhand familiarity of personal-relationship-with-God-talk creates rhetorical pressure to conform, to nod, to say, "Yes, I know what you mean," when they don't, and to act as if such a relationship is the universal reality of all Christians.

The language of personal relationship with Jesus has at least as much to do with secular culture's influence on Christianity as it has to do with the Bible. Charles Taylor notes that "a striking feature of the Western march toward secularity is that it has been interwoven from the start with this drive toward personal religion, as has frequently been remarked." Robert Bellah argues that the language of personal relationship flourished especially when, in the 19th century, "science seemed to have dominated the explanatory schemas of the external world, [and in response] morality and religion took refuge in human subjectivity, in feeling and sentiment." By this account, the triumph of science meant that faith had to make a strategic

retreat to private experience.

Indeed, today's society is one in which experience and feeling reign. A religion freed from some of the rational and linear constraints of modernity becomes uncritical in its choice of sources, authority or even good sense. Syncretism leading to "designer religions" is common. As religion retreats from the world of linear rationality, it seeks a home in experience.

Our society is individualistic and competitive at home, at work and in the public square. People can easily feel beat up. Our society is also a materialistic one, full of cars and furniture and boats and clothes and toys. Yet none of these things satisfies our longing to get in touch with that genuine trace of God's divine image that still exists deep inside each of us. These days everyone longs for a divine connection that will ease the pain of their human dislocation in the midst of so much material plenty. We are waifs when it comes to meaning, unable to engage the accumulated wisdom that can be found in any library or tradition. Instead, we look for it in endless miles of shopping mall corridors or computer game avatars. Since we have eternity set in our hearts, we want an epiphany: we want to experience God. And I suspect that that longing is enough for a lot of people to mistake just about any intuition or good thought or warm fuzziness as being Jesus.

The bottom line is that the huge emphasis that contemporary evangelicals put on a great personal experience of and with Jesus has little or nothing to do with scripture and everything to do with taking from our culture what it thinks human happiness is all about.

So what does scripture say about personal relationships with God? On the one hand, scripture speaks powerfully about the providential nearness of God. God is David's shepherd and restores his soul (Ps. 23). God promises Israel that when it passes through waters or fire, "I will be with you" (Isa. 43:1-5). Similarly, Jesus promises that where two or three come together in his name, he will also be there (Matt. 18:20). While Paul is in Corinth, Jesus appears to him in a vision and promises him safety, saying "for I am with you" (Acts 18:10), much as he promises to be with the apostles to the end of the age as they teach and baptize (Matt. 28:20).

In a different vein, however, Jesus suggests that he is most present to us when we receive others in a Christlike manner. "He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me. . . . And if anyone gives even a cup

of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward" (Matt. 10:40-42).

The Bible also speaks often about God's distance. Notwithstanding Psalm 23, God's presence to David was not so personal that God was able to advise him about Bathsheba or counting soldiers or how to raise Absalom. And the prophets insist on God's providential presence in Israel because the Israelites themselves cannot sense it, as they stumble from one disaster to another.

The Gospel of John actually wrestles with what the personal absence of Jesus will mean for his followers. "I am with you for only a short time," says Jesus, "and then I go to the one who sent me. You will look for me, but you will not find me; and where I am, you cannot come" (John 7:33-34, 8:21). It sounds like Jesus is saying that we cannot have a personal relationship with him in anything like the way we assume we will have personal relationships with anyone else.

God's presence, even when, according to the Exodus story, it is experienced directly, also happens to be ambiguous and hard to trust. When the pillar of fire by night and cloud by day accompanied Israel to the Promised Land, speaking loudly of God's presence, Israel did not trust in God or make a choice for obedience because of that. In the New Testament, God came to humans in the flesh—in the form of Jesus—but it was so ambiguous a presence that, at the time Jesus walked on the Earth, few recognized him. Even the disciples, who had the closest of personal relationships with Jesus, barely understood him until after the resurrection.

In the absence of Jesus, who has ascended into heaven, we do have something else, of course: the presence of the Holy Spirit, which was made known to us at Pentecost. Jesus says, "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you" (John 14:18). But as a spirit, the Holy Spirit's interaction with us is also ephemeral. Jesus makes a point of telling us that, though the Spirit is real and powerful, it does not make itself known to us 24/7. "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (John 3:8).

The sum of the matter, as far as the Bible goes, is this: We have a kind of relationship with God: he is the creator, we are the creatures; Jesus the savior, we the saved; the Spirit reveals the truth, but only if we read scripture. While scripture claims that God longs to embrace us and has set in motion Christ events that will

allow him to do just that, we live before the consummation. We try to interpret scripture correctly, but our differing interpretations have split the church into thousands of splinters. We want to love perfectly, but anger, misunderstanding and fear drive us apart. We pray every day for peace in the Middle East and elsewhere, but for 2,000 years those prayers have gone mostly unanswered. We want the same kind of personal relationship with Jesus that we have with a beloved spouse or child, but it is something we cannot have.

We must come to grips with the fact that "personal relationship" means many different things to nearly everybody by acknowledging this variance in our homes, churches and denominations. I am not a great fan of James Fowler's six-stage approach to faith, but it seems to me that his work is, at the very least, a reminder that not everyone is at the same place when it comes to faith, and we need to work with that by avoiding generalizations about what a personal relationship with God has to be. We especially need to avoid the trap of making some fellow believers feel less than Christian, or uncool, or overly holy or whatever, because they have not experienced the right kind of personal relationship. As Christians, we also need to come to terms with God's absence. Jesus is not present in the flesh. God has not rearranged the stars to say, "I exist." One presumes that it would be easy for him to do so.

And as far as we can see, Jesus is also not present to prevent human suffering. I've tried to be a pastor to parents who have just had a child with Down syndrome. After a car accident, I had to officiate at the funeral of a man's wife and only child. I've seen hundreds of rotting bodies—victims of genocide—in a little church in Nterama, Rwanda. And readers will all have their own stories to add. For such situations we need to recover the psalmist's language of lament: "You have taken my companions and loved ones from me; the darkness is my closest friend" (Ps. 88:18). And here ends the psalm, the psalmist's fist raised to heaven, because God certainly is not present. In a world full of suffering, injustice and inequity, we need more of the psalmists who cry out to God with raised fist because he seems absent than we need people glibly speaking about their personal relationship with God.

We need to recover the psalmist's language of lament because it fairly represents how we should feel about Jesus' absence till he comes again to make all things new. This is especially true for our young people. We all know the dual phenomena of young people desiring both reassuring and intense experiences, including intense and reassuring worship experiences. Leonard Sweet describes "postmodern

pilgrims" as people who not only want "all is well with my soul" worship, but also worship that cries out to God to come again and make all things new, because they are not all right now. I'm not against experience; I just want to make sure that it is connected to our tradition's deepest wells rather than individual and subjective interpretations of feelings that are characteristic not of faith, but of our culture's inability to delve deep or long.

Interestingly enough, it isn't just older folks who question contemporary worship's inability to take place in anything other than praise mode. Seventeen-year-old Marjorie Corbman recently wrote a surprise evangelical bestseller titled *A Tiny Step Away from Deepest Faith*. She comments on her use of an old Christian liturgy for morning prayers: "I gush over the liturgy, over a thousand years old, to whoever will listen . . . [including] Christians of various denominations sick of contemporary Christian music that can sound more like love ballads than hymns of worship."

Finally, what about the language of faith? In an odd way, saying you have a personal relationship with Jesus makes faith unnecessary, doesn't it? And given scripture's overwhelming interest in faith, to the complete exclusion of insisting that one have a personal relationship with God, what I'd really like to see is a revival in the language of faith. I would like to suggest that rather than saying, "I have a personal relationship with Jesus," we say instead, "I believe in Jesus." Or, at least, "I try to believe in Jesus."

The bottom line is that faith is what we need precisely when there isn't the black-and-white certainty that goes with a personal relationship, as most people understand such things. Unlike Thomas, we who believe today are blessed when we have not ever seen Jesus or heard his voice or touched his wounds (John 20:29). In the end we are blessed because, though we don't have a personal relationship with Jesus, we believe anyway. This is the language of the Beatitudes; in fact, I sometimes think of the blessing Jesus gave Thomas as the ninth Beatitude. People who have not seen and yet believe—people of faith—are like the poor, those who hunger, those who weep and those who are persecuted. They are in a very tough spot. They are experiencing the fallout of sin in a broken world. But somehow they are getting along anyway. They are blessed because the kingdom of God will one day be all in all. But not now. And they cannot miraculously evade the experience of Jesus' absence and the conviction his absence requires by claiming a personal relationship. Faith, writes Hendrik Berkhof, "contains the notion of distance between the deity and man. . . . It suggests a reaching beyond experience, even a holding on

against experience; it speaks of a trust which can at times become totally blind; and it has the undertone of the 'not yet,' of living by a promise."

So where the language of personal relationship has a very questionable pedigree rooted in secular pressures to demythologize God, as well as a therapeutic culture that wants to turn God into a warm fuzzy, the language of faith is deeply rooted in scripture. Whereas the language of personal relationship is always ambiguous and inexact, meaning whatever the speaker happens to privately mean, the language of faith is deeply examined, as 2,000 years of reflection and shelf after shelf of books in any theological library will attest. Whereas the language of personal relationship sounds, on the face of it, implausible or perhaps even impossible (at least as far as the plain sense of such language goes), the language of faith serves as an invitation to ponder mystery and overcome unbelief. The apostle John put it this way: "This is [God's] command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us" (1 John 3:23). Faith—whether as intellectual assent or trust or a concrete love for whoever is your neighbor of the hour—is Christ's own invitation to get into a proper relationship with him.

This article is adapted from John Suk's book *Not Sure: A Pastor's Journey from Faith to Doubt*, just published by Eerdmans.