

Flying the Tuesday after Memorial Day I overheard a conversation between a man and a woman behind me; these were chance seatmates for this flight. He was a geologist, perhaps 50+ years old, and she was perhaps late 60s or 70s.

At some point, as I recall, she was the initiator of the mild sort of conversation that occasionally happens between chance travelers. As it developed, she began to open a Christian witness theme, eventually coming around to stress the need for a “personal relationship with the Lord.” He responded very civilly, recounting that he had never missed a Sunday at a Methodist church until he turned 16; somewhere after that he left Christianity altogether. As a geologist he apparently spends a good bit of time outdoors, and he responded to her, as he said he had to many, that if God isn’t out where he is, he certainly isn’t in a church building. Their conversation was quite cordial and did range over a number of topics for much of the several hours we were on the plane.

While I had some sympathy with what she was wanting to do, and respect for her commitment to acting, she could not respond to him in any adequate way. When the point is about personal relationship with God, and the other thinks they have that to the extent they want such, there simply is no bridging the chasm between them.

The woman, for all her admirable devotion to evangelism, simply has an inadequate message for someone like the geologist, who, having been committed to the church in his youth, does not see that what she is saying has any particular relevance to him. The emphasis on “personal relationship” simply has no meaning for someone that thinks he understands what she is talking about and has rejected it because it didn’t have any/sufficient meaning with respect to his scientific education. He thinks he has the same relationship with God in nature that she has in church and sees no need for limiting it to a church setting.

Even as I listened to them I wanted to tell them that they were both missing the point. It isn’t just about personal relationship with God, and that conversation reflected what I see is one of the deep failures of both the traditional mainstream churches and much (not all) contemporary evangelical thought. As I have come to see the church in the last few years, it is to be, as Scot McKnight ([The Whole Gospel](#)) so well put it, “...an alternative society where the will of God is done... where justice and equity prevail.” The emphasis on personal relationship misses the purposeful community of the coming Kingdom of God. Without the focus on community, there does not seem to be much reason to be part of a church, just as the geologist understood.

The judgment discourses of Jesus have to do with our relationship to each other, to those in need, not just in personal relationship to him. Yes, the personal relationship is crucial; the Matthew 7:21-23 rejection of those that he never knew cannot be overlooked. Yet, the Matthew 25:31-46 judgment scene in which the criteria are how we helped those in need defines something of what it means to know him. To know him is to respond compassionately, as peers, to those that are in real need. I John 3:16-20 make it clear that failure to respond to the needs of others means that the love of God is not in us; because the greatest commandment is violated, the second greatest commandment is not lived out.

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