

# GOD'S PASSIONATE PURSUIT OF PEOPLE

## (... and how it affects my witness)

Some things have been changing in my thinking about God. For instance, I'm noticing his presence and influence in more places than I used to. I'm used to seeing him in the Bible, in other people (mostly Christians), in my experiences in the Spirit, in the Church, in sunsets, and such places. But I'm starting to think he plants ideas about himself in more fields than I had previously thought. I'm also becoming more aware of his *passionate pursuit of people* through those ideas that he's sowing throughout the world. I just don't believe that God is sitting on his hands, waiting for people to come to him or for volunteers for his sales team! I'm pretty sure that he's already at work in every heart in every place before anyone ever goes there to tell them about Jesus. Yeah, he's *patient* but I don't think he's at all *passive*. God is the ultimate missionary. He's more *obsessed* about bringing his children back home than we are in trying to convince them to do so; and he does something about his obsession.

When I look back to the time when I found Jesus, it is crystal clear to me now that he actually *found me*. He'd been following me around all my life, and I finally looked over my shoulder and noticed him. The day I asked Jesus to save me, it was due more to him drawing me to himself than because the preacher said I should.

I wonder if many of us hold to the less than worthy idea that God finished his outreaching when he sent Jesus to pay for our sins, and that now he sort of sits back and hopes that people will take advantage of it. He completed the *active* part of saving us, but now he's more *passive* as he waits for people to believe. I never thought of him as *apathetic* as such, but simply *sympathetic* as he silently waits for people to receive the gift he offers. But I'm beginning to see things a little differently now. I envision him in an unrelenting search for the people he loves. I think he's as relentless in his quest for people to enjoy his redemption, as he was eager to send the Redeemer in the first place.

I have ongoing conversations with a couple of friends of mine: Bazim, a young Iranian man with whom I've recently made an acquaintance, and Steve, a young guy who became a Christian about a year ago. When I first brought up the subject of Jesus to him, Bazim said to me, "*I love Jesus.*" He wouldn't consider himself a Christian yet (and neither would I), but everything that he knows about Jesus has led him to the conclusion that he was (or is) a very good man; so good, that he felt he could say that he "loved" him. Granted, the kind of "love" to which he was referring seems to be more of a fondness for the kind of life Jesus lived than the faith-filled love of a disciple. Bazim is not a Muslim nor does he have the slightest inclination for any "organized religion" (if people only knew how "disorganized" we Christians are), but he claims to have a "love" for Jesus, at least in as much as he knows about him. Where did he get this affection?

Steve has a *love* for Jesus also, but he is what we might say, further along in his revelation of him, and he loves the Lord in a much more personal way. Steve met Jesus when he overdosed on a dozen or so hits of ecstasy and a preposterous amount of nitrous oxide (these are street drugs, these amounts of which would've killed him many times over had God not intervened and saved his life at the same time he saved his soul!) God turned the volume all the way up in Steve's spirit and spoke audibly to him while he was stoned out of his mind. He became an avid follower of Jesus that day and hasn't looked back since!

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So, I've been thinking about God and the ways he reveals himself to his lost and confused people, how resilient he is to our rejections, and how relentlessly he vies for our attention until he gets it one way or the other. Even though he's wrapped in mystery and sometimes "hides in darkness," he is a God whose personality it is to reveal himself to the people he loves. To put it more succinctly, he's after all people all the time! Some people talk about "chasing after God" (and their point is well taken to mean that we should be pursuing him with all our hearts), but I'm talking about *him chasing us*.

I'd like to share here about what God has been showing me lately about how wide is his mercy and how stubborn is his love. He's all about convincing people that he exists and that he's looking for friendship. Since learning some of these things I've had more faith for my friends like Bazim to become full-on followers of Jesus and for more people like Steve to get born-again while hallucinating on lethal doses of drugs (or whatever are the sources of their truth-escaping hallucinations). He's relentless about revealing himself to Iranians, druggees, and everyone on the planet.

I'd like to show you some things I've been learning about how generous God is in the distribution of revelation about himself. My purpose is to stimulate your thinking about this passionate pursuer of people and encourage your faith that wherever you live and wherever you go, he's gone before you to show himself to people. And though you play an essential part in his plan to make friends for God, you're not alone in this pursuit.

## SOME SCRIPTURE

We all know the stories about Adam and Eve and Abraham and Moses and the like, and how God went after them. But what about the less than obvious cases, the off-the-beaten-trail examples of non-Jewish people like *Job the sufferer*, *Balaam the pagan prophet*, *Abimelech the pagan king*, *Rahab the prostitute*, *the Magi from the East*, *Cornelius the Roman Centurion*, and many others? How did they learn about God, and how did they come to have faith in him without having a Bible to read or a person to tell them? What about people in places on the planet where there are no Bibles or Christians, Internet, or TV preachers? Or how should we think about people involved in other spiritual paths? Are all of them going the diametrically opposite way of The Way? Can God get through to them (either through their religion or in spite of it) or is the vast majority of the world going to hell without any idea of a God who loves them?

I'll unpack some of these later, but here are a few of the biblical passages I've been rethinking lately:

- **John 1:9** *The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.*
- **Acts 10:2, 34-35** *2 He (Cornelius) and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly... 34 Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism 35 but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right."*

- **Acts 14:17** Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.
- **Acts 17:22** Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. **23** For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.
- **Psalms 19:1-4** **1** The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. **2** Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. **3** They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. **4** Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.
- **Romans 1:19** since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. **20** For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. **21** For although they knew God...
- **Romans 2:14-16** (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. **15** They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.) **16** This will take place on the day when God judges people’s secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.
- **Song of Songs 4:8; 5:1** Come with me from Lebanon, my bride, come with me from Lebanon. Descend from the crest of Amanah, from the top of Senir, the summit of Hermon, I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride; I have gathered my myrrh with my spice.
- **John 5:17** “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working.”
- **Revelation 22:17** The Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let the one who hears say, “Come!” Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life.
- **John 16:8** When he (the Holy Spirit) comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: **9** about sin, because people do not believe in me...
- **John 12:32** And I (Jesus), when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.
- **2 Peter 3:9** The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.
- **Luke 15:4** Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine (sheep) in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ... **8** Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn’t she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it?

## A PARABLE

(The Seed, the Sower, the Son, and the Spirit)

*To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. **Revelation 2:7***

*On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. **Revelation 22:2***

The parents of our race (the *human* one) started out as gardeners in God's lush Garden. Fruit trees filled it in verdant abundance – a true Paradise. They had amply more than they needed, while the single prohibition that the Sower (the Planter of the Garden) insisted on was to stay away from only *one* of the hundreds of other varieties of luscious fruit-bearing trees. They disregarded his directive and decided to taste the illicit fruit anyway. Wretchedly sad, but true to his threat, the Sower removed them from the Garden, and had the gate locked and guarded.

The Sower loved our parents way too much to bar them from his Paradise in perpetuity. He yearned for friendship with them and all their posterity to follow, and insisted on finding a way to get us all back to enjoying his lavish Garden with him. So the Sower, the Son, and the Spirit solemnly convened to devise a way to redeem us and return us to the Garden to live with them in friendship forever.

The generous plan they conceived required a dreadful price to them, but because of the Sower's prodigal love for his people he, the Son, and the Spirit were all willing to go to any length to bring us back. The Sower's Son would gladly take the guilty place of our thieving parents, be convicted of robbery, and be banned from the Garden on our behalf. The Son's self-sacrificing ransom would be sufficient to exchange the Sower's *prohibition* for an *invitation* to our parents and all their offspring to be welcomed back to Paradise.

The tricky thing is that we have become pretty attached to the life we've made for ourselves outside the Garden. The world we've created here, though a vast wasteland by comparison to the Paradise we left, has become our "home." We're quite satisfied with our life the way it is and are not particularly motivated in returning to some *alleged* lush Garden of the Sower. But that doesn't dissuade the stubborn Sower from doing all he can to convince us otherwise. The price he paid for our reclamation was exorbitant, but equally extravagant is his insistence now to pursue us and bring us back. The Son has already paid the full ransom price, but still most of us tend to refuse to return to where we belong. So the Three convened again to concoct *stage-two* of their plan. The Son had given his life for our right to return to the Garden; now the Sower and the Spirit would give their all to entice us to return home.

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The scheme entailed the Sower harvesting fruit from the special life-giving tree in the Garden, extracting all its seed and sowing it throughout the world. He would merrily traverse the globe with his store of seeds and scatter them liberally in each land and every culture of banned gardeners. The Spirit's job is to wildly blow on the seeds as they leave the Father's hand, his torrential wind carrying them to every corner of the planet. From the tiny seeds trees would grow up and bear lush samples of fruit that, upon eating, the people would be attracted to return to the Garden for more of the same. In

order to win them back to Paradise he would make a clue-filled trail from each beloved person's heart to the Garden's gate.

Today every lost gardener has all around them the Sower's seeds taking root and growing up into offspring of the life-giving tree. Some have no intention of making any trek to anywhere they can't see. The fruit they eat now is good enough for them. They resist the claim that there is an actual Garden where the Sower, the Spirit, and the Son all live. They cling to the notion that what they have is all there is. As they taste the fruit, some detest it, preferring their own food processed by human initiative. Others love it, but instead of following the Sower's trail back to its origin, they dare to clone the fruit – content to remain where they are to eat their own facsimiles of them – man-made replicas. Still others are so crazy for it that they crave the fruit from the original tree, make their way back to the Sower's Garden, and enjoy him and the lavish abundance of Paradise forever.

The Sower strategized that as people came home to the Garden they would become part of the glad errand to reach others with the news about the free access to the life-giving fruit in the Sower's Garden. "Be sowers!" he told them. The job of these "sub-sowers" would be to partner with the Sower, Son, and Spirit, and carry with them full supplies of seed to scatter throughout the world in fields all around them. These redeemed gardeners would become essential in the Sower's strategy to beckon lost gardeners back to Paradise.

People who taste the fruit tend to develop a hunger for more than a sample, and often wonder where they can get more. The trees that grow from the Sower's seed don't have inscriptions on them explaining the whole story of the Sower. That's where the sub-sowers come in. Their job is to give them more than a taste and compel them to go back with them to meet the Sower in his Garden.

Though their role is central, the Sower doesn't leave them to do all the work. He's never ceased his own relentless seed-scattering effort in every part of the world, copiously sowing seed, the Spirit furiously blowing on it to spread it far and wide. He precedes his sowers, sowing his own seed, which grows into trees from which people everywhere pick luscious fruit. Many take such delight in it that they become curious about its origin and develop a hunger for more. And so, oftentimes when his sub-sowers show up to plant their seed, in some places his prevenient work has been so effective that they find people already on their way back to the Garden and need only employ little effort to induce people to come all the way home. Their work is little more than a simple confirmation of what people already knew in their heart about the Sower and his Garden. *They've tasted and they've seen that the fruit is good and they want more.*

So today it brings a smile to the Sower's face as he observes the continuum of people tasting his fruit, being enticed toward its source, his sub-sowers on a co-mission with him to show and tell about him and his Garden, leading people one by one on the happy trek in the direction of Paradise!

## **FIVE FIELDS**

I propose that there are five fields in which the stubborn Sower sows his seed (and into which the furious wind of the Spirit wafts it). There may be more, but these are the fields that I'm aware of from both my understanding of the Bible and my own observation. He's not *passive* but *passionate* in propagating his truth in every place possible.

His clues are like breadcrumb trails for us to find our way back home to him. These clues can be rationally and even instinctually unavoidable. He reaches out to every part of our being – I guess he knows something about our "parts," having invented and installed them all. He's not just trying to get

into our *heads*, but our *hearts*. His breadcrumb clues actually nourish us on the journey back to show us he's our sustenance. But he also drops hints like rose petals leading up to the bedroom! He's not just interested that we know that he is, but that we know he's a lover.

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I hope I can convince you how *prodigal* the Sower is in his distribution of seed and the importance of each of these fields into which he generously sows his clues among the people he loves. I call these five fields: **Creation, Conscience, Culture, Creed, and Christians.**

## Field #1 – CREATION

- **Psalm 19:1-4** *1 The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. 2 Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. 3 They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. 4 Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.*
- **Romans 1:19** *since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. 20 For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. 21 For although they knew God...*

A lot of God-seeds go into the Creation field. He made his world with such wonder that clues about him abound at every glance. Where do I begin? Stars, flowers, the human brain, sunsets, how warts sometimes go away without any attention, the Grand Canyon, how gravity is just enough to keep us from floating away but not so much as to flatten us like crêpes! I'm no science buff (can you tell?), but it's just way too much for my puny brain to think that we just evolved this way without a superior intelligence supervising. I don't know how it all works, but I know that even before I met the Sower, when watching a meteor shower I felt an attraction to Something/Someone— and I don't think it was the pot I was smoking that night!

*"... there's no place where their voice isn't heard..."* (Psalm 19) Have you been to the zoo and used the little plastic animal keys that go into the storybook boxes that tell the story of a particular animal in its original habitat? God has these little speakers too at sunrises, waterfalls, and baby smiles. They whisper the message that leads you back to the one who made them up. But he doesn't make us listen. Some people can muster the will to believe that it all just happened without a Designer. Don't you just want to say, *"Come on, you don't see God – a personal one – behind the cacophony of color in a school of tropical fish? You don't hear his voice in the melody of ocean waves?"* A lot of people choose to experience the *created* and avoid its *Creator*.

Creation isn't the only field in which he plants seeds from his garden, but if they're honest with themselves, I suspect that most people are influenced by it and even feel an attraction to the Maker because of it. The left-brained person who marvels at the molecular structure of the butterfly wing and the right-brained who wonders at the imaginative color scheme, both hear a voice say, *"Nice, huh?"* Whether for the mechanical phenomenon or the aesthetic spectacle of it, one is tempted to reply with, *"Thanks!"* (to someone).

Sometimes I think about how he could've made things differently. I don't mean that he could've put our nose in our forehead or our mouth where the belly button is now. If he'd done that, I'm sure we'd have gotten used to it in 1000 years or so. What I mean is that he could've made our earth like the frozen moonless planet "Alzoc III," which is covered with desolate, frozen plains, and endures a powerful sun glaring harshly off the reflective snow. (OK, this is a Star Wars planet.) I'm just saying! He could've made our world differently. He might've made us without the capacity to *enjoy* – as in, not enjoy *anything*. Can you imagine a world where pepperoni pizza tastes the same as a Hershey Bar, and no different from lemon-aid! I had a roommate in college who had a motorcycle accident without a helmet. (It wasn't illegal in those days – like I said, this was when I was in college during the early part of the *Paleolithic Age*.) With the brain injury he lost his sense of smell, and along with it his sense of taste. What a bummer that was/is for him! But my point is that our taste buds (when undamaged) and our eye for beauty (most of us are not color blind because we have something called "cones" as well as "rods" in our eyes) both communicate a message to us from the Maker. "*Go ahead and enjoy. Oh, and by the way, I love you!*" Our pleasure sensors are connected to our ability to smell flowers and enjoy sex and feel the thrill of fast cars. These all tell me that Someone made the world in a certain way and put people in it with the capacity to enjoy it. Take away this amazing capacity to *enjoy*, and we have a pretty dull world. But with it, I see God – don't you?

If God is, "*not far from everyone of us*" (Acts 17) he shouldn't be all that hard to locate in the world. He can be encountered everywhere inside and outside his Garden. He's not agoraphobic; he gets out. I honestly think that it takes more work to miss him in this world than it does to find him! He gives *light* to everyone (John 1), and though it's possible to lower the blinds and shut the light out (Romans 1), it makes sense, doesn't it, that shutting it out takes more effort than to simply accept it?

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Lately I've been thinking a number of people mentioned in the Bible who seemed to have followed the seed-trail back to the Garden without having had the benefit of actually hearing the witness of another human. You'll probably recognize most of the names:

- **Rahab** – the Gentile prostitute who was saved from Jericho's destruction (Joshua 3)
- **Abimelech** – the Philistine king who seemed to know God better than father Abraham (Genesis 20)
- **Balaam** – the pagan prophet who had a conversant relationship with God (Numbers 22)
- **The Ethiopian eunuch** – worshipped with Jews in Jerusalem, and read the most poignant Old Testament prophecy of Jesus' crucifixion before God sent Philip to tell him the rest of the story (Acts 8)
- **Cornelius** – the Roman army commander who loved God, prayed to him and did good works before hearing about Jesus from Peter (Acts 10)

It seems to me that each of these ate the life-fruit that the Sower sowed, and when someone showed up to "witness" to them, they found them well on their way to (if not already in) the Garden. When Rahab gazed up after dark there's no doubt that she heard the "voice" of the Sower bidding her toward his kingdom of light. If you read the story in Joshua, you'll have to admit that this lady (of the night) had quite a profound revelation of Jehovah (she even used this Hebrew covenantal name for

God in her conversations with the Jewish scouts). She might even have had a more vivid revelation of him than the spies did themselves!

Let's go on to the second field...

## Field #2 –CONSCIENCE

- **Romans 2:14-16** *(Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. 15 They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.) 16 This will take place on the day when God judges people's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.*

The human conscience is one of the fields in which God plants his life-tree seeds. If Paul's right, and people have "*the requirements of the law are written on their hearts,*" someone must have done the writing – right?

The conscience is that little voice in all of us that says, "*This is right and that is wrong.*" Someone said that it's the part of you that feels bad when the rest of you feels good! It's not a perfect rule of thumb because, like a computer, it's affected its programming, and it can be skewed or silenced. Like the witness of God in creation, the testimony of conscience can be suppressed. But when it's working right, it points to the Sower.

An atheist friend with whom I've been corresponding asked me recently, "What makes you think that religious people have a monopoly on compassion?" My sort of terse response was this:

*Well, they absolutely don't. There are lots of social justice groups that are not faith-based (although, my experience is that a lot of their volunteers are Christians). I know that there are lots of caring/compassionate people in the world who are not people of faith. Frankly, I attribute benevolent things that non-Christians do as evidence of them being the offspring of God. He's the most compassionate being in the world, and when he made us in his image, that caring quality was included. In my view, his image was marred and twisted when we kicked God out of our lives, but there is still a clear vestige of his personality left in us in the form of our conscience...*

Compassion is just one aspect of God's personality that's left in us after our removal from the Garden. But I think it is through our *conscience* that we experience these divine promptings. One little boy said to his little brother, "What does God's voice sound like? I'm starting to forget."

Someone said, "*Conscience is the inner voice that warns us that somebody's watching.*" It might be thought of as sort of "the voice of God in the soul," a compass which God surgically implanted in each of us at birth that tells us if we're going the right direction or not. It's the only one of the five fields that's actually inside us. On the day I was born God installed a "homing device" which beeped incessantly until I found my way home to the Installer. Before I decided to follow Jesus I ordinarily drowned out the sound of its irritating warning with other sounds so I could do what I wanted to do when I wanted to do it without being bothered by it. I could hear it only when I let silence last more than a second or two. Eventually it led me right to the one who put that annoying apparatus inside me to begin with. It did its job.



C.S. Lewis called the conscience “inside information” about God. He wrote, “*You find out more about God from the Moral Law (conscience) than from the universe (creation); just as you find out more about a man by listening to his conversation than by looking at a house he built.*” Lewis also said that two things were true. “*First, human beings all over the earth have this curious idea that they ought to behave in a certain way, and cannot really get rid of it. Secondly, that they do not in fact behave in that way.*” He called it “*The Law of Decent Behavior*” (conscience).

*“Conscience is the inner voice that warns us that somebody’s watching.”*

**“Draw near to God and he will draw near to you.”** (James 4) My friend Richard and I were talking about this the other day. He said he thought it worked like this:

*God turns on his light, and from the great distance between him and us the beam seems like a speck, as does a star from its position light years away. If we take a step toward him – instead of away – he takes one toward us, and the speck appears larger than before. It seems to increase in size and lumens as we move closer to its source. Until finally, what seemed like a pinpoint beam, now directly in front of us, is a blazing sun. What was once tiny in the distance now fills our entire line of sight. Conversely, if we move away from the light or attempt to block it out, it becomes smaller and smaller until it finally disappears altogether. But before it vanishes, God does all he can to get the beam to find its way around our hand upraised to quash it. He shoots his beam from another angle, and then another, and another until finally we either surrender to him or reject him from every direction. He’s relentless like that, I believe, until our last breath.*

Of course our Gentile friends that we mentioned above had the same “Conscience Insertion Surgery.” Abimelech had what seemed to be a more developed sense of moral conscience that did his counterpart and the father of faith – Abraham. Read it for yourself (Genesis 20). While Abraham lied about his own wife and put her at risk to save himself, the King of the Philistines heard the voice of God and knew instinctively that he wasn’t someone to cross. Hmmm! He did “*by nature things required by the law*” without having ever read the law in the Bible.

### **Field #3 – CULTURE**

Sometimes when I hear Carlos Santana play the guitar (as far as I know, is not a follower of Jesus) I think I feel the presence of God. The same thing happens when I gaze at a painting by Rembrandt or read the novels of Twain. I’ve finally come to the realization that the artist doesn’t have to be a Christian to exude through his art the creativity of God. When he makes a sunset and when he gives the gift of artistic talent to someone, God reveals himself.

Through what he made *directly* (in creation: eagles, snow-peaked mountains, etc.), God left clues about his *power*. But he continues to cultivate an awareness of his *person* through the things he makes *indirectly* through people (in culture: art, community, science, tradition, etc.).

How people express themselves is part of what makes up culture. The Sower brings seed out of his bag and the Spirit blows on them as they leave his hand to find their way into all forms of human civilization. You might be interested to know that some people who study such things think that the term “culture” was coined to refer to “the cultivation of the soul.” Using our horticultural metaphor, we

might say that God plants some of the seeds of his life in our cultures in order to “cultivate our soul,” to dispose that soul toward him and toward the Garden where we belong together. Culture has to do with arts and sciences, patterns of thought, spirituality, community, morals, etc. I think that the Sower sows the living seeds from his Garden into each human culture in order to influence people in those cultures to follow the clues back to his Paradise.

**“Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...”** (Genesis 1). The Sower, his Son, and the Spirit have for eternity lived in perfect and unbroken community. (Well, there was one moment in time where there was a break, but it was planned and rectified after a three-day hiatus!) They form the best “small group” ever! Part of what it means to be made in their image is our penchant for living in relationship and community. Human relationships are clues that we’re made in the likeness of a relational God. If not for a Maker who loves and yearns to be loved, why would we be so intent on the same?

The field of **Creation** is *in front of us*, the field of **Conscience** *inside us*, and the field of **Culture** is all *around us*. God surrounds us within and without with traces of his person. He really seems to want to be known. He’s relentless about it.

We’re referring to the best elements of each culture. But even when a society fails, when it implodes on itself by its anti-God attitudes and actions, I think God uses even these to attract attention to himself by offering a better way. We learn by negative examples as well as by positive. God uses instances of botched society (which is merely the cumulative failure of its adherents) to beckon people to himself. People who are frustrated by the failure of their society may be thus incited toward his good society. His message, in this case, is more of one by contrast, *“Obviously, what you’re doing is not functional, so how about taking a look at a better way!”* The society that rejects him and then suffers the consequences of the darkness that ensues is maybe one of his favorite scenarios in which to entice people back toward the Sower’s society. He’s relentless in his pursuit of people and will go to almost any length to bring us home. He’ll let us go our own way, sit anxiously by while we suffer in our self-inflicted pain, and then lead us to where we belong.

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that we’re made in the  
likeness of a relational God.

Cornelius seemed to have a fairly honed sense of who God is without the benefit of a human witness. Was there something in his culture, which pointed him toward the culture of God’s Garden? Or did his society direct him so diametrically opposite of Paradise that it drove him to seek God for a better way? Read Acts 10 for yourself and see what you think about this man’s faith before he heard from Peter about the specifics of the good news about Jesus. Peter showed up, and Cornelius and his friends got filled with the Holy Spirit before Peter was even finished explaining the Gospel to them! Why? I think it’s because the fruit was nothing new to them. They’d been sampling for some time by then!

## Field #4 – CREEDS

The word, “Creed” is not really the best one I could’ve chosen. I admit that I selected it mostly because it started with “C” and came close to describe *Field #4* in which the Sower sows his seeds. I’m really talking about *religion* – creed being sort of the verbal distillation of someone’s faith, how they articulate it. And I’m not just talking about a *Christian creed*, but just about any form of

spirituality. Yes, I do think that the Sower, who goes to the ends of the earth to get his seed scattered by the breath of the Spirit to every realm of life, will even pursue people into the realm of *religion* (Christian or not). Bear with me.

### **Jesus, the way...**

- “I am the way, the truth, and the life; and no one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14).
- “There is no other name under heaven, given to men by which we may be saved” (Acts 4).
- “There is one God and one Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2).

Is Jesus the only way to God? Absolutely! But I have to say that I like what William Paul Young wrote in his novel, *The Shack*, “Are you saying that all roads lead to God?” to which Jesus replies, “No, (I’m saying) that God is willing to travel any road to find you.” Let’s unpack this a little bit in light of our theme of God’s relentless pursuit of all people. For a much more thorough and provocative treatment of this theme you might be interested to read one or more of these books:

- **The Wideness of God’s Mercy, Clarke Pinnock**
- **No Other Name, John Sanders**
- **Eternity in Their Hearts, Don Richardson**

It seems to me that religion (whether Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, or whatever) can sometimes reflect people’s sincere attempts to find the truth. It’s doubtless also true that at other times religion represents their attempts to *evade the truth* through hypocrisy and ritual. People (myself included) can suppress the truth and look holy while we do it! I won’t try to differentiate between the two motives here, but for now, I want to primarily address the sincerest of incentives for people being involved in religion of one type or another. I’m particularly referring to true God-seekers involved in creeds that are not Christian.

When I heard someone say that “*Christianity doesn’t own God*,” I was sort of offended. The longer I mused about it, my offense eased and I began to wonder how much of his seed God might be planting along *religious paths*. Could it be that he cares enough about the billions of Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists to leave clues about himself in their systems of worship?

I’m not saying that he concocted the world’s religions or that all of them are non-stop flights to God. We Christians are better at identifying *the errors* in other religions (a valid study in itself, and one that others who are better equipped than I have done) than finding *common ground* with them and even locating “pieces of truth” in them. Like seeds dropped in unexpected fields, I think God’s love messages get incorporated into systems which are not entirely accurate.

I’ve often said, “*It’s better to have weak faith in a strong plank than a strong faith in a weak plank when using it to cross a treacherous ravine.*” My point is that it’s not the *quality* of your faith per se, but the *object* of it that matters most. Though I still believe this, I’ve been wondering if one’s strong and sincere faith in a weak plank (an inadequate religious system) could possibly lead them to the only plank that could eventually get them over the chasm. Could it be that God is willing to walk to the end of such planks in order to beckon people onto his sturdy beam (Jesus)?

Through whatever means he can, he insistently inserts himself into the lives of those who don’t know him as well as he can be known. He’s stubborn in his hunt for the hearts of people. He wants us to know him and enjoy him, so much so that he’ll travel to some of the most unexpected places and do some of the most surprising things to get our attention. The Son sacrificed himself for every person in history, the Sower sows seed from the life-tree in every place on the planet, and the Spirit furiously

blows the seed all over the world in every conscience and culture. It shouldn't be so surprising then that some of that seed would end up in the hearts of people whose creeds are not entirely correct.

## Could it be that he cares enough about the billions of Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists to leave clues about himself in their systems of worship?

There's only one "non-stop flight" to God, and it's Jesus. He's the only way to the Father. But it appears that he'll take whatever *flight* he chooses to get us on the right plane! He doesn't often (if ever) *hijack* people to get them on the right flight, but he is relentless in his mission to win the hearts of as many people as he can without forcing them to love him as much as he loves them. We may all be quite shocked to see certain people at the destination (heaven) – ones we didn't see board our plane!

My standard response to the issue of who gets to go to heaven and who doesn't is: *"I'm in sales, not in management!"* In other words, it's not my job to know for sure. But what I do know for sure is that the Son paid for everyone who was banned from the Garden, that the Sower plants his seeds prodigiously in every inch of soil he can find, and that the Spirit blows those seeds everywhere people are.

C.S. Lewis wrote some things along these lines (These quotes are taken from God in the Dock, Letters of C.S. Lewis Volume III, and Mere Christianity):

- *"There are people in other religions who are being led by God's secret influence (and it behooves us to concentrate) on those parts of their religion which are in agreement with Christianity..."*
- *"God is not pronouncing all other religions to be totally false, but rather saying that in Christ whatever is true in all other religions is consummated and perfected..."*
- *"God sent the human race what I call good dreams: I mean those queer (strange) stories scattered through all the heathen religions about a god who dies and comes to life again and, by his death, has somehow given new life to men."*
- *"I think that every prayer that is sincerely made even to a false god or to a very imperfectly conceived true God, is accepted by the true God and that Christ saves many who do not think they know Him. For he is (dimly) present in the good side of the inferior teachers they follow. In the parable of the Sheep and Goats (Matthew 25) those who are saved do not seem to know that they have served Christ."*

*"I'm in sales,  
not in management!"*

### **The Bible and people with other ideas...**

*Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." . . .*

*"Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem."*

*“Woman,” Jesus replied, “believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.”*

*The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.”*

*Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.”*

(John 4)

Is there any biblical evidence that religions can be *repositories* of varying quantities of truth seeds sown in their culture? I think there is. Jesus’ conversation with the woman at the well teaches me something about this. She was steeped in the half-truths of Samaritanism, and her theological ideas and religious ways were repulsive to the Jews of Jesus’ day. You’ll notice that Jesus didn’t automatically rule her out because of her cultic ideas, but built on her apparent inclination toward the truth. He didn’t attack her error but invited her to readjust her course toward God. He saw that she had an inner longing for God and offered her living water to satisfy her nagging thirst.

I like how he acknowledged what she *did* know, while at the same time disabused her of what she *didn’t*. He found in her a person who was already eating the fruit of the Sower and led her to find the tree from which it came.

*“You worship what you don’t know... we worship what we know,”* I think he’s saying, *“Hey, I know that you are worshipping the God you think he is, but you don’t really know him accurately. I know him and am going to reveal him to you. And more – God’s looking for people like you (as flawed as you are in lifestyle and theology) to worship him in the power of his Spirit (not just religious pageantry) and worship him for who he really is (instead of made-up facsimiles of him).”*

I wonder how many there are who worship God, knowing very little about him. Their revelation of the truth about God falls short (to varying degrees, depending on how far they’ve followed the light they have) and can only be totally clarified in Jesus. The Spirit had blown the seed of the Sower into the Jewish-hated cult of the Samaritans. If that’s true, is it conceivable that he does the same in other philosophies and religions? God knows and judges *people* by their *hearts*, not by their *doctrinal statement!*

I’ve mentioned these other characters, which sort of come out of nowhere and surprise us with their knowledge of God. I wonder if their stories are included in the Bible in order to show us that the seed has been effectively sown in surprising places. Job, who probably lived before Abraham, had no Bible; and yet God somehow made himself known to him. The Philistine king Abimelech had personal visitations from God. Rahab, not only a prostitute, but was also a citizen of the sin-filled city of Jericho. The Magi who followed a “star” to the baby Jesus were Babylonian astrologers. Some of these heard God’s voice (Job, Balaam, Abimelech), others saw signs in the sky (the Magi), and some were terrified by stories they’d heard about the God of the Jews (Rahab). Is it possible that these are representative of many others to whom God has revealed himself over the millennia?

### **Angels, visions, and dreams...**

Daniel chronicles the stories of several pagan kings – Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, Darius, and Cyrus. The Lord used angels, dreams and visions to move these men to believe and to act on what they believed. If you read their own “statements of faith” in Daniel’s book, I think you’ll see that they were convinced that the God of the Jews was the Creator and Lord of the universe. Sometimes God uses uncommon supernatural phenomena to plant his seed in people’s hearts. Setting aside the topic

of whether or not these means are adequate ones to save people and get them to heaven without using any human witness, the point I'm making once again is that the Sower is relentless in his hunt for potentially hungry hearts. His love is stubborn that way. He will use whatever means he can in order to gain entrance into that starving spirit. He uses what and whom he chooses.

## God knows and judges *people* by their *hearts*, not by their *doctrinal statement!*

I'll say it again – I don't think that all the religions are the same or that, in themselves, they lead all the way to a personal friendship with God. No doubt there is as much *destruction* inherent in the world's religions as there is *instruction*. Religion in itself (even the religion of the Christians) can't connect people to God; in fact, in many cases it *harms* more than *helps* people become his friends. Jesus told the intensely religious Pharisees that when they made converts to their religion (which was supposed to be Judaism) they made them into "*twice the children of hell*" that they were (Matthew 23)! Peter spoke about supposed Christian teachers who "*promise freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity*" and their converts are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning." (2 Peter 2). There's no doubt that any religion can be more of a *stumbling block* than a *stepping-stone* to God.

But my point is, that instead of only identifying what's wrong with people's ideas about God, maybe we should try harder to discern spiritual hunger in their hearts, celebrate what's true in their thinking, notice the evidence that Sower has been there ahead of us, and collaborate with him to beckon people toward the tree of life!

### ***The "Jesus bus" and other buses...***

My friend and I were meeting at the baseball stadium to watch my San Francisco Giants play. Parking costs as much as the ticket, so I decided to take public transportation. From my house there isn't one bus that takes me directly there, so I had to take one bus and transfer to another, which dropped me off right in front of the ballpark. I think that *creation, conscience, culture*, and even some aspects of *creed* (religion) are like those buses that lead people to --- "*The Jesus Bus!*" They can serve as *vehicles* that can bring us to *The Vehicle* that brings us to God. As far as I can tell, it's necessary for devotees of other religions to "transfer" from their *former way* to *The Way* in order to get *all the way* to the Father! How and when they make this transfer, and even what the process of *transfer* looks like is considerably above my pay grade. But I'm saying that though I believe that Jesus is the only way to the Father, there might be more *ways to Jesus* than I used to think!

He will use whatever means  
he can in order to gain entrance  
into that starving spirit.

I'm talking of course about buses that are going in the general direction of the true God. They might not take people *all the way* to where they need to go, but deposit them closer than they were when they began. The bus that goes in the diametrically opposite way of the right way might not help them make the transfer to The Jesus Bus. I can think of at least one exception to that rule. I wonder if there are buses (certain religions) that are so obviously treacherous and dangerous that they terrify their passengers into jumping off before it crashes! And what good thing would it be, if these passengers were then frightened all the way onto the *right bus* going the *right way* to the *right place*. In such a case, I guess even that wrong bus played a role in "delivering" riders to *The Jesus Bus!*

Once again a disclaimer – they say the third time’s the charm. I’m not saying that every form of spirituality is a “first bus” to bring people part way to God nor am I claiming that all people involved in those religious communities are genuine God-seekers. The world’s religions are absolutely not all saying the same thing about God or about how to get into relationship with him. To say otherwise is false tolerance and sloppy thinking. My point is that there might be enough similarities to indicate that some of their adherents are actually looking for God. I know that the common evangelical view is that the world’s religions are solely the product of human ingenuity (and often satanic delusion) and only serve to *hide*, rather than *reveal* the true God. I can’t argue with that in many cases, but I don’t think this is true in *all* instances. Couldn’t it also be true that there are true God-seeking Hindus in India? Since they’ve only been exposed to their own pantheon of gods, are steeped in the religious culture of their land, worship according to the light they have, isn’t it possible that they’ll somehow find their way into God’s Garden?

God is not stingy with his seed! You might even say he’s careless with it and prodigal with his love!

## Field #5 – CHRISTIANS

If what I’m saying about God and his persistent pursuit of friends is true, I trust that you can see what kind of colossal influence it might have on our witness to these potential friends of his. It’s certainly affected the way, and the spirit in which, I share his love with people lately. As I tell you how, please know that there are many many other things that could be part of a discussion about “evangelism,” but I limit my focus to the topic at hand. These are some things that are changing in *how I do what I do* since I’ve been more aware of how much *God does what he does* to make people aware of his love.

...maybe we should try harder to discern spiritual hunger in their hearts, celebrate what’s true in their thinking, notice the evidence that Sower has been there ahead of us, and collaborate with him to beckon people toward the tree of life!

**“The Spirit and the Bride say come...”** We all know that the Spirit helps us witness and helps people receive our witness at the point of contact (when we’re actually interacting with someone about Jesus). The Spirit gives us courage, words to share, and sometimes even brings about some miracle to confirm the Word. Then he convicts people of their wrongs against God and illuminates their minds to the truth about Jesus and his cross. I can’t thank him enough for all the help he’s given me over the years as I try to share God’s love with others. But I’m not so much talking about that “on-site work of the Spirit” right now. I’m referring to what he was doing in people before I ever even met them. Call it the “pre-work” of the Spirit or whatever you want (some people use the phrase “*prevenient grace*”). He says to people through Creation, Conscience, Culture and Creed – “Come!” And then he says it through us (Christians)! He’s already been serenading the lost and forlorn, and then we come along and harmonize with him. “COME!”

I also trust that what I’ve said above would in no way be misunderstood to appear that I think our role in the process is somehow unimportant. I “witness” to people a fair amount, and what I’ve said thus far about God’s ingenious quest to get people to come home with him has made me nothing if not

*more passionate* about my partnership with him in the quest. I am absolutely even more enthused about telling people about God and his Garden since I've been more aware of the enthusiasm with which he chases them. Even if I'm speaking with someone who has never heard about Jesus, I am aware that in one sense they've been "hearing about him" all their lives in ways other than through words. Almost every day I'm noticing evidences of the Sower's planting in front of, inside of, and all around people. I see my role as a "sub-sower" following the footsteps of the Grand Sower. Let me share a few things that have been changing for me as I go about this "sub-sowing."

### **Back to the Bible...**

God uses us, but first he prepares people for us. I've noticed several examples of this in the Bible. Here are a few:

We've mentioned how God gave King Nebuchadnezzar a dream, which made Daniel's job less *about convincing* and more *about clarifying* what God was like (Daniel 2). When Peter went to Cornelius' house, his hearers were already so prepared that they received Jesus before he could finish his sermon (Acts 10). When the scouts went to do reconnaissance in Jericho they found a Gentile prostitute named Rahab who, without any contact with the Word of God (that we know of) already had a sure revelation of the power and justice of Jehovah (Joshua 3). She went on to marry into David's family and eventually the line of the Messiah!

*"People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you."* (Acts 17)

I don't think Paul was criticizing the Athenians for worshipping the wrong God as much as he was affirming them for worshipping God as much as they knew him to be and offering to introduce them to him as he actually is. His message was not just a *critique* of their theology, but a *clarification* of what's true about the God of the Bible. More often than we realize, our role is to introduce people to the God they already believe in, but don't know much about. Their knowledge about him may be vague and include many misconceptions, but that's where we come in.

*"Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy."* (Acts 14)

In Lystra Paul looked for people familiar with the Sower's fruit. To him, rain and crops and food and joyful hearts were all clear clues of God's love. These formed God's "testimony" to them. (The term he employed for "testimony" is the same one used by Jesus in Acts 1 "...you shall be my witnesses.") God's kindness in creation and provision *witnesses* to people, and then we Christians add our *witness* to his *witness*! First the Sower – then his sub-sowers.

*Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.* (1 Peter 3)

Everyone needs "hope." We crave it in a world bereft of it. The Sower plants samples of it in his world so that they'll *hope that there is hope*. When we show up as living *witnesses* of such hope, they see it lived out in front of them, and sometimes ask us "to give a reason for it" and we *witness* to them.

### **I feel more like I'm working *with* him instead of just *for* him...**

If God is revealing himself all over the place, what's he need me for? If he's planting seed in and around everyone in the world, what's my job?



Well, in order to bring them back to his Garden, God uses *Creation, Conscience, Culture, Creeds* AND *Christians*. You've probably noticed that there are lots of things he could do (and do much better) by himself without involving us. So it's not that he needs our help – he's quite self-sufficient. But he didn't create us so we could sit back and watch him do his thing. He loves to include us, to involve us in his adventure. He calls us his *partners* in sowing – “sub-sowers.”

When we go to plant our seed, we find evidence that the Sower has been there before us. In some cases, people are sampling the fruit, and are already on their way toward the Garden. From the samples, they've tasted and they've seen that the fruit is good and many want more of the same. That's what we bring – *more of the same*, through the lives we live and the words we speak. Our witness isn't entirely new to them for they already know in their “knower” that there is a God who loves them and wants to be friends.

## First the Sower – then his sub-sowers...

Now that I'm aware of these things, I feel more like I'm working *with him* instead of just *for him*. When I'm talking to someone about God or praying for someone to come to know him I no longer feel as though I'm introducing some *foreign seed* to him or her. I'm just trying to appeal to what the Sower has already introduced.

**“The Father is always at his work,”** and his Son is always at his side making his work effective. I just get to be part of the Trinity's grand friend-making scheme. Don't get me wrong, my part (and yours) is essential, but it's taken a considerable weight off my shoulders, knowing that I'm simply appealing to something that's probably already going on in a person's soul. My witnessing is less of a *collision* and more of a *collusion*.

I'm beginning to notice that the seed that I sow often has an air of familiarity to it to people, because it's the same thing that the Sower has already sown in them. The thing that I'm saying to a person is the same thing that he has been hearing repeatedly, and in a variety of ways over his lifetime. Before I show up to tell my story he already saw it in a sunset, heard it in a symphony, knew it in his knower, and maybe even believed it in his religion. I'm simply collaborating with what God has been doing in a person throughout his lifetime. My meager contribution is but a tributary coinciding with God's “grand stream of things.”

### **I'm less guilt-driven and have a more relaxed urgency about “witnessing”...**

I'm looking for the riches that God has already put in someone in order to connect to it with my witness. It's more of a treasure hunt than it used to be.

*The purposes of a person's heart are deep waters, but one who has insight draws them out.* (Proverbs 20)

The good news about Jesus is the “*power of God for salvation*,” (Romans 1), and it's my privileged duty to share it, but now I'm sharing it with more of a *patient passion*. My efforts to “evangelize” people used to be much more laborious. I felt more like I was on my own trying to make something grow in hard soil. I'm now a much happier sub-sower, gladly scattering seed alongside of him!

My witnessing is less of a *collision*

and more of a *collusion*.

Before I noticed that God has already been on a persistent hunt for friends, and has done all the real work to win someone's affection, I was more *uptight* about getting people from point A to B to C. Do I want them to know him and enjoy him as much as I do (or more)? Yeah! Am I concerned about people's eternal destiny? Yes! But so is God; and he's doing all he can to possess their hearts!

### **I'm speaking to people more and at them less...**

C.S. Lewis wrote in a letter to a friend, "*Think of me as a fellow patient in the same hospital who, having been admitted a little earlier, could give some advice.*" Now that I see God working in people before I get my "expert hands" on them, I'm not nearly so patriarchal or preachy in my approach to telling them about Jesus. Now I think that every person is somewhere on the continuum in a search for God (even if they don't know it), and so I'm not so much *sending people* to God, but trying to *take them* with me as I go. I'm not the God-specialist or anyone's spiritual hero, come to save the day. I am on the hunt for God and I encourage people to join in the hunt so we can hunt together. I may have been "hunting" longer, gotten to know him a little better, but I can slow down long enough to bring people with me on the trek.

Speaking of the trek, I've noticed that a common deception is *the delusion of arrival*. With all the good that comes of the Sower's use of the first four fields to attract people to his Garden, there's always the risk that they'll get stuck in one of them rather than be propelled forward and on to Paradise. It's like they stop and worship the clue rather than the one who put it there.

I elaborate...

- Some gaze into Creation light, and rather than move toward the *Creator*, they get stuck worshipping the *created*. They become so mystified by what was made, they stop short of searching out the mystery of the one who made it.
- Another, firmly in touch with the moral voice within him (Conscience), becomes trapped in his own egoistic gloating about how much better he is than others. Such a moralist must be urged to acknowledge this capacity as a gift from the Sower intended to lead him to a grateful and dependent aspiration to please him with his good moral choices.
- The Culture worshipper also makes no progress toward the Sower's Garden. It's the "Culture Vulture" who takes an excessive and arrogant interest in his own culture (or sub-culture). What should be pointing him *beyond* has become his obsessive preoccupation and source of spiritual inertia.
- Speaking of arrogance, Creed-worshipping might be the most popular "worship center" of all. Religion, or one's segment of it, (Baptist, Pentecostal, Catholic, Buddhist, Islamic, Hindu, or whatever); rather than point to an adventurous pursuit of God, can be an excuse for narcissistic conceit and godless self-satisfaction.

It's incumbent on us to avoid such traps ourselves and urge our friends who get stuck in them to break free from worshipping his *love-messages*, and journey on to meet the *Loving Messenger*.

### **I listen more and download less...**

I'll never forget "going witnessing" on a college campus back in the 70's with a friend named Fred. (Pretty funny, huh --- Barney and Fred?) I couldn't figure out why people giggled when we introduced ourselves until someone asked us where *Wilma and Betty* were! Anyway, my method was to waste

no time with trivialities and hurriedly start in on people with spiritual information. I was freshly out of Bible College, pretty much knew everything there was to know about God, and was on the hunt for anyone who'd listen. Fred would disrupt whatever theological treatise I was giving and ask something like, "So, *what're your thoughts about God?*" At first, I was irritated by the interruption, until I realized there was a method to his madness. He was saving them from me and from my sermons, plus I think he knew that God was probably already working in them and the only way to find out what he was doing was to ask. Wow, what a concept!

## I see God working in people before I get my "expert hands" on them

I recently highlighted all the questions that Jesus asked people in one of the Gospels. I almost ran out of highlighter before running out of Gospel. He was God in humanity, and though he had more important things to say than anyone ever had, he asked people a lot of questions. "*Who do men say that I am? Who touched me? How long has he been this way? What is written in the law; how do you read it?*"

So now I ask more questions than give answers to questions they weren't asking. First of all, I'm just trying to get acquainted – and not as a step in some "Friendship Evangelism" spiel. I genuinely want to know about a person with whom I might just become friends. Secondly, I'm trying to find out what the Sower has already done in front of, inside of, or around this person. Aware of it or not, he's been eating the Sower's fruit, and how will I know what to address unless I ask him? "*What do you think about Jesus? Do you have a spiritual orientation? What are your thoughts about God? Have you ever had what you think might have been an encounter with him? Do you have any opinions about Jesus?*"

Of course, there is a lot of stuff that can't be cognitively detected, so I'm also looking for what can only be spiritually discerned. The Sower knows how much fruit they've tasted, and what kind of stuff they've been through in their lives to dispose them toward or away from him. And sometimes he shows stuff to us (as in a "word of knowledge or wisdom" – 1 Corinthians 12) so we can address something directly that the Spirit knows will increase our chances of getting to the heart of matter. This kind of discernment is particularly helpful when a person hasn't yet connected the dots from one tree to the next. They don't see that they are being pulled in his direction. I think this is one of the jobs of the witness, to help them notice that there's a trail back to God on which the Spirit has been leading them.

I try to listen better and download less. In fact, I'm less and less inclined toward an information-based witness. I don't know about you, but Jesus came into my *heart* long before he entered my *head*. I knew very little about any Four (or more) Spiritual Laws, about my depravity, or his divinity. I just said to him, "Come on in!" and I learned stuff about him later. He came in that day and started changing me before I had any idea about regeneration, justification, sanctification, or any of the other "-ations". People are less and less impressed with my bullet-point proofs for Intelligent Design or my rhyming sermon points that promise a Blessed Life in four easy steps. They're gluttoned with slick pitches and silly promises and my guess is that most people are more interested to connect with the eternal and live more meaningful lives.

I'm more apt to share about Jesus in *sound-bytes*, not only because the culture requires it, but also because the Spirit has been delivering his lines and directing the play long before I ever came on stage. And he'll continue playing his part long after I exit. My lines are important to be sure, but if I don't deliver them perfectly or skip something in the script, it doesn't ruin the whole play. I think that God loves people way too much to hinge their eternal destiny on the quality of my performance.

### **It's more about *friendship* than it used to be...**

People used to talk about "*Friendship Evangelism*," and to be honest, I've never felt very comfortable with it. It always seemed sort of disingenuous to me that I was supposed to evangelize under the guise being someone's friend, when in fact, I didn't need or want any more friends. I never could pretend that I was *making friends* when what I really wanted was to *make converts*.

## Jesus came into my *heart* long before he entered my *head*

But since I've been paying more attention to the pre-efforts of the Sower and the Spirit, I am able to relax a little – knowing that it's not all on my shoulders to make the cold-call, present the product, and close the deal all in one 15-minute encounter. Now I have time and room in my heart for more friends. I figure that if friendship is God's goal it should be mine as well. Since I've been more aware of his passionate pursuit of friends, I'm finding that one of the best ways for me to partner with him in his quest is to befriend his pre-friends. If I'm anything at all like him and love in a way that even remotely suggests his love, then my friendship in itself is part of *his friendship* quest. If they've even slightly felt his invitation to friendship in creation, conscience, culture and/or creed, then it's possible that my friendship with them will appeal to what has already been planted inside them throughout their lives.

So now, if pressed to boil my life's goal to one thing, it would be to: "*Make friends with God.*" You see the multiple implications, right? • Making friends with him begins with being aware that he's the best friend I can have, and so I aspire to enjoy the depths of my own friendship with him. • And then I aim to be the best friend to him that I can, loving him for all he's worth. • Beyond that, "making friends with him," entails understanding (as we've been exploring) that God is avidly engaged in this project of making friends for himself. He's on a mission to make friends with all people. He's furiously scattering his invitation for friendship everywhere always and he invites us to join him in the adventure. The adventure entails not only being his friends, but also collaborating with him in his friendship quest. As I go about making friends *for him* I'm doing it *with him*. How cool is that! And then, serendipitously one consequence of making friends with him is that they usually become friends of mine at the same time!

### **Talking to people on other buses...**

Remember what I was saying before about God being willing to ride other buses in order to call people to himself? Well, maybe we should also be willing to ride other buses too. I'm certainly not suggesting that we join other religions (or even study them per se), but remember what Paul wrote, "*To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some*" (1 Corinthians 9). We have to be willing to have some friendly dialog in hopes that they'll consider transferring to the "Jesus Bus."

I think that "dialog" is the right word for what is done on other buses. While *preaching and proclaiming* are often called for, *conversing* – with an actual back-and-forth – is often more effective. If this is true then it means that we should be on the lookout for people (on other buses) whose bus has taken them *part way* to God. There are probably more people involved in alternative spiritualities than we realize who are "*not far from the kingdom of God*" (Mark 12). God has undoubtedly been speaking to them before we arrived. We might want to be more interested in what he's been saying to them before we begin our *torrent of talk* about the Bible. They're on the *first bus* (so to speak), and some of them actually on their way to the right place. Maybe I need to be making friends there, looking for people to whom the Spirit has been calling. I might encounter the Spirit himself going from passenger-to-passenger trying to persuade each one to get off at the next stop and take *the Jesus*

Bus all the way to the Father! I want to be there with him, harmonizing with his call, joining in the persuasion!

*My life's goal is to  
"Make friends with God."*

**I try to be more of a witness than just go witnessing...**

"Witnessing," what's that? I've been out "witnessing" many many times. (That's where we go out with tracts – little papers that tell the gospel – and approach strangers in order to tell them about Jesus.) I still do this, because people need to hear it, and I need to tell it. You never know when God will use it. The first time I heard about Jesus was from a newly-saved hippie named Michael, who approached me and a friend of mine while we were sitting up in a tree smoking pot! He stood there looking up at us and told us about his radical encounter with the Lord! I never saw him before or after that day. He "witnessed" to us, and though I didn't climb down out of the tree and decide to follow Jesus that day, it had an impact. I'll always be grateful for his boldness. In addition to the street ministries with which I'm engaged, I try to "witness" whenever the opportunity obviously presents itself wherever I go. I blow it off a lot too and have missed many divine appointments. But I do my best. A lot of panhandling goes on in my neighborhood. So I try to have a tract and a buck on me when I go out. If someone approaches me for money, I give them the dollar and the tract and try to engage them in conversation about the Lord as much as time allows and they consent.

But actually, the term "witness" occurs in the Bible *as a verb* only twice ("*Paul witnessed to them*"). The other 50 times are all nouns ("*You are witnesses*"). In other words, the emphasis is on us *being witnesses* rather than on the *act of witnessing*. A *witness* is someone who saw something (like a crime being committed) and then they tell about it to anyone who's interested to hear it.

You hear what I saying, right? I'm not saying that we shouldn't talk to anyone who doesn't already have an interest in Jesus. I wasn't interested in Jesus before my fellow-hippie "witnessed" to me in that tree. Plus, we can't know whether or not someone is interested until we talk to them. I'm saying that, in essence, none of our witnessing is a "cold call." The Spirit has already "witnessed" to them in one way or another, so our witness is more of a *follow-up call*. I think of witnessing as telling people more than they already know about what they already know in their knower. (Woe, that just came out! But think about it...)

I'm saying a witness is something I am before (and beyond) something I do. I want to *be* a witness, live my life as a witness; and when it's time to "witness" to someone (with words), then I hope I'm ready to *do* it, knowing that he's already done it ahead of me and ready to do it with me!