

Barbara Butler Bass, a former Professor of Church History at Duke Divinity School, describes an experience during her youth in this way:

Saguaro High School, Scottsdale, AZ ,1976

I opened my locker -- it was overstuffed and unorganized as usual -- and out fell a copy of the New American Standard Version of the Bible. The word of God hit the sandaled feet of a girl with a locker near mine.

"You're so religious," my high school companion growled. "A Bible at school, are you becoming a Mormon or something?"

"No," I replied. "I'm not a Mormon."

I had recently joined a non-denominational church,
a church that took the Bible both seriously and literally.

I was only vaguely acquainted with scripture through childhood Sunday school.

But my new church friends knew the Bible practically by heart. I was trying to make up for lost time by reading it at lunch period.

"What sort of religion makes you bring a Bible to school? Are you a religious fanatic?"

"I'm not religious; I've got a relationship with God. I really don't like religion. Religion keeps us away from Jesus. It is more -- it's a spiritual thing."

I was only trying to describe something that had happened to me, an experience I had with God. At the time I felt pretty special, that God had chosen me, but what I didn't know was that millions and millions of other people shared our story- of growing up in a formal religion, finding that somehow chilly or distant, and rediscovering God through a mystical experience.

Belief is the intellectual content of faith, such as Confessions of the church. But faith is not entirely dependent on church doctrine. Faith is not only what we know or believe or profess; Faith is also how we experience God in our daily life.

Faith is an affair -- a relationship -- of the heart. Faith in the Spirit emphasizes not what people believe, but how they live, how they treat one another, how they experience the divine through spiritual practices or ritual.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul is very concerned about similar matters, for the followers of Jesus, who are eagerly trying to learn the tenets of their faith, are competing with one another over who

is following the most 'expert and knowledgeable'

leader of the faith, who can best bring them to salvation. The problem is, the leaders have become enamored with their elevated status in society and enjoy their more respected stations in life. They have become "lofty" in manner.

Paul's letter begins right away to chide the followers of Jesus for taking sides and quarreling over who is the wisest leader among them. They are each declaring loyalty to their favorite teacher, saying, "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ," as though Christ is just one among the many who speak with wisdom or eloquence, as though any of the favorite leaders is on par with Christ.

Paul quickly identifies **human** wisdom and eloquence as the root of their divisiveness. And it has caused them to devalue the Gospel of the Cross and Christ Crucified. The wisdom they should be seeking is the wisdom of God and the power it holds in their faith, for the wisdom of God refers to God's plan for salvation.

Paul insists that "the world" --the leaders and debaters who try to impress the followers with eloquence and signs, do not know God as they think they do. And the people are thus diverted from the gospel and the power that God gives to believers to know him, not by intellectual knowledge, but by faith in the Spirit.

Some followers have forgotten that they teach only human wisdom, and that:
God is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God,
and righteousness, restoration, and redemption (v. 30) .

This lack of unity among them is understandable, since the followers of Jesus were raised either in the Hebrew or Greek cultures. The Hebrews highly regard wisdom and the Law and have always followed the wisdom of the scribes, the learned scholars of Judaism. And the Greeks are accustomed to the philosophical debaters of their culture, who concentrated on wisdom from ancient philosophers and show their intellectual superiority at the podium.

Paul is saying that a new age has come - that God, through the sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus, has overturned worldly wisdom, and replaced it with God's wisdom; that by an unsurpassed ability God has turned the powers-that-be upside down and chosen the most "foolish" ones by human standards, who desire Christ, the wisdom and power of God (v. 22-24).

How do human beings come to know God? How is fellowship possible between frail, finite creatures and the Creator of the cosmos?

Bonhoeffer drew a distinction between Religion, or human attempts to connect with the Divine, and

Christianity, which is a response to God's decision to engage human beings.

The wisdom of God gave us teachers and preachers and others to proclaim the word so that we might be aware of God. Through them, we are taught the tenets of Christianity and how to apply them in our lives so that our lives may be enriched. But there is more to it.

If one only come to church to hear a lecture on the goodness of God and then and go out the doors to the world, we can be inspired and revived for awhile, but then it all begins to fade away amid the culture.

Fully experiencing our faith contains more dimension than listening, reading, and understanding. Experiencing faith is coming to church, worshiping with brothers and sisters in faith, and then going over to Watkins Hall and having an International Potluck Luncheon with people from all over the world! This is the crucial dimension of Christ.

Experiencing our faith brings to life all that we know and understand. Experiential faith brings us home to the presence of God.

This is precisely what Paul is doing when he writes his letter to the ordinary people of Corinth. He writes to teach and guide them, to make them aware of his ministry and what he hopes for in their ministry, and then he comes again in-person, to experience faith together. //

When Ina Scheib came to live with us in 1989, we were a busy young family with many things to get done -- obligations to 3 children and school, and making a living. At that time, I was the organist in this church, so I was committed to come to church almost every Sunday of the year. Ina would attend with us, but not all the time.

She told us her story. She had been baptized at birth in Germany, but her family had never practiced their faith. She was unaware of church with worship and community, yet perhaps felt it in the culture of Las Cruces by a kind of "transferral by osmosis" of our family's practices, the new culture, and her intellect. Ina was from a very loving and congenial family, but what she experienced here at First Presbyterian was an introduction to experiential faith.

My first expectations were that a lovely Rotary Exchange Student was going to live with us for six months and then return home, and that would be the end of our time together.

But that is not what happened at all! Our experience became a lifelong extension of genuine relationship. The Scheib family invited Dina to visit Germany for a month later that summer, and Ina's mother, Ulla, arranged a bus trip for the girls to Russia all by themselves!

Talk about experiential! What they found was that in the city there were serious demeanors from the local police driving with loaded rifles in the back of military jeeps, and yet they delighted in the

ordinary people they met -- the kindness, acceptance, eye-to-eye contact of the Russian people -- on the streets, in the hotel, and in the shops and restaurants, as Dina and Ina explored.

They learned first-hand that the Russian government 's relationship with the U.S. was tenuous after almost 40 years of the Cold War, but the people, the "foolish ones." were openly smiling and welcoming to each other, and to two foreign teenagers.

And we remember that Paul, formerly a learned and respected former Jew whose only crime was to share his new faith, was chosen by God to be one of the foolish , ordinary ones who proclaimed salvation in the cross of Christ.

In these experiences we clearly see the wisdom and power of God that brought Paul and the "foolish ones" together in a bond of faith, even amid great suffering.

After Ina had lived with us, we exchanged many visits through the years.

Ina and her mother returned for Dina's wedding. Steve and I visited them when I was on an organ research trip to Germany, Ina returned again when our grandson Evan was born, and brought her new husband with her; and the pattern continued over the years.

Then, in 2018, Steve and I returned to visit Ina and her family, who now live in Zurich, Switzerland. At the time, her children's ages were about 8, 10, and 12. One evening, Ina shared with me that those times of attending church with us in 1989 were very nice and comforting. She saw the commitment of family to church, she heard the word of God preached, and she experienced the fellowship of the church in small ways. I am not saying that she "drank it all in" at that time, for even today she is still a very intentional woman, spirited, (and just a little stubborn)!

But at that time she was also incredibly homesick for her family. To Ina, everything in Germany was the best, and everything in America was questionable. It is true that, in her mind, America could not compare with her home country, because that is where her family was waiting. This was understandable to us, as hard as it was to feel her emotional disconnection.

However, from 1989 to 2018 -- she had almost 40 years to ponder her experiences here; and she told me that day in Zurich that she had remembered her time in church and cherished the family memories -- and had decided to send her children to the youth group in their new church. They were going through confirmation, for she wanted them to know who Jesus Christ was in a personal way.

In 1 Corinthians 3:4-8. we read:

For when one says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apollos," are you not all too human? What then is Apollos? What is Paul?

Servants, through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each.

I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one

who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. //

Knowledge of God through Christ Jesus and the Holy Spirit results from the sovereign,
divine decision

to come down from heaven and establish fellowship with humanity.

We are called to be servants; no more and no less; for we learn, preach,
and teach the humility of Christ.

This is how we find God, who is benevolent, loving and forgiving,
yet more powerful in wisdom than any social structure or government could ever be.

Praise be to God, Amen.
