

Connecting With God Rightly

1 Corinthians 10:14-22

Traditional Christianity is losing ground in America. Fewer and fewer people are looking to orthodox Christianity to provide their connection with God.

But this movement away from traditional Christianity does not mean that people do not have an innate desire to experience a connection to the spiritual, or to the divine. They simply no longer believe that the answer is found in attending Church and reading their Bible.

Ross Douthat is Opinion columnist for The New York Times. He writes,
“A recent Pew survey on secularization likewise found increases in the share of Americans who have regular feelings of “spiritual peace and well-being.”

As Americans, we haven’t abandoned our desire for “spiritual peace and well-being.” We simply no longer seek that peace and well-being through traditional Christian practices.

The traditional Transcendent God, who is not a part of this creation, is too distant and removed to be of real help. Americans hunger for something that is nearer to them, something that can be experienced in a more tangible way.

Douthat continues,

“According to Americans new spiritual hungering, divinity is fundamentally inside the world rather than outside it, that God or the gods or Being are ultimately part of nature rather than an external creator, and that meaning and morality and metaphysical experience are to be sought in a fuller communion with the immanent world rather than a leap toward the transcendent”.

It is possible to describe us as yearning for a powerful experience of life, more than we are hungering for the God who declares himself to be the way, the truth, and the life.

It is not wrong to want more out of life. It is good to receive with thanksgiving the good things of this world and to enjoy them as gifts from God. But when we look to the experience of life, rather than to the Giver of life, to satisfy our deepest longings, we are veering off course.

We are seek first the kingdom of God.

And yet, when we do seek Him, we are often disappointed.

For most of us, when we seek God through prayer, study of the Bible, and coming to corporate worship, we feel a certain amount of frustration in our connection with God.

How have you responded to this frustration?

How does God want you to respond to this frustration?

The struggle to connect with God is not new.

It has existed ever since the Fall of Adam and Eve and their expulsion from the Garden.

It was present in the Israelites when Moses was receiving the 10 Commandments on Mount Sinai.

It was present in the early Church of Corinth.

And it was present throughout the history of the Church.

Having a desire to know and experience God, to truly connect with God in an meaningful way, is good.

But, like anything that is good, Satan looks for ways to twist this desire and lead us away from the true God. Jesus promises to all who will come to him life to the fullest.

John 10:10 ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

Jeremiah 29:13 ¹³ You will seek me and find me. When you seek me with all your heart,

But the gulf between these promises and our daily experience is vast, and at times seems insurmountable.

What if God intends for this gap to exist?

What if he purposely orchestrates it, not to be cruel, but as a means of destroying what is wrong with us? The frustrations that we feel in our connection with God challenge us.

They drive us to contemplate what it is that we truly want from him.

And they force us to decide whether or not we will entrust ourselves fully into his hands.

The Christian life is lived by faith.

Hebrews 11:1 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

2 Corinthians 5:7 ⁷ for we walk by faith, not by sight.

Sight implies more than what we see with the eyes. It also includes the entirety of what we can perceive with our senses. This would include our sense of smell, our sense of touch. It also includes our emotions, what we feel inwardly. Sight is the expression of our experience.

Faith, on the other hand, clings to what cannot be perceived. Faith believes that which is not presently being experienced.

As Christians, we yearn to experience God. But when our experience of God falls short, we must decide whether we will continue to seek him in the ways that he has provided. Or if we will seek satisfaction and fulfillment elsewhere.

Faith pleases God because it continues to seek after God during seasons of not experiencing God.

Hebrews 11:6 ⁶ And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

As followers of Jesus Christ, all of our hopes of experiencing God are only found through faith in Jesus Christ.

John 14:6 ⁶ Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

The Christian life is a life of faith. It is choosing every day to believe as true what God has revealed to us on the pages of Scripture. Faith in Jesus Christ certainly results in various good experiences in this life. We have fellowship with God now. But that fellowship is not all that we hope for. It is lacking in this life. Partially because we continue to lack faith. But partially because that is just the way that God intends it to be.

He treasures our faith more than we know.

We yearn for experience. Jesus yearns for our faith.

Where are you today?
How would you describe your present experience of God?
What are the means by which you draw near to God and hope that He will draw near to you?
How do you connect with God?
How are you supposed to connect with God?
Today, we are going to look at how to connect with God – rightly.
But first we must explore something more painful. We must consider what is happening when we seek fulfillment in wrong ways.

The pursuit of fulfillment in wrong ways is what the Bible calls idolatry. Idolatry is subtle. It is deceitful. It is extremely alluring and therefore very dangerous. I would argue that there is no one living who has not in some degree fallen prey to its tentacles, including myself. And so, Paul rightly urges us to flee from its clutches.

Read I Corinthians 10:14-22.

1 Corinthians 10:14-22 ¹⁴ Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.

Paul has told the Corinthians that they have a freedom, a right, to eat the food that has previously been sacrificed to idols.

But, while it is true that the meat of a pagan sacrifice was not altered in such a way that eating that meat at some later time caused you to in some superstitious way partake of something evil, Paul now wants to make clear that the actual worship of idols does bring you into fellowship with evil.

And so, Christians should be careful to flee from all idolatry.

In v. 18, Paul tells the Corinthians to consider the Israelites. That is exactly what we are going to do. Turn with me to the book of Exodus. Chapter 32.

Shortly after being rescued through the Red Sea, God led his people to Mount Sinai. At this point, God's intent is to reveal to his people the Law. So, he leads Moses up to the top of the mountain and meets with him in the cloud. The rest of the people remain at the foot of the mountain.

Only Moses is on the mountain longer than anyone expected. That brings us to verse 1 of Exodus 32.

Exodus 32:1-6

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain,
the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him,
"Up, make us gods who shall go before us.
As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt,
we do not know what has become of him."

The driving force towards idolatry begins with frustration with God.

Moses was the means of the people's connection with God. God spoke with Moses. Moses spoke with the people.

But when Moses was removed from them, the people lost faith that God was near them to save them. Moses was up on the mountain for more than a month. And while they could certainly see the cloud over the mountain, the people wanted the comforting presence of Moses. God was powerful. But he was also distant. They did not feel the warmth and security of being in a relationship with God.

They felt an emptiness and decided to search for a way to meet that emptiness.

God was in control of all of this. It was His plan that they would experience emptiness. It was his design that Moses would be gone so long. God was testing his people, to show what was inside of them. Instead of patient faith in the God who had redeemed them through the Red Sea, they decided to do something about it.

The only problem was that God did not want them to do something about it. Unless of course by doing we mean patiently waiting upon God.

2 So Aaron said to them,
 "Take off the rings of gold
 that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters,
 and
 bring them to me."
3 So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears
 and
 brought them to Aaron.
4 And
 he received the gold from their hand
 and
 fashioned it with a graving tool
 and
 made a golden¹ calf.
 And they said,
 "These are your gods, O Israel,
 who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"

Idolatry begins with a willingness to make sacrifices to get what you want. You choose valuable materials because these materials demonstrate the devotion that you have. Some forms of idolatry rose to the level of sacrificing your children to prove one's devotion.

Idolatry is an act of devotion. There is zeal involved, and sacrifice. Most worthwhile goals in life require sacrifice. So, this makes sense. The people were willing to sacrifice something precious because they desired something else. In this case, connection with the spiritual.

Once you have the materials for the idol, you must then form the idol. But what sort of idol will you choose. Ultimately, you will choose an idol that expresses your desires. Aaron chose a calf.

The Bible does not explicitly tell us why he chose a calf. But we have a pretty good idea. Both in Egypt and in Canaan the bull was worshipped. The bull was a symbol of fertility (or fruitfulness) and strength, two things that the Israelites craved. They were, after all, traveling through a desert. But Aaron does not choose the bull. Instead he chooses a calf. Now the calf would become a bull so it is probably true that the Israelites desired a strong and powerful God. But a calf is not yet a bull.

I grew up with cows. And we had a bull. His name was TN. TN was massive. As kids we were not a threat to TN so we got along with him pretty well. But my dad always had a healthy fear of TN. Occasionally, TN would decide he wanted to carouse with the neighbor's cows. He would break through our fence and we would get a call from the neighbor asking us to come and get our bull. This was no easy task. One day, dad was having a particularly difficult time. So he went up the barn and got a 4 by 4 post. He looked TN in the eye and swung the post as hard as he could right down on the hump on TN's head. And for one tense moment, I saw fear in my dad. And dad was not afraid of much. TN staggered back, shook his head from side to side. I thought for sure he was going to charge dad. But then, he turned and walked back into our pasture.

The point is that bulls are fearsome animals. I think it is likely that the Israelites knew God was fearsome. They were at the foot of a mountain that was smoking and shaking, one that they could not even touch without dropping dead.

They wanted a god that was more approachable. And so, Aaron chooses a calf. It is also true that the calf represented fertility. The calf that leapt around the pasture symbolized life and youthfulness. These qualities represented what the yearnings of the Israelites.

Yahweh was not coming through on their expectations. They were not openly abandoning God. But they were beginning to remake God according to their own desires.

Do we not feel the same desire within our own hearts?
Can you identify the qualities of God that you struggle with?
Have you not sought to remake the God who is into the god you want?

They have demonstrated their devotion.
They have fashioned the idol according to their own desires.
Now they are ready for the act of worship.

5 When Aaron saw this,
 he built an altar before it.
 And
 Aaron made proclamation and said,
 "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD."

In order to worship, you need an altar.
The altar was the sacred place where sacrifices and offerings would be made to create a sacred connection with the divine.

And after the sacrifice was made, there would be a meal. This feast represented the fellowship that the worshipper had with god.

By these human means, the worshipper could be assured that their god was near to them and they could in some way influence the god to satisfy their longings.

Provide for basic needs.
Grant protection from enemies.
Give joys and pleasures that were lacking.
Provide for my well-being.

All of these actions were rituals designed to bring that which was common into contact with that which was divine. And something happens in this act of worship. It does provide some sort of connection with the divine. Or at least what you think is the divine.

For a moment, what you have been seeking seems to find fulfillment.

But once you make your desire the supreme focus of your actions, that desire begins to rule your life. And it pushes you to make pleasure your highest goal. You no longer are seeking connection with God. You are really only seeking pleasure itself.

Either you learn to submit your desires to your love of God, or you seek ways to make god a part of your desires.

6 And
 they rose up early the next day
 and
 offered burnt offerings
 and
 brought peace offerings.
 And
 the people sat down to eat and drink
 and
 rose up to play.

What does it mean that the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play?

Most commentators look at this as a reference to sexual immorality. We may think that it is odd to combine sex with worship, but sexual pleasure is one of the strongest desires that exists. One often has a sense that all other fears are removed. All is well.

So, we see idolatry having run its full course.

It began with a feeling of emptiness, a disappointment with God.

There is a continued devotion present, but it is no longer to the God who is, but rather the god that you want to be.

Then, instead of submitting one's desires to God, there is an attempt to use or manipulate God to enhance one's desires.

But there is something missing from this process. People engaged in idol worship because believed that the act of worship did something more. It helped them to experience a connection with the divine. But the whole thing is built on a lie. The golden calf is nothing more than a golden calf.

Is idolatry nothing more than a psychological result of wanting to be connected with God? Hardly. There is one other factor involved.

Jump back to I Corinthians 10.

Look at verse 18. We will get back to vv. 15-17 in a moment. Paul tells the Corinthians to do what we just did, to consider the people of Israel. Only Paul wants them to consider the worship God appointed for the Israelites.

18 Consider the people of Israel:
 are not those who eat the sacrifices
 participants in the altar?

What is Paul saying?

Basically, that the formal worship of OT Israel met the same yearning of being connected with God, but in a way that God established as good.

The Levitical worship was established to bring God's people near to him without their being overwhelmed by his holiness. There was an altar. The worshipper did bring sacrifices and offerings for cleansing and as an expression of devotion. And there was also a fellowship meal. The participants and the priest and Yahweh, dined together.

But what is missing: There is no indulging in revelry. Sexual passion was not in any way associated with worship.

Still, Paul makes the point that when the Israelite ate of the meat that was offered on the altar, the worshipper was participating in the altar. That sounds strange, but it basically means that they were experiencing “fellowship” with God, and with the other worshippers.

Paul is making the case that when Israelites engaged in authorized worship of the Levitical Law, they were being brought into fellowship with God. The ceremonial acts of worship in the OT were not merely symbols. They enabled the worshippers to have fellowship with Yahweh.

But if it is true that the act of worshipping Yahweh brings the worshipper into fellowship with Yahweh, then it is also true that the act of idolatry also brings one into fellowship. Only the fellowship is not with the true God, but false gods of their making.

Paul assumes that there is parallel between the true worship of Yahweh in the OT and the false worship of idols. In both cases there is a spiritual connection going on. That is why Paul then answers the question that he anticipates from the Corinthians.

19 What do I imply then?
 That food offered to idols is anything,
 or
 that an idol is anything?

Paul has already made the case that idols are not real gods. This is the same argument that the OT makes. Idols are not real gods. But since Paul has just made the case that sacred acts of worship bring us into contact with the divine. Therefore, Christians should flee idolatry. They should not want a spiritual connection with a false god.

Now you know the objection: But Paul, there is no such thing as a false god! Idolatry is just made up stuff.

Paul makes clear: the connection that idolatry makes is not with another god. There is only one true God. Well then, who is it that idolaters are brought into fellowship with?

20 No,
 I imply that what pagans sacrifice
 they offer to demons
 and
 not to God.
 I do not want you to be participants with demons.

The act of idolatrous worship brings one into fellowship with demons. And demons through means of deception can in an empty way provide a fleeting experience of our desires.

Deuteronomy 32:15-18 ¹⁵ "But Jeshurun grew fat, and kicked; you grew fat, stout, and sleek; then he forsook God who made him and scoffed at the Rock of his salvation. ¹⁶ They stirred him to jealousy with strange gods; with abominations they provoked him to anger. ¹⁷ They sacrificed to demons that were no gods, to gods they had never known, to new gods that had come recently, whom your fathers had never dreaded. ¹⁸ You were unmindful of the Rock that bore¹ you, and you forgot the God who gave you birth.

Demons are not gods. They are fallen angels. They are spiritual beings, but they are not gods. But demons are evil. And they are powerfully working to draw you away from true worship to the true God.

So, when a person offers a sacrifice to idols, what he is really doing is engaging in fellowship with demons. I know that in our scientific world, some struggle to acknowledge the presence of the spiritual. But this is exactly what Paul says is occurring.

On the one hand the Bible can claim that idols are nothing, because there is no other god but the God of the Bible. But at the same time the Bible teaches that the actual worship of idols brings you into fellowship with demons.

So, while the meat itself is not in some way magically contaminated, the actual participation in idol worship is truly evil and demonic.

Idolatry is incompatible with the true worship of God.

21 You cannot drink
 the cup of the Lord
 and
 the cup of demons.
 You cannot partake of
 the table of the Lord
 and
 the table of demons.
22 Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy?
 Are we stronger than he?

Behind idolatry is the worship of demons. To engage in pagan worship is to worship demons. That makes God mad. It provokes him greatly. He is not indifferent to false worship.

Paul asks, "Are we stronger than he?" (stronger than God).
The implied answer is, "Of course not."
You really do not want to provoke God.

And most of us would agree. We would not imagine going to a pagan worship ceremony. But, we can participate in the essence of idolatry without doing the formal ceremony.

When we demand that God give us the feelings of spiritual euphoria rather than waiting patiently upon him. We crave the connection with God more than we are determined to live by faith.

We want the experience of salvation in its fullness now. We really do not want anything to do with patiently waiting upon God.

As Christians, the absence of God's presence is designed by God to test your faith. If God wanted to continually overwhelm you with powerful and tangible expressions of his presence, He most certainly could. Instead, he withdraws his presence to test whether or not we will reject everything that we previously believed simply because we have lost a sense of his presence.

And, when we seek ultimate fulfillment in the pleasures of this life we make idols of them. We crave the pleasures of the flesh more than we truly desire the God who is.

In this way, I have been an idolater.
I have loved my security, my pleasure, my life, more than I have loved God.

We live in a world that loves “spiritual experience.” But we do not live in a world where many people truly love the God who is.

The only thing we can do if we recognize that we have committed the sin of idolatry is to fall down before God in humble repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the only means by which we can draw near to God. There is no other means for sinners to ever have a true connection with God.

And this is why I have waited until now to explain vv. 15-17. In these verses Paul explains to the Corinthians that what is wrongly done in idolatry is rightly done in the Sacrament of Communion.

¹⁵ I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say.

¹⁶ The cup of blessing that we bless,
 is it not a participation in the blood of Christ?
 The bread that we break,
 is it not a participation in the body of Christ?
¹⁷ Because there is one bread,
 we who are many are one body,
 for we all partake of the one bread.

There is no question that Paul is referring to what we call the Sacrament of Communion. As Christians, we do not have a formal altar on which to place animal sacrifices. Our faith is not in the greatness of our devotion. Our faith is in the once and for all sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. We do not bring our own devotion to God as a means of bartering with Him to get what we want from Him. The blessing that we receive from God flows from the one fountain of Jesus’ one act of devotion, the offering up of himself – the shedding of his own blood, the breaking of his body.

In Christ, and in Christ alone, will we ever find fullness of blessing. The blessing for which our hearts truly yearn, a blessing that is not based upon lies and deceit. A blessing that will endure through all eternity.

We are united to Jesus Christ through faith alone. Union with Christ is not a result of your devotion. It is a gift that is received by faith alone through grace alone.

Your faith is expressed every time to open your Bible to seek the truth of God. Your faith is expressed when you bow to pray, thanking God and seeking his righteousness.

And your faith is expressed when you approach God in the sacrament of communion. Communion is rightly called a sacrament because it is a holy action. That is what sacrament means: a holy action. The sacrament of communion is not idolatry, because it is appointed by God to be a means by which we draw near to him and in which he also draws near to us.

Very similar to how idol worshippers experience a fellowship with demons, Christians experience a fellowship with God as they engage in communion.

Paul refers to the cup of communion the cup of blessing.

This is probably because during the Passover, when he was establishing the sacrament of Communion, Jesus used the third cup of the meal – which was called the cup of blessing.

And Jesus speaks of this cup as the cup which we bless. He is referring to the setting apart of the cup for a holy use. The cup of wine is nothing more than a cup of wine. But when it is blessed it is set apart for a special use. After the communion service, the left over wine remains just wine. Just like in the pagan sacrifices the meat offered to idols could be sold in the market as nothing more than meat. But in the sacrament of communion, the cup takes on a sacramental value.

As the worshipper drinks the cup in faith, he or she is being brought into fellowship with the blood of Christ. Of course this connection is not physical. It is spiritual. But it is real. We are in fellowship with Christ and his death on the cross.

“Paul implies that the Christian, because he partakes of the Lord’s Supper, is in connection with the death of Christ.” Grosheide

And from that connection, the Christian draws spiritual nourishment.
The Christian hope is renewed that from Christ true life, eternal life, will flow.

But communion is not simply a private experience of the worshipper with God. Communion is a sacrament of the entire body of Christ. As we enter into fellowship with Jesus Christ in the Sacrament, we are doing so with the rest of the body of Christ.

17 Because there is one bread,
 we who are many are one body,
 for we all partake of the one bread.

Jesus does not want us to simply experience him as individuals. He want us to approach him as a whole body. We cannot rightly do communion while we are apart. We should all be feeling the loss of not coming together in corporate worship. We should be pleading with God to make it possible for us to come together again as soon as possible. There is something that we are missing as we are separated from one another.

But even when we can draw together for corporate worship, and for the sacrament of communion, it will not in itself provide the spiritual experience that we want. The sacrament is not precisely like the worship of idols.

In the sacrament, we seek the God who is, not the God we want.

And in the sacrament, we learn to submit our desires to our Lord Jesus Christ.

We trust in his promises. But we do not demand that Jesus meet our passions.

In the sacrament, we are brought into fellowship with Christ, but it is a fellowship that relies upon faith and not sight.

In Communion we learn to live by faith. We accept that God will certainly dish out some amount of his presence, like he provided manna in the wilderness. But we also accept that He will not give us all that our hearts desire here and now. If he did, we would surely chase after the experience more than the Giver of the experience.

One of the hopes of eternity is that God will fully fix us so that He can pour out the fullness of blessing without our making an idol of the blessing.

O what a day that will be!

Until then, seek God. Seek him in the Word. Seek him in prayer. Seek him in fellowship with other Christians. And seek him in the Sacrament of Communion.

And learn to be content with portion of blessing that he gives you now.

1 Timothy 6:6 ⁶ Now there is great gain in godliness with contentment,