

Peter's Second Pentecost

„Let Mutual Love Continue: Relationships Old and New on the Journey“, Part Two

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We have heard from Ruth how the relationships between Paul, Philemon and Onesimus shaped a new category of personal relations. I want to extend this idea a step further and suggest that what we learn from this story can also improve our theology and our worldview.

The five years I was involved with the development of the document „Christian Witness in a multi-religious World“, released 2011 by the Vatican, the World Council of Churches and the World Evangelical Alliance, powerfully changed my life, and this not because I read a lot of books around the topic, but because of longterm personal encounter with the other people involved in the project.

When I was introduced as a new member of the committee of the Global Christian Forum the newsletter of the Forum wrote: „In terms of his personal journey Dr Schirrmacher says that, coming from a very conservative evangelical background, “I would not even enter Catholic or Pentecostal churches ... I never expected that I one day would: * attend two Vatican synods, * help to work on close contacts between the World Council of Churches and the WEA and speak at the General Assembly of the WCC ... My change of heart came for several reasons, including my activities on behalf of persecuted churches. In 2005 we started the International Institute for Religious Freedom and I found myself defending people of ... all churches and confessions. Here I was sitting and praying for protection for Christians, whom I still thought to be unbelievers. I was also changed through the joining of ‘spiritual experience and friendship’. Theology followed later and had the final decision: strange for a professor of Systematic Theology. But still it’s the truth. The years of diligent work around the globe changed my perception of the Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches and made me a champion of the goals that are now central to the GCF.“

Some Evangelicals have taken issue with my statement that experience came first and theology followed. With this position, they said, I no longer could be head of the theological concerns department of WEA. They also said it proves, that the Global Christian Forum waters down Biblical convictions and the strong endorsement of WEA for the Global Christian Forum is wrong.

But in response I would ask: Is Evangelical or even Pentecostal theology with no experience possible, just as a pure academic exercise in comparing and judging theologies? Can we have a correct understanding of the Trinity without the life-changing experience of being loved by, and loving, the triune God?

The global gathering of the Global Christian Forum gives me the rare chance to prove from Scripture, that experience of how God acts in this world in the lives of other people and churches, that growing mutual relations, that experience is a good road to a sound theology.

By all means, Holy Scripture is God's revelation and our highest authority. But God uses experience to shape our theology. In other words, if you are firmly committed to the authority of Scripture, experience of how God acts through other people and churches is a good road to a sound theology.

Job's theology did not become upgraded through the endless theoretical discussions with his friends. Only through his personal experience – ugly and painful as it was - did he reach the conclusion about God that “So far my ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you” (Job 42:5).

Many prophets and leaders in the Old Testament testify to the fact that only real-life experience of and encounters with God – directly and through other people – enabled them to understand God and his will.

This is still true today. I know more people who started to think more favourably about Pentecostals because they experienced healing for themselves or others than people who were swayed by heated discussions of Pentecostal theology.

We know that pure, uninterpreted experience does not teach us anything by itself, and we surely do not accept experience as such as the highest authority in the church. By experience I also do not mean that we constantly adapt to cultural circumstances or to the *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of the age. If you marry the *Zeitgeist*, you will be a widow or a widower soon.

But often, personal experience and relationships with others can remove the haze in front of our eyes. Experience opens our minds to things that we perhaps could have known through intellectual research and discussion but do not realize because we have biases that cause us not to see what we do not want to see.

Often in the gospels, Jesus said something but his listeners understood only much later what he meant, and always after some major event or experience had happened. The most famous example is that Jesus promised to rebuild the Temple in three days. Only after his resurrection did his followers understand that he was not referring to the Temple made of stone, but to himself.

The Apostolic Council of Acts 15:1–33 was about a very serious theological matter. The whole church met—the Apostles, elders, delegates from the churches and mission teams. The end result was summarised by the person presiding, James, who claimed that their conclusion must be true because it was in line with Scripture. But even though the interpreting and declaration of Scripture by the authorities was the council's final step, the theological discussion actually centred on reports of experiences. Peter, Paul and Barnabas won the day, so to speak, because of the many moving stories they told, arguing that God had decided the matter already by sending his Holy Spirit on the Gentiles.

Acts tells us that Peter addressed those gathered as follows: “Brothers and sisters, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us” (Acts 15:7–8). And Acts adds: “The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them” (15:12).

Telling those stories was theology at its best, not some inferior method of theological argument!

In Galatians 2:11, Paul wrote, “When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong.” Paul added a lengthy explanation of why Peter was wrong, indicating that God accepts people from all nations simply by faith (Gal 2:11–19).

Was this the same Peter who heard the original oral version of the Great Commission? Was this the Peter who preached in Jerusalem on the first Pentecost? Was this the Peter in whom Jesus invested so much time in personal encounters and extra lessons, last but not least calling him to shepherd his sheep (John 21:15–21)?

Like all the disciples, Peter learned from the living Word of God himself that the Great Commission is to all nations (Mt 28:18–20) and that the power of the Holy Spirit would come upon them so that they would be witnesses “to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:9). God used Peter more than anybody else when Pentecost occurred, as he had the privilege of preaching that day and being the first herald of the new age that had come.

Yet despite all his learning and all his correct words, Peter did not believe this deep in his heart. He still believed in the separation of Jews and Gentiles.

How did God convince Peter? By presenting him with a new volume of systematic theology written by Paul? By compiling all statements from Jesus as well as from the Old Testament prophets that are relevant to the topic? Or even better, did God give him a well-prepared, systematic lecture directly from heaven?

Well, you all know, God did reveal himself directly to Peter, but not in the way we theologians would have chosen. He used a dream that contained a shocking example and applied it to the upcoming encounter with Cornelius. He had Cornelius wait for Peter so that Peter could see with his own eyes and have a first-hand experience of ... true theology.

Read carefully the whole story of Cornelius in Acts 10 tonight. How much effort God put into shaping Peter’s theology through this experience! He corrected Peter’s wrong views, but in a way that changed his life forever.

Only after what I like to call “Peter’s second Pentecost” did Peter grasp the theology of the first Pentecost. After the conversion of Cornelius, he declared, “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right” (Acts 10:34–35) and: “Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have” (Acts 10:47).

Of course those examples relate directly to what we are doing here in Bogota. Listening to the faith stories of other Christian leaders, young and old, is one of the marks of the Global Christian Forum. These sharing times are not just to give more people a chance to say something. They are as much and deep a theological encounter as the superb messages delivered by people like Ruth (Padilla deBorst), who spoke before me.

I hope that those from older churches seize the opportunity here to listen to people from newer churches. I hope those coming from newer churches open their ears wide for the faith stories of people from older churches, as their churches may be long-established but their stories are not old!

Let me address my Evangelical and Pentecostal friends more directly. In Scripture, Jesus speaks two judgements that I pray will not be spoken over us. While on earth, he described

a Pharisee (the closest thing to an Evangelical in the Jewish world) who came to the Temple and prayed about himself: "God, I thank you that I am not like the others" (Lk 18:11). This statement was opposed to the "evangel," the gospel, which was captured in the other man's prayer: "God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (Lk 18:13).

The second judgement comes from the risen Lord in his letter to the church at Laodicea: "You say, 'I am rich ... and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked" (Rev 3:17).

Our high view of Scripture should not keep us from being always willing to learn more. The Holy Spirit has many ways to teach us sound theology, not just the classroom. If we listen, we will often hear profound truths spoken and lived in places where we did not expect it.

If Scripture is God's Word, than we should follow Scripture when it teaches us that we often understand God's deepest thoughts not just by quoting them, but through life-changing encounters and experiences.

Thanks be to the Triune God that he did not just leave us a book inspired by the Holy Spirit and revealing Jesus as Saviour to us, but that he sent the Holy Spirit himself into us. Thank God that he uses multiple means to help us more deeply understand His revelation, put it into practice in our lives, and grow all the more in love for our Father in Heaven, our Saviour Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.