



Feeding Faith

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- My ecclesia, the Simi Hills ecclesia, suffered what you might call a **Crisis of Faith** in the past year
- Several of our brightest and best members lost their faith in the past few years
- They were slain by the scientific method
- They felt that logic and science should answer all their questions about God
- When they searched for definitive answers they fell short
- Consider this story from one of them...

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Over the course of a few years, I lost my faith.

*The best way I can describe the process is that I gradually started doubting everything I read in the Bible, which felt more like **fable than fact**. I also began feeling more and more certain that there was no God out there at all. I questioned why I ever felt that God was there in the first place, and found that I had no concrete reason to make such an affirmation. Full of skepticism, I felt that praying to a God I had never met was a ludicrous notion altogether. I confided in a few close friends, removed myself from the speaking list, and **began to live my life without God**.*

- Some have, by the grace of God, worked their way back to a relationship with their Father
- It's not an easy path... It's a path that requires patience...
- Patience on the part of the Spouse...

- Patience on the part of the Family...
- And patience on the part of the Ecclesia

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- Let's continue on with this young Brother's story...

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*It did not take long for me to become a person I did not want to be. **My skepticism gradually turned into cynicism.** My absence of focus on God turned to an obsessive focus on self. Instead of inspiring others, I felt that I did nothing but criticize. It occurred to me that I needed God, but I was still left with a nagging feeling that he wasn't there. That's when I reached out in spite of my disbelief and asked that God, if he was indeed there, would help me **feel** that he was there. Things started happening little by little - nothing that could be considered a miracle, but comments people would make in passing, situations in my life that seemed to speak directly to my doubts. **The more I prayed, the more I felt God was reassuring me of his presence.***

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- This Brother is back on the Exhorting Schedule, and let me tell you... When he exhorts now it's a completely different exhortation than it was a few years ago...

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***The feeling that God was there returned to me.** And I describe it as a "feeling" quite deliberately. To me, it is more like **knowing someone cares** about you than it is like knowing $2+2=4$. This feeling waxes and wanes throughout my life even still. To those who have lost the feeling that God is there, I understand you, and **my prayer is simply that He will bless you with faith**, and will reassure you of His love for you. That you, like those Peter writes to, will learn to love a savior you have never seen with your eyes. May he return one day so that all doubts will subside, and until then, may we be bold in our faith in the midst of a world that hasn't yet been blessed with the feeling of his love.*

- It's been an amazing journey to watch
- The sad journey of a wonderful young man who struggles and loses his Faith
- And the inspiring journey of a young man who works his way back into a relationship with his Heavenly Father

- Some of the others in our Ecclesia are still struggling to understand that relationship
- Some may never return
- The ones that have made it back have come to realize that faith is not a logical equation
- That there is no A + B that you can add together to find absolute proof of our heavenly Father
- Faith is believing in something that cannot be proven
- Faith is believing in something that cannot be seen

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- So how do we face **Challenges to our Faith?**
- There are many things in life that can conspire together to weaken our Faith
- Our Ecclesia has been challenged with several who have felt the effect of Science and Evolution attacking the logic and reason of their Faith
- But, there are others things that challenge our Faith
- Consider this not all too uncommon letter from a young Sister in our Ecclesia...

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*I believe that my marriage **will** be in the lord. I have never believed that only Christadelphians will be saved. I don't mean that in a theoretical way because God can make any exception that he wants. I mean that I believe there are good godly people that are not Christadelphian, and that they can be forgiven just like us. God has a limitless capacity for forgiveness, and there is no reason it can't extend to sincerely mistaken doctrines. **I have decided not to make agreement to the BASF and doctrines to be rejected a prerequisite for who I chose to fellowship.** Specific doctrinal issues are not as important to me as the weightier matters, like learning to love my neighbor as myself.*

- Whether you agree with it or not, you must concede that this is a reasoned and logical argument...
- ...Made by a young woman desperately in love with an unbeliever...
- What drives a person to this point?

- Was it the influence of the mainstream Christian school that she went to?
- Was it the negative effect of witnessing some of the hypocritical fellowship practices of the Brotherhood?
- Was it simply a desire to marry someone who has no interest in godly things?
- *Or, was it a combination of these things and many more?*

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- It's often not one thing that kills our Faith, but more often it's a death of a thousand cuts
- We are beset on almost every side by influences that can have a weakening effect
- This is nothing new...
- I don't think that this is unique to *"the Last Days"*
- I think that Jesus was very familiar with this concern

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- Consider the Parable of the Sower in Matthew 13
- We tend to think of this in regards to preaching, but in reality, these are all the same kind of people who have accepted the Truth and are members of the Ecclesia...

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- Matthew 13:19 NIV

19) When anyone **hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it**, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path.

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- Many will say that a **Lack of Understanding** is the **ONLY** reason that people lose their Faith
- *If they were to just read some more, study some more, attend a few more Bible Classes, then they wouldn't have such struggles*

- Obviously, the person saying that reads a lot, studies a lot, attends lots of Bible Classes and hasn't had any challenges to their Faith
- But, that doesn't mean that those same things will have the same effect upon a young Brother who is struggling to understand how there could possibly be a loving God who cares for him if He has chosen to leave the Brother lonely without a companion to bring joy into his life...
- In one sense, of course, if we really understood what God has planned for us, and what He wants from us, then our Faith would be strong...
- But, it's called Faith, because it is something that exists **WITHOUT** that knowledge...
- But, then again... It can't exist, to say nothing about grow, unless it has knowledge...
- Regular, constant contact with God's Word is essential to feeding your Faith

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- Matthew 13:20-21 NIV

20) The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy.

21) But since he **has no root**, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away.

- "Has no root" can be taken a few different ways...
- Your natural reaction is to interpret this almost the same as verse 19... A very shallow, insufficient understanding of the Scriptures
- Is Christ repeating himself for emphasis, or does it mean something different?

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- I tend to think of **ROOTS** as **CONNECTIONS**...
- One of the clear signs of Spiritual Danger that we look for at Simi Hills is whether or not a member is **CONNECTED** to the Ecclesia
- And, how many connections do they have?
- The more roots they put down, the better they will grow

- Someone who has no family in your Ecclesia, was brought in by a girlfriend, who is now an ex-girlfriend, and hasn't really connected with anyone else may not be long for your Ecclesia

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- Matthew 13:22 NIV

22) The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the **worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it**, making it unfruitful.

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- When I was growing up in CYC they called it *The World*...
- The whole plethora of things that we allow into our lives that eventually take priority in our lives and leave no room for the things of the Lord
- I know Brothers we have lost to Gambling
- And, I know Brothers we have lost to Scuba Diving
- I know Sisters we have lost to 24 Hour Fitness, Yard Sales and a Clean Kitchen...
- It doesn't matter **WHAT** the influence is... It often doesn't take much for it to become stronger than the person's Faith...
- Faith doesn't often die a bloody battle fighting to the last ounce of strength, but more often than not is simply weakened to a point of withering and dying
- It hardly ever goes away entirely, but is just reduced to such a weak and lifeless emotion that it has no power or control over the individual
- You eventually just don't care enough any longer to bother

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- There are a lot of other things that are Challenges to our Faith...
- And Relationships are a big one...
- I honestly believe that there will be no other single item that keeps more people from the glory of the Kingdom than our relationships with each other...
- Good relationships that fall apart...

- Bad relationships that eat you alive...
- Relationships that you shouldn't be in...
- Relationships that you can't stop yourself from being in...
- When it comes to issues of the heart, people often let their hearts do the thinking
- Even worse... They sometimes let other body parts do the thinking...
- We don't always make wise and sound decisions when we are in love, or even **THINK** we are
- How the Ecclesia responds to a Brother or Sister as this sensitive time is crucial
- The Ecclesia has a great opportunity to show Grace at this point
- But, it can't be resolved in one two hour meeting on a Tuesday night
- They took months, or maybe years, to get themselves into this position, don't think that you are going to work it out in a single session
- Give them the gift of time
- You may not work it out before the next Breaking of Bread, but you might just save your Brother or Sister
- Socrates said, ***"I cannot teach anyone anything. I can only make them think."***
- The same thing kind of holds true when it comes to strengthening someone's Faith
- We can't strengthen anyone's Faith **FOR** them, but we **CAN** show them **HOW!**
- There is a paradox in the idea of wanting to strengthen faith
- Faith is a gift of God, so if my faith is weak, is that God's fault?
- I think that like any gift, to be of any value, faith has to be used
- In other words, Faith has to be fed and exercised

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- ***How do you feed faith?***

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- I think a basic diet to strengthening Faith includes three things:
 - Prayer
 - Bible Reading
 - Fellowship
- If it truly is our goal to help and encourage each other during these challenging times, then the Ecclesia needs to take an active role in each one of these three areas

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- **PRAYER** is an important area where the Ecclesia can dramatically improve
- Like mine, your Memorial Service probably contains four or five prayers
- But, if you were a stranger walking into your meeting for the first time, what would be your impression of those prayers?
- Are they perfunctory, repetitious words delivered without much emotion, or are they alive with the personal feelings and character of the person praying?
- Is the content the same platitudes heard over and over, or are they actually topical and applicable to what is going on in people's lives that day?
- Are our prayers simply bookends and dividers to our Memorial Service, or are they a vital and important part of the service?
- If we want to feed the faith of our Young People, our Families, and each other, we need to raise the level of importance that Prayer holds in our Ecclesias
- We need to find a medium that allows for frequent, personal and relevant prayers

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- Focus on opportunities to change our group prayers so that your members are not an **AUDIENCE**, but **PARTICIPANTS**
- This may mean holding separate Prayer Meetings, or restructuring our existing meetings to allow time for people to hear and be heard in their prayers

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- It means making Prayer as common and comfortable in your meeting as Coffee and Donuts

- It means making it very “normal” for someone to be able to share a challenge that they are facing, and having the opportunity for several people who care to be able to sit with them and call upon God to help

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- It means demonstrating to everyone in our Ecclesial Family that Prayer is alive and active in our Ecclesia
- **PRAYER** is an important part of Feeding people’s Faith

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- **BIBLE READING** is another...
- As a body, we do spend a lot of time with our “*nose in the Word*”
- But, I fear that sometimes we do it in such a way that **DISCOURAGES** our Young People from developing daily habits of Bible Reading
- Robert Roberts did our community a great service by providing a helpful tool that we can reference in order to systematically read through the entire Bible each year
- But, too often, I feel that we have become slaves to the Daily Bible Reading Chart
- Just because it **IS** part of the Holy Scripture, and just because it does appear on today’s schedule, doesn’t mean that it is necessarily the best selection for us to read that day
- Our Ecclesia is blessed with many visitors
- Between contacts, friends, coworkers and boyfriends & girlfriends, it is not uncommon for us to have 3 or 4 people visiting our Ecclesia for the first time
- It’s so exciting to see people come in contact with the Ecclesia for the first time...
- It’s a great opportunity full of hope and promise
- And then you watch their face, as someone walks to the front of the Hall, opens a King James Bible and reads...

“And Moses slew it; and took the blood, and put it upon the horns of the altar round about with his finger, and purified the altar, and poured the blood at the bottom of the altar, and sanctified it, to make reconciliation upon it. And he took all the fat that was upon the inwards, and the caul above the liver, and the two kidneys, and their fat, and Moses burned it upon the altar. But the bullock, and

his hide, his flesh, and his dung, he burnt with fire without the camp; as the LORD commanded Moses.”

- Now, don't get me wrong!
- I think that there are some wonderful lessons to be learned from Leviticus!
- Every Scripture is an important part of the daily diet for a baptized believer
- But... I've sat through too many CYC Skating Parties, where we enjoyed a wonderful night of fellowship with the Young People, and then we gathered around in a circle with some cookies and punch to close out the evening with a few words from Scripture...
- But, because the Skating Party is always held the last week of the year, we get 120 teens into a circle, and read...

“And here is the mind which hath wisdom. The seven heads are seven mountains, on which the woman sitteth. And there are seven kings: five are fallen, and one is, and the other is not yet come; and when he cometh, he must continue a short space. And the beast that was, and is not, even he is the eighth, and is of the seven, and goeth into perdition.”

- Now, again... I'm not saying that it's not important for our Young People to eventually learn about the wonderful lessons hidden in Revelation
- I'm just saying that when you have a group of people who are about 80% unbaptized, isn't it an ideal opportunity to share some of God's Word that is really going to speak to them?
- What a great opportunity to reinforce the wonderful, glorious message of the grace we have received from God, and the blessing of having our sin's forgiven!
- By being so stuck on the “Daily Readings”, **AND** by reading them in a 400 year old translation, I fear that we have convinced a lot of people that the Bible isn't really relevant to them
- We've convinced them that we are out of touch with the realities of the challenges they face, and God's Word isn't a valid or helpful resource for guiding them through life

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- We need to spend a few moments in thought and prayer to help us choose a reading that is going to be **APPLICABLE** to the group that we are addressing
- We need to share the saving message of God's Word when we have the opportunity to talk to visitors and unbaptized Young People

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- Don't be afraid to share the Word of God with your Members in a version that is a little easier for them to understand
- It has a wonderful effect on people when they hear the Message in a way that they have never heard it before
- Sure, it's a little uncomfortable at first, because you are not **USED** to it, but you quickly begin to see things you've never seen before

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- And, let's not limit ourselves to the **THREE** Daily Readings!
- Let's structure our Meetings so that the Humans speak less, and the the Word of God speaks more
- When we know that people are facing challenges, we need to focus on the comforting, encouraging words that the Bible is so full of
- Spend time in your Ecclesia with the Group reading the Bible together
- **READING THE BIBLE** is a important part of Feeding people's Faith, so let's take that seriously

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- **FELLOWSHIP** is the last part of Feeding Faith that I want to talk about today
- I feel that this is the most important part, and the part that we, as Ecclesias, have the greatest opportunity to have a positive impact on
- I think that if a person doesn't see themselves as a member of a Community, their Faith will begin to weaken and die
- In our individualistic society we often think in terms of "**My Faith**", but there is a problem with thinking that way
- Christian Faith is founded in **Community**
- The Ecclesia is the "**Body of Christ**"
- As a Community of Believers it is "**Our Faith**" that needs feeding if we are to be any use as Christians

- If you are concerned about the challenges that face the Faith of your Members, then the best thing that you can do is make sure that they are members of a Community of Faithful people
- The best thing that you can do for them is to make sure that they are members of a Community of real, honest believers
- Show them that their life can have meaning
- Show them, by your example, that we don't simply exist, that we are put here for a reason
- We have a Purpose
- We were created to be a part of a Community
- We were created to be a part of God's Family
- God desires a family, and He created you to be a part of it

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- Ephesians 1:4-5 NIV
 - 4) For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love
 - 5) he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will
- God is love, and therefore he treasures relationships
- And he wants to have a relationship with **YOU!**

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- Because God is **LOVE**
- The most important lesson He wants you to learn is **HOW TO LOVE**
- It is in loving others that you are **MOST LIKE GOD**

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- Galatians 5:14
 - 14) The entire law is summed up in a single command:

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“Love your neighbor as yourself.”

- Learning to love unselfishly is not an easy task
- This runs counter to your self-centered nature
- Of course, God wants you to love everyone
- But, He is particularly concerned about you learning to love others in His family
- Why does God insist that you give special attention to trying to love your Brothers and Sisters?
- The answer is simple...

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- John 13:34-35

34) “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.

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35) **By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”**

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• *Love cannot be learned in isolation*

- God wants you to be in regular, close fellowship with other believers so that you can develop your skills of loving
- Why do you think that God designed our lives so that we had to experience life together with other Human Beings?
- Do you think it is because of the wealth of experience and wisdom that we can gain from such spiritual, gentle, kind and intelligent souls?
- **NO!!!**
- God wants you to have fellowship with people just like you... Imperfect, irritating, frustrating, sinful people

- That is specifically part of the process that God intends each one of us to go through
- Sure, your Ecclesia might be just as messed up as my Ecclesia is
- You've got some close-minded members who won't be open to anything new
- You've got some overly open-minded members who bring up crazy ideas
- You've got some discouraging members who don't do anything...
- You're concerned that it's not a good environment for your young people to grow up in...
- That is exactly the point!
- God wants us to learn how to love **EVERYONE** in the Ecclesia!
- God wants the us all, including the Young People, to come to realize that even though everyone in the Ecclesia is messed up, life outside the Ecclesia is useless

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- God says that **Relationships** are what Life is **ALL** about
- Four of the Ten Commandments deal with your relationship with God
- The other six of the Ten Commandments deal with your relationships with each other
- All Ten Commandments deal with relationships
- When you stand before the Judge, he won't ask you about your career, your hobbies, or your net worth

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- Instead He will be concerned how you have treated others
- You will be **EVALUATED** on how you have **LOVED**

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- Matthew 25:37-40

37) "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and **feed you**, or thirsty and **give you something to drink**?"

38) When did we see you a stranger and **invite you in**, or needing clothes and **clothe you**?

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39) When did we see you sick or in prison and go to **visit you**?

40) “The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’

- Look at the types of things that Christ is talking about here: Feeding people, taking people in, giving people something to wear, going to visit them...
- We are going to be evaluated on the type of life that we lived
- Too often, we imply in our teaching that we are going to be evaluated on how much study we did, or how regular we did our Bible Readings
- God is concerned about those types of things because that is what helps us learn how to better love our Brothers and Sisters
- But in the end, all he is really concerned about is whether or not we **DID** anything with all of that knowledge
- All he is really concerned about is whether or not we have **LOVED**
- Because that is what life is all about

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- So, the recipe for Feeding Faith is quite simple
- Prayer, Bible Reading and Fellowship
- The trick is that we can’t do these for someone else, they have to do them for themselves
- Our role is simply to give them a good example
- I want to focus further on Fellowship

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- Next class we’ll talk about how to **Cultivate Community**