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‘KNOWING CHRIST’

TO POSSESS ETERNAL LIFE is to know the true God and Jesus Christ whom He hath sent (Jn. xvii. 3). To progress in the spiritual life is to increase in the knowledge of God in Christ. ‘Grace to you and peace be multiplied in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord; seeing that his divine power hath granted unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that called us by his own glory and virtue; whereby he hath granted unto us his precious and exceeding great promises; that through these ye may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world by lust’ (2 Pet. i. 2-4, RV). The pathway of holiness to the divine likeness is the pathway of increasing knowledge. St. Paul counted everything else as refuse in comparison with the knowledge of Christ Jesus his Lord, and to gain Christ, to know Him more and more, and become more like Him, was the great goal and ambition of his life (Phil. iii. 8-14).

The knowledge of Christ comes with a corresponding knowledge of ourselves which is humbling and devastating. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of all true wisdom. In reverence and godly fear we can begin to know the Lord. There is in the human heart, apart from the revelation of divine grace, a proud conceit and wisdom which is really folly and ignorance. To it the preaching of the cross is foolishness. Yet to those who are being saved the cross is the power of God and Christ is the wisdom of God. The wise and prudent receive not the revelation of the Father in the Son. God reveals Himself to those who feel as babes in their helplessness and ignorance. They come to Christ weary and heavy laden to receive rest and to find a deeper rest in life as they learn of Him. They know Christ as Saviour from sin’s penalty and burden, and they desire to know Him more and more as Saviour from its power (see 1 Cor. i. 18-31 and Mt. xi. 25-30).

While it is given to few to have as dramatic an experience as Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus road, the inner meaning of that experience must be realized by all who would know Christ. It is sadly possible to have an interest in

religion, to be able to discuss many of its aspects, and yet to be nearly as much a stranger to Christ as Saul was before his conversion. Also we believe it is possible to be Christian in much of our conduct and yet be very formal or dead, even though painstaking, in our Christianity. Such religion has little real warmth or joy in it, and seems sadly lacking in some prominent New Testament features. There is another danger which we must guard against, and it is particularly one to which evangelical religion is prone, and that is the teaching of a doctrine of Christian assurance which it is possible to hold in a very barren, arid, and unlovely form. Knowing Christ means not only coming to Christ but also becoming like Christ.

Bunyan has three characters who in different ways represent religion without the true knowledge of Christ. Formalist, who would not face the hill Difficulty and was lost in seeking some way round its base. Talkative, who could talk, talk, talk, but yet had no real heart experience of Christ and who was not consistent in his life. Ignorance, who went right up to the gates of the Celestial City before he was made to realize that his religion was only self-conceit and self-deception. Sometimes one wonders if much of our religion of today which seems to have succeeded in filling in the Slough of Despond on the way to the cross, and in levelling out the Hill of Difficulty on the way after it, is worthy of any better titles. The great tragedy about the Pharisee in the temple, in our Saviour’s parable, was that he really believed what he said concerning himself. All Bunyan’s characters are rolled-into-one in him. There was some real knowledge of self and of God in the Publican’s brief prayer, and it is certain that divine blessing and favour rested upon him after it. He had met with God, and went down to his house justified. Christ is never prized or known in any vital sense except by the needy soul.

The prophecy of the New Covenant in Jeremiah xxxi. 33, 34 contained the promises of regeneration in the law written in the heart, a personal knowledge of God for all, and complete forgiveness. ‘This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith the Lord; I will put my law in their inward parts, and in their heart will I write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people; and they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord.’ Christ stated that His sheep would hear His voice, and know Him, and be able to distinguish His voice from the voice of the stranger. The other sheep, which He would gather through the ages, would also hear His voice, and be brought into His flock. (Jn. x. 1-16.) A personal knowledge of Christ, which is akin to hearing His voice, is the prerogative, the birthright, in fact it is the birth-cause, of every child of God. To us this knowledge of Christ, this experience of new birth and justification, comes by the Spirit’s work through the written Word. To know Christ is to be made aware of saving truth through the gospel. Of course it does not stop with a knowledge of the facts; it begins there, but goes on to bring us face to face with Christ as we are brought to own Him Lord. God shines in our hearts the illumination of the knowledge of His glory in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. iv. 6). We know the Lord, we follow Christ, we have the light of life.

The knowledge of Christ which begins through the gospel word, must be increased through the written Word. The work of the Holy Spirit, as promised by Christ, is to focus attention upon Christ, not to speak of Himself. It is His continuous work. He is the Spirit of Christ. All the Old Testament scriptures were inspired by Him to make us wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus (2 Tim. iii. 15-17). The New Testament scriptures came into existence, because Christ said His words would never pass away, and because He promised that the Holy Spirit would bring all things to the remembrance of the apostles. The scriptures of the Old and New Testaments exist to increase in us the knowledge of Christ. The regenerate heart is not left to feed upon itself, or to dwell upon that initial disclosure of God in Christ. There can be an unhealthy subjectivism which is constantly pre-occupied with self analysis. On a day of despondency it may find expression in the self-torturing words of the hymn:

‘Tis a thing I long to know,
Oft it causes anxious thought,
Do I love the Lord, or no?
Am I His, or am I not?

But on brighter days the new-born babe will desire the sincere milk of the word that he may grow thereby. Hunger for Christ, an appetite for His Word and His Presence, are some indications that we know the Lord. St. John, who has much to say on the ways in which we may know that we know Him, says we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He hath given us of His Spirit (1 Jn. iv. 13 and iii. 24). A genuine desire for the Presence of God, a new sense of relationship with Him, a delight in prayer, is, in the language of St. Paul, the witness of the Spirit with our spirits that we are children of God (Rom. viii. 15, 16). This is something we cannot analyse, it is a spontaneous awareness of the Presence of God. We must sadly confess that this mystical experience is not always sustained, but it is so real when we know it that we are assured thereby that we are truly Christ's and know Him. The beginning of Christian experience, whether it remains as a vivid experience of a sudden conversion crisis, or as the undoubted realization of the power of truths which we had always sought to live by, has so affected the whole course and direction of our lives that we can never allow temporary lapses in spiritual awareness of Christ to rob us of our assurance that we know Him. We may even lose our scroll, in unguarded moments of relaxation, on some hill Difficulty, but we cannot forget that we have travelled a long way from the Slough of Despond on the other side of the cross.

This last consideration leads us to consider another ground of confidence emphasized by St. John as a means whereby we can know that we know Christ. We have seen that our knowledge of Christ must be, as all knowledge is, mediated through the intellect. But it is not the intellect, enlightened or left in the dark folly of self-conceit, it is rather the mind enlightened and renewed by the Spirit in the moral crisis of a meeting with God in Christ. This results in an awareness of God, a joy in communion with God through the Word and prayer. The inevitable consequence of this change of nature and fellowship is a change of conduct. If the law of God is within our hearts (Je. xxxi), if the seed of God is within because of the new birth (1 Jn. iii. 9), then we must be obedient to God's commandments in life. There can be no assurance that we know Christ if our lives are not consistent with His declared will. When we first trust Christ for salvation we rest on the unchanging promise of God. Always our hope of salvation is in what Christ has done for us. But as faith without works is dead, so the claimed knowledge of Christ which does not bear fruit in a transformed life is a vain conceit. When man disobeyed God and became a sinner, his foolish heart became darkened, he became alienated and an enemy in his mind by his wicked works. The sure consequence of reconciliation and the enlightened mind is that we walk in the path of obedience.

St. John records our Lord's clear teaching on this aspect of the truth. 'He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him. . . . If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him' (Jn. xiv. 21, 23). John's own inspired words are a comment and application. 'And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him. He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked' (1 Jn. ii. 3-6). Obedience to Christ's commandments, likeness to Christ in conduct, is an evidence to us and others that we know Him, and that He abides in us and we in Him. There is an assurance which comes through obedience, a glad obedience which springs from love and is an evidence of love. The knowledge which is not seen in loving obedience is only vain conceit which puffeth up, and is nothing (1 Cor. viii. 1 and xiii. 2).

It is clear from St. John that the assurance that we know Christ is not something which can be fastened to a past experience alone. Our assurance of our eternal salvation is ultimately a conviction about the character of God. 'I know him whom I have believed, and I am persuaded that he is able to guard that which I have committed unto him against that day' (2 Tim. i. 12, RV). But that can never be divorced from the living experience of Christ day by day, and the evident tokens of His work in our lives. This experience

and these tokens are realized and seen in the Christian fellowship. All spiritual experience is ecclesiastical. Our knowledge of Christ comes through the Church which is the witness and keeper of Holy Writ. No Christian virtue can be practised in solitude. It is impossible to keep Christ's commandments and live as a hermit. Fellowship with Christ means fellowship with each other. You cannot follow the Shepherd unless you walk in the flock. Of course there are lame sheep and faltering sheep to be tended, and even lost sheep to be found, but knowledge of the Shepherd is increased in ministering to them. Christ says that in the last day, when He will divide the sheep from the goats. He will surprise some by His commendations for their attention given to Him in His weaker brethren. Knowing Christ is a very practical experience. It begins in a personal encounter with Him as Saviour and Lord, it grows in the daily study of God's Word and through dwelling in the secret place, it is evidenced in daily obedience, and increases in the warm expenditure of Christian love in Christian fellowship. The environment in which it most readily begins and grows, is that of a Christian fellowship, which approximates to the Church of the early days. 'And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and the prayers. . . . And all that believed were together, and had all things common; and they sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all, according as any man had need. And day by day, continuing stedfastly with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread at home, they did take their food with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to them day by day those that were being saved' (Acts ii. 42-47, RV).

Weston-super-Mare.

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A PARISH CAMPAIGN

THIS YEAR VARIOUS CHURCHES were asked if they would like to have teams of students during September to run Parish Missions. At the time we were in the middle of the preparation for a big Parish Mission, which was to be led by Major Batt — but we thought we could well use students to prepare the way for it, so we invited the I.V.F. to send us a team. The week was an outstanding success.

The main work given to the students was that of conducting a Mission for children, with a meeting every day — visiting people every afternoon and evening — organizing a Squash for Young People on the final Saturday — and a final Sunday of evangelistic services. The results were encouraging. It was thrilling to see three mothers converted during Major Batt's week after their children had been converted the week before. But there were several other people converted during the week in which the students were with us. Their ministry was also a teaching one, and the impression of their united witness was felt deeply by the church people themselves, and all who came into contact with them.

There seems to be no doubt that many churches would similarly benefit from a visit of students. It might take the form already outlined, it might be a straightforward evangelistic effort itself, or it might be a week of teaching, giving new life and vision to the church. The visit might also be used as a recruitment drive for the Sunday School and Bible Classes.

Such Campaigns have a twofold aim. Firstly to break new ground, i.e. widespread sowing, and secondly to reap the fruits of the previous work of the church. To accomplish either on any scale, such a Campaign needs to be a climax to regular work and depends on some basic machinery of evangelism already functioning in the church. Without this it is difficult to accomplish much and even harder to retain the fruits of the Campaign. This is not to despise the purely pioneer effort, but if there is a weekly Prayer Meeting and Bible Study, with regular guest services or other evangelistic efforts, much more can be accomplished. For instance, so much visiting is unfruitful, but we were able to get our members to visit the whole parish beforehand and we had their careful reports to guide the students to homes where there was most opportunity.

It is my conviction that these teams also give the finest possible training to young Christian students. Very often their vision of Christian service is