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"THE KNOWLEDGE THAT IS VIRTUE"

Both the Christian minister and the Christian educator are haunted by the question, "Can knowledge make men good?" The ancient Greeks had no doubt about the matter. Socrates taught that *knowledge is virtue.* and even beyond Socrates the ethical teachers of Greece expressed what they considered the secret of goodness in the maxim, "Know thyself." One of the assumptions of modern thought also is that improved education and improved environment, both of which appear to be attainable by the techniques of education and science, will produce better men and women. In recent years much public money has been poured into better equipped and more adequately staffed schools, and the cynic may say that the most obvious result has been the increase of juvenile delinquency and crime.

It is always wise to examine our presuppositions. The presupposition that knowledge is virtue must be carefully weighed by Christian educators. It is an interesting fact that the New Testament itself offers us a valuable critique of knowledge.

1.

In the first place, the New Testament warns us against the false knowledge of Phariseism. "The Pharisee," Bonhoeffer writes, "is that extremely admirable man who subordinates his entire life to his knowledge of good and evil."

Both in the Gospels and in the Talmud, however, there are indications of defects in Pharisaic morality. They were obviously very religious people,

and yet they had missed the heart of true religion. They know that God demands holiness of living, but they failed to realize that such goodness is always and only the gift of God's grace and never the result of human effort, the outcome of the human knowledge of good and evil. The result was that they thought of their good deeds as the products of their own virtue and forgot they owed everything to God. When morality no longer has its source and power in the grace of God, it inevitably ceases to look on human need with the loving kindness and justice of God. There was a religion that no longer knew God's grace, and as a consequence it had no longer had any vital contact with human need.

"Morals without religion" is a slogan of our time, but the Pharisee stands as a warning that the mere pursuit of goodness for goodness' sake, however admirable an ideal it may appear, is fraught with gravest moral danger. The knowledge of good and evil, Bonhoeffer reminds us, was the bitter reward of man's first disobedience, and such knowledge is indeed a curse so long as it is divorced from the knowledge that is man's real god according to the teaching of Jesus, the knowledge of the revealed will of the heavenly Father.

The way of Phariseism then is a dead-end street. The Pharisees are a warning to us that the knowledge of good and evil, when divorced from the grace of God, is a curse rather than a blessing. Pharisaic knowledge is not true virtue.

2

If the human knowledge of good and evil is powerless to produce true goodness, so also is intellectualism. The ancient name for this error is

Gnosticism (from the Greek word gnosis, meaning knowledge). Gnosticism tended to believe that salvation depends primarily on knowledge. Man's evil condition was held to be the result of his fall from the realm of pure spirit, down to the world of matter in which he is now imprisoned. The way of moral and spiritual restoration is through an intellectual understanding of our human nature. Christian Gnostics held that the mission of Jesus was to provide such intellectual illumination, and that men by the very act of receiving it gained moral emancipation.

The Gnostics were anticipating a characteristic view of our own scientific age that the understanding of the causes of a morbid condition either in an individual or a society is not only a preliminary step toward a cure, as all would admit, but has a curative effect in itself. This is most clearly seen in the practice of psychoanalysis. It has its measure of truth which determined the Greek maxim, "Know thyself"; yet an intellectual comprehension of the causes of our moral corruption, whether obtained by Gnostic cosmologies or by Freudian psychology is not the Christian gospel. Scientific knowledge is not saving knowledge, although the wise Christian will not despise any help that science and psychology can give.

The Gnostic who claims to understand the roots of moral evil may easily fall into one or the other of two dangers. He may think that the man who knows is above the conventional distinction between right and wrong, and so he becomes an antinomian. The other danger is a false asceticism. The Gnostic who attributed man's evil to the influence of matter, including his own body, practiced ascetic techniques in order to rid the soul of such material influences. Modern man still falsely regards his material environment as the sole cause of many of his physical and moral ills, but he meets this, not by asceticism but by an exaggerated faith in improved material

conditions and improved medical techniques, as if good houses, good schools, and well-balanced diets could save men from sin.

3.

I want now to point the way toward a third kind of knowledge, which, when undergirding and nourishing moral life, produces the fruits of Christian love and justice, and which, when consecrating all human knowledge on its altar, offers the way by which the kingdoms of this world may yet become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ.

What is this third kind of knowledge which makes for moral power and Christlike goodness? It is, in one word, the knowledge of God. This knowledge is not conceptual, it is intuitive. To use Rudolph Otto's phrase, it is "the knowledge of the Holy." It is an encounter with the "Wholly Other." As such, it transcends reason. Moreover, it effects a moral transformation in the individual and begins a chain reaction which affects society. It is a redemptive knowledge.

(1) To begin with, this knowledge is a knowledge of historical facts, particularly God's saving acts in history. "He made known his ways unto Moses and his acts unto the children of Israel." Supremely He has acted in His Son Jesus Christ. These facts differ from the propositions of Gnostic philosophy in that they can be grasped by all, even little children. It is a blow to the pride of the human heart to be reminded that we must become as little children in order to learn of God. We must listen to the simple story of God's love in Christ—and believe it—if we are to come to a true and saving knowledge of God. This knowledge takes possession of our whole being, of our feeling and will, as well as of our intellect. "For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. For the Jews require

a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness, but unto them that are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." (I Corinthians 1:21-24).

(2) It is not only a knowledge of facts, however, but a personal knowledge of God the Father. God is not an Idea to be grasped; He is Person to be met and fellowshiped. The knowledge of God is not a knowledge of abstract principles; it is a direct apprehension of reality—the kind of knowledge we have of people we "know" as friends. Hosea does not shrink from likening the knowledge of God to the knowledge a man has of his wife—a knowledge made possible only by the mutual surrender of two who love each other in utter personalness. Since God is holy love, the surrender we must make is moral surrender. No one can know God who clings to his sinful selfishness. God hides himself from those who will not pay the price of true repentance. But "if any man will do his will, he shall know." To quote Henry More of Cambridge, "If thou beest, thou seest."

(3) Only in the knowledge of God can we obey the maxim, "Know thyself." I can know myself only as I stand in the presence of God. Billy Graham said in his recent Los Angeles Crusade, that many an uneducated workman knows what the Ph. D. is likely to overlook—that what is wrong with our world is the disease of sin—a moral disease. Man does not begin to know himself until he stands before the Cross of Christ naked and sinful—a rebel in need of divine mercy and grace. "Know thyself," said Socrates. "Know thyself a self-willed, self-centered, hopelessly lost sinner," says Christ. Only in this true self-knowledge which leads to a transforming knowledge of God is there the power of a new life.

Celsus, a second-century critic of Christ, said once concerning Jesus, "Your teacher is the strangest of all teachers. Whereas our teachers say 'Come unto me, you who are clean and noble,' your teacher says, 'Come, unto me, you who are down and beaten by life.' And so being taken at his word by these impossible folk, he is followed by the rag, tag, and bobtail of humanity." Whereupon Origen replied, "Yes, but He does not leave them the rag, tag, and bobtail of humanity. Out of material you would have refused as useless, He fashions men, enabling them to stand on their feet and look God in the eyes. They were cowed, broken, and cringing things, but the Son hath made them free."

"This is life eternal, that they might know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent."