



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 The Christian Way of Knowing
(*Where Wisdom Is Found*, pp. 19-26)

Suggested Article:

📖 Humble Wisdom
(*Where Wisdom Is Found*, pp. 56-62)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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The Christian Way of Knowing

The virtue of faith guides the Christian way of knowing and enables the Church to witness faithfully to the gospel in the midst of challenges to knowledge and truth in our postmodern culture.

Prayer

Responsive Reading: Colossians 1:15-20

Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him.

He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Reflection

What can we know about ourselves, the world, and God? How do we know it? The answers to such questions, Jonathan Wilson writes, are greatly contested in our culture due to the breaking down of the modern view that knowledge is objective and impersonal correspondence with reality that we know with certainty. Postmodern thinkers argue knowledge is only an interpretation (or, more radically, a construction) of reality.

Both modernity and postmodernity assume human knowing is our own accomplishment. In contrast, the Christian way of knowing is grounded in the *virtue* of faith in Christ. Too often we do not think of faith as a *virtue*, as a habituated way of living. Instead, we reduce faith (under the sway of modernity) to one's assent to a list of true statements, or (by the lure of postmodernity) to one's choice to trust Jesus, a choice devoid of intellectual content. These thin views of faith, Wilson says, leave us vulnerable to the dangers of modernity and postmodernity.

The New Testament characterizes the virtue of faith in Christ as a gift that is personal yet communal, and cosmic in scope.

- ▶ *Faith is personal* – not “private” – since it transforms one's whole being by relationship with a person, Jesus Christ. Against modernity, this implies “knowing cannot be reduced to a mental act” achieved from “a detached, objective stance,” Wilson writes, for we know persons “through our whole being as persons.” Against postmodern skepticism, the virtue of faith teaches, as Lesslie Newbigin has argued, “The great objective reality is God but he is also the supreme subject who wills to make himself known to us not by a power that would cancel out our subjectivity, but by a grace that calls forth and empowers our subjective faculties, our power to grow in knowledge through believing.”



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- ▶ *Faith is a gift from God* that results from humility, not pride, and should lead to humility, not pride. This counters both the modern view “that knowledge is achieved through human effort in our quest to master the world,” and the postmodern view that knowledge is “a contest for power.”
- ▶ *Faith is communal*, for it is engendered through the disciple community, the body of Christ, in which “diverse gifts of the Spirit...[enable] us to discern the work of the gospel today, participate in that work, and be formed by our participation in it.” Postmodernity will agree that knowing is communal, but in contrast to its fear that this leads to subjectivity, “the practice of faith as communal forces us to rely on the Spirit-gifted community, not on ourselves as individuals.”
- ▶ *Faith is cosmic in scope* because “in [Christ] are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3). “Of course,” Wilson notes, “this does not mean we can understand any thing without loving attention and diligent study. Rather, only through Christ do we know things in their proper relationship and in reality.”

“To the postmodern suspicion that all knowing is an exercise in power, we offer faith as a gift that transforms our will to power and teaches us to live peaceably,” Wilson writes. “For too long the disciple community has accepted the modernist construal of knowledge that denies to faith the status of knowledge. Postmodernity has helped expose the errors of modernity, but only the gospel can provide us with a sure guide for our knowing. Far from being something other than knowledge, faith is the only way by which we can know all things truly – as reconciled to God in and through Jesus Christ.”

Study Questions

1. Jonathan Wilson warns that we may be tempted to accept the modernist account of knowledge on the one hand, or to wholeheartedly embrace the postmodernist critique of knowledge on the other. Why does he reject each of these accounts of knowledge? Does he think that the modernist and postmodernist views are “partly right”?
2. Why is it so important, according to Wilson, that we understand faith in Jesus Christ as a *virtue* rather than just a mental act (one’s assent to a statement of faith) or a commitment of will (one’s decision to trust Christ)? Does the virtue of faith include assent and commitment?
3. How is the virtue of faith in Jesus Christ related to the study of such things as geography, psychology, and calculus?
4. In the program of the Robbins Chapel stained glass windows, how is the virtue of humility depicted as an intellectual virtue in relation to Christian wisdom?
5. In William O’Brien’s hymn, “Wisdom’s Way,” how are the four New Testament characteristics of the virtue of faith in Jesus Christ – it is a gift that is personal yet communal, and cosmic in scope – depicted?

Departing Hymn: “Wisdom’s Way”

The Christian Way of Knowing

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand faith in Jesus Christ as a *virtue*, or habituated way of living.
2. To explore how the Christian way of knowing is grounded in the *virtue* of faith in Christ.
3. To contrast the Christian way of knowing with the modernist and postmodernist accounts of knowledge in our culture today.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Where Wisdom is Found (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with an Observation

We often hear the word “postmodern” used to describe movements in art and architecture, sociology and history, philosophy and theology. What do these movements have in common? They agree that people cannot be *absolutely certain* – that is, have no possible doubts – about what they claim to know or value as good. Many Christians would accept this lack of certainty as a mark of our finitude as creatures and fallenness as sinners. But many postmodern thinkers draw a further, more disturbing conclusion: that knowledge claims are only statements of how an individual, or a community, proposes to view reality. Thus, when people assert what they think is true or good, they are trying to force their “interpretation” on others. Every claim to knowledge becomes a subtle grab for power.

If we cannot avoid this more radical conclusion, “the best that we can hope for is that those who gain power will create a more humane world,” Jonathan Wilson notes. “This distress in our culture is even more intense for Christians than for society in general. For society, debates about the nature of knowledge are contests for political power and for one or another view of our society. But for Christians the meaning of these debates is even deeper. They are debates about people’s relationship to God – or, better, about God’s relationship to individuals – and about people’s eternal destiny.”

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to give the group discernment as you prayerfully reflect on the Christian way of knowing.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

This study introduces the immensely important, complex relation of faith in Jesus Christ to human knowing. Jonathan Wilson contrasts the Christian way of knowing to the modernist account of knowledge, which is

losing its sway in our culture, and to the postmodernist views of knowledge (as an interpretation or an exercise in power) that are emerging from the critique of modernity. Do not let the details of his analysis distract you from the main point: we must think of faith in Jesus Christ as a *virtue* if we want to grasp how faith is related to knowing. This relation is obscured if we reduce faith to one's assent to a list of true statements (for we'll focus only on whether the faith-based statements are supported by reason, or compete with our research), or if we reduce faith to one's choice to trust Jesus that has no intellectual content (since this makes faith either a private expression of preference, or an exercise of power over others).

Study Questions

1. Jonathan Wilson agrees with modernists that the goal of knowing is truth, but he fears "modernity has often exercised a corrupting influence on Christian witness to the gospel" by reducing knowledge to a mental act that is unconnected to "our own history and personalities." That is, modernity does not see knowing as personal (in the sense of involving the whole person) and communal; instead, the modernist invites us to 'bracket' our faith in order to think objectively. Wilson believes the modernist is overconfident about achieving certainty through human efforts and procedures of knowing.
Thus far, he agrees with a postmodernist critique of modernity. Yet postmodernists mistakenly conclude that knowing is irreducibly relative (to individuals, or to communities). Also, a postmodern turn from knowing to personal feeling can tempt us "to package the gospel as an answer to [one's personal] quest, but such a quest is an expression of 'consumer spirituality' that turns the gospel into something that meets my needs as I perceive them, not a genuine 'thirst for God' that participates in the redemption of the gospel."
2. Faith as a virtue is an achieved state, or disposition, of the human self involving what one notices, what one cares about, how one weighs options, how one deals with other researchers, and so on. Faith in Jesus Christ would include assent to certain beliefs and commitment of loving trust, but as a virtue it is more. Faith as a virtue transforms "our very *way* of assenting and consenting." The modernist reduction of faith to a mental act of assenting to statements may reduce humans "to disembodied minds who know 'objective truth'.... [But] we who know Jesus Christ by faith are not disembodied minds but persons with our own history and personalities through which we come to faith."
3. Faith in Jesus Christ is no substitute for "loving attention and diligent study" of a subject, Wilson says. "Rather, only through Christ do we know things in their proper relationship and in reality." Later he writes, "This means that all the ways in which we know – through our emotions, wills, minds, and bodies – must be transformed by the virtue of faith in order to conform to the Christian way of knowing." When one's subject matter deals with human nature, like psychology, Christian beliefs about persons and their capacities might shape one's investigations. In other subjects, like geography, Christian commitments might influence what one investigates and how one applies one's knowledge.
4. Humility is presented as the first of six intellectual virtues, which culminate in wisdom. In the lower panel, or predella, the figure of Bernard of Clairvaux pauses from writing his manuscript, *On the Steps of Humility and Pride*, when he sees a vision of Mary and the Christ Child. Bernard's very act of pausing from his writing calls attention to Christ as his inspiration and guide. In his book Bernard argues humility is essential to knowing, because pride "blots out the light of truth, so that if your mind is full of it you cannot see yourself as you really are." In the upper panel, the biblical figure of Rachel is depicted as a shepherdess, which relates her own humility to that of Christ, the Good Shepherd.
If time permits, the group may study the Wisdom window, which depicts Boethius and King Solomon, and explore its relation to the Trinity windows in the chancel.
5. The cosmic scope of wisdom is depicted in the first three verses of "Wisdom's Way" which have a Trinitarian structure, describing the outworking of wisdom in God's creative activity, Christ's incarnation, and the Spirit's guidance in faithfulness. Verse four summarizes that this wisdom is a divine gift "wrapped in love" by Christ, "the Way, the Truth, the Life." The life-encompassing personal and communal aspects of Christian wisdom are implicit in the prayer of the community in verse five: "walk with *us* along the way; / grant *us* knowledge and discernment / as *we* serve you day by day."

Departing Hymn

"Wisdom's Way" is on pp. 53-55 of *Where Wisdom is Found*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.