

# CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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<b>Series:</b>	<b>Exposition of Romans</b>		Pastor/Teacher
<b>Number:</b>	<b>158</b>		Gary L.W. Johnson
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## The Need for Mental Maturity

A middle-aged and much-experienced minister stood before the graduating class, faculty, and guests at the commencement exercises of a well-known American seminary. He had been called upon to speak as a representative new graduate of one of the more popular degree programs, the Doctor of Ministry.<sup>1</sup> Dressed in his new robe and elegant doctoral hood, he mounted the podium with words of praise for the seminary, words that, by his own admission, were as much a surprise to himself as to anyone else. He had always frowned on seminaries and seminary education. He had warned dozens of young people about the “ivory tower” of academic study and its irrelevance to the “real work” of ministry. He had mocked processes of accreditation that only resulted in making seminaries more academic and more isolated from reality. He had scorned the theological speculations that led away from and undermined the faith. Why, then, was he graduating from a seminary? He was there because of the practical, “how-to” approach of the Doctor of Ministry degree. He was there because this degree was different – it demanded no theological speculation, no academic, ivory-tower critical thinking, no ivory-tower courses – courses dealing with critical exegesis, the history of Christian doctrine, and philosophical and systematic theology – had not been a part of his program of education. He had studied only useful, relevant subjects.<sup>2</sup> This decidedly evangelical (as it is presently constituted) perspective is reflected in the attitude of the Tin Woodman in L. Frank Baum’s famous *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. In one particular scene the dialogue between the Tin Woodman and the Scarecrow makes my point:

“Why didn’t you walk around the hole?” asked the Tin Woodman.

“I don’t know enough,” replied the Scarecrow, cheerfully. “My head is stuffed with straw, you know, and that is why I am going to Oz to ask him for some brains.”

“Oh I see,” said the Tin Woodman. “But after all, brains are not the best things in the world.”

“Have you any?” enquired the Scarecrow.

“No, my head is quite empty,” answered the Woodman, “but once I had brains, and a heart also; so having tried them both, I should much rather have a heart...”

“All the same,” said the Scarecrow, “I shall ask for brains instead of a heart; for a fool would not know what to do with a heart if he had one.”

“I shall take the heart,” returned the Tin Woodman; “for brains do not make one happy, and happiness is the best thing in the world.”<sup>3</sup>

This false dichotomy (the either/or mentality) has gained wide acceptance in much that passes for evangelicalism. Os Guinness rightly bemoans this pathetic development; “More often we evangelicals choose a good thing but in a bad way because we choose at the expense of another good thing. In terms of a Christian mind, we evangelicals characteristically pit ‘heart’ versus ‘head’ and opt for heart as the most spiritual choice.”<sup>4</sup> Part of the problem, as diagnosed by historian Mark Noll, lies in the history of American Evangelicalism. “Evangelicals do not, characteristically, look to the intellectual life as an arena in which to glorify God because, at least in America, our history has been pragmatic, populist, charismatic, and technological more than intellectual. In our past we have much more eagerly leaped to defend the faith than to explore its implications for the intellectual life. We have tended to define piety

as an inward state opposed to careful thought, rather than as an attitude that might include attention to the mind. Although such tendencies are, by specifically Christian standards, indefensible, there are good historical reasons why American evangelicals have adopted them and so devalued the life of the mind.”<sup>5</sup> This has reached epidemic proportions in much of the evangelical church, where knowledge is denigrated and passion, mysticism, warm fuzzy feelings, or blind faith are elevated. Christian doctrine is often set against practical Christianity, as if the two were antithetical. Objective truth is ignored and subjectivity exalted. Knowledge is scorned while feeling is elevated. Reason is rejected and sentiment is put in its place. Understanding is disdained and gullibility encouraged. That eats away at genuine spiritual maturity, which is always grounded in sound doctrine (cf. Titus 1:6-9). Notice, for instance, the number of times Paul uses the word *know* (and its cognates) in this section of Romans: “Do you not *know* that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death?” (v. 3). “*Knowing* this, that our old self was crucified with Him, that our body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin” (v. 6). “*Knowing* that Christ, having been raised from the dead, is never to die again; death no longer is master over Him” (v. 9). “Do you not *know* that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey...?” (v. 16). “Do you not *know*, brethren... that the law has jurisdiction over a person as long as he lives?” (7:1; cf. also vv. 7, 14, 18). Fundamental to everything is sound knowledge. “Do you not *know*...?” Paul asks at the outset of the whole discussion. “Growth in righteousness and godly living are based on spiritual principles that must be *known* before they can do us any good.”<sup>6</sup>

## I. KNOWLEDGE: SOME QUALIFICATIONS

Knowledge alone is no virtue, of course. If someone “knows the right thing to do, and does not do it, to him it is sin” (James 4:17). Knowledge without love corrupts the character: “knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies” (I Corinthians 8:1). Knowledge not mixed with obedience hardens the heart: “If we go on sinning, willfully after receiving the knowledge of truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins” (Hebrews 10:26). Knowledge can be destructive when not tempered with other virtues: “If someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an idol’s temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols? For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died” (I Corinthians 8:10-11). The great Protestant Reformer John Calvin maintained the proper balance. “By ‘being fools’ we do not mean being stupid; nor do we direct those who are learned in the liberal sciences to jettison their knowledge, and those who are gifted with quickness of mind become dull, as if a man cannot be a Christian unless he is more like a beast than a man. The profession of Christianity required us to be immature, not in our thinking, but in malice (I Corinthians 14:20). But do not let anyone bring trust in his own mental resources or his learning into the school of Christ; do not let anyone be swollen with pride or full of distaste, and so be quick to reject what he is told, indeed even before he has sampled it.”<sup>7</sup>

## II. KNOWLEDGE NECESSARY: IGNORANCE IS NOT BLISS

Israel rejected Christ because they had zeal without knowledge (Romans 10:2). Hosea recorded the Lord’s complaint against Israel’s spiritual leaders: “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being My priest. Since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children” (Hosea 4:6). Isaiah recorded a similar indictment: “Israel does not know, My people do not understand” (Isaiah 1:3). All spiritual growth is based on *knowledge of truth*. Sound doctrine is crucial to a successful spiritual walk (Titus 2:1, ff.) Paul told the Colossians that the new self is renewed to true knowledge (Colossians 3:10). Knowledge is foundational to our new position in Christ. The entire Christian life is established on knowledge of divine principles, sound doctrine, and biblical truth. Those who repudiate knowledge in effect jettison the most basic means of spiritual growth and health, while leaving themselves vulnerable to a host of spiritual enemies.

**CONCLUSION:** The New Testament scholar, Leon Morris observes, “Paul not infrequently appeals to his correspondents’ knowledge (*we know*; cf. 3:19; 6:6; 7:14; 8:22, 28). He varies his approach by using the participle ‘knowing’ (5:3; 6:9; 13:11). Or he can say ‘you know’ (2:18) or ask the question ‘Do you not know?’ (6:3, 16; 7:1; 11:2; cf. 2:4). All this is an invitation to sweet reasonableness. Where the occasion demands it, Paul can be dogmatic and issue authoritative instructions. But he likes to enlist the intelligent cooperation of his readers and have them see the point for themselves (as when he tells the Corinthians, ‘I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say,’ I Corinthians 10:15).”<sup>8</sup> The Apostle *expected* Christians to possess this elementary understanding of the Christian faith – and at times his language serves as a rebuke when this knowledge was absent.<sup>9</sup> What specifically did he expect the Roman Christians to know? Our position in Christ: “knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, that our body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin” (Romans 6:6-7). We must understand that we are united with Christ in His death and resurrection and therefore free from our former enslavement to sin. In other words, we must grasp theologically the truth of Christ’s work on our behalf. We will never mature as Christians if we choose to remain blissfully ignorant of the theological aspects of our faith. A state of perpetual childhood is unhealthy and harmful. To remain childish reveals arrested development – yet this characterizes many people who profess to be evangelical Christians. Regrettably, this type of Christianity promotes itself under the guise of real spirituality, where feelings and emotions trump reasoning and doctrine. B.B. Warfield, perhaps the greatest theological mind since Jonathan Edwards, warned his students along these very lines when he wrote, “Nothing could be more fatal, however, than to set these two things over against one another. Recruiting officers do not dispute whether it is better for soldiers to have a right leg or a left leg: soldiers should have both legs. Sometimes we hear it said that ten minutes on your knees will give you a truer, deeper, more operative knowledge of God than ten hours over your books. ‘What!’ is the appropriate response, ‘then ten hours over your books, on your knees?’ Why should you turn from God when you turn to your books, or feel that you must turn from your books in order to turn to God? If learning and devotion are as antagonistic as that, then the intellectual life is in itself accursed, and there can be no question of a religious life for a student, even of theology. The mere fact that he is a student inhibits religion for him. That I am asked to speak to you on the religious life of the student of theology proceeds on the recognition of the absurdity of such antitheses. You are students of theology; and, just because you are students of theology, it is understood that you are religious men – especially religious men, to whom the cultivation of your religious life is a matter of the profoundest concern – of such concern that you will wish above all things to be warned of the dangers that may assail your religious life, and be pointed to the means by which you may strengthen and enlarge it. In your case there can be no ‘either – or’ here – either a student or a man of God. You must be both.”<sup>10</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> David Wells has aptly referred to this as a degree by linguistical inflation. Cf. his article “The D-Min-ization of the Ministry” in *No God But God: Breaking with the Idols of Our Age* eds. Os Guinness & John Seel (Moody, 1992), pp. 175-188.

<sup>2</sup> This true story told by Richard Muller who witnessed it while serving on the faculty of Fuller Theological Seminary. Cf. his *The Study of Theology: From Biblical Interpretation to Contemporary Formulation* (Zondervan, 1991), p. VII.

<sup>3</sup> Frank Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (Dover, 1960), p. 57-58.

<sup>4</sup> Os Guinness, *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds: Why Evangelicals Don’t Think and What To Do About It* (Baker, 1994), p. 30.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Eerdmans, 1994), p. 55.

<sup>6</sup> J.F. MacArthur, Jr. *The Vanishing Conscience* (Word, 1994), p. 214. Appendix I “Gaining Victory Over Sin: A Closer Look at Romans 6” forms the substance of my own analysis.

<sup>7</sup> J. Calvin, *Concerning Scandals* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1978), p. 18.

<sup>8</sup> L. Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (IVP, 1988), p. 110.

<sup>9</sup> E.H. Gifford points to Romans 6:3 as an example of the Apostle’s reproof of such ignorance. *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans* (rpt. James Family, 1977), p. 126.

<sup>10</sup> *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield* I ed. J. Meeter (P & R, 1970), p. 412.