

## Changing your mind!

### II Peter 1:5-6 & Acts 10 & Acts 18:24-28

Something inside us dies when people talk about knowledge, in evangelical circles it can be a dirty word. We trust people who are full of zeal and passion, we are cautious about people who know stuff; almost as though they are too clever by half!

We have been learning about how to become apprentices of Jesus, and so far we have been thinking about God's call, repentance, faith and goodness. Peter goes on to list *knowledge* as an important tool in the apprentice's toolbox. Different versions of the Bible express this differently – the New Living says *knowing God better*: the Message says *spiritual understanding*. All these are attempts to translate one Greek word – *gnosis* – a no-frills word that just means *knowledge*.

But when the Bible talks about knowledge it never means just accumulating facts – growing knowledge means a growing experience of God and of living as a Christian. This is especially obvious in the Old Testament – here's an example from Genesis 4.

*And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain, and said, I have gotten a man from the LORD*

**Genesis 3:1 (KJV)**

Adam knew a lot about Eve, but the old Hebrew word (*yada*<sup>1</sup>) means that he had direct... you know, experience of her! So throughout the Bible the word *knowledge* is flavoured with the idea of having direct, even an intimate, experience of someone.

### Can *knowledge* be spiritual?

I have friends who know a lot about God. They only need to read a book and they have downloaded its contents into their brains, when it comes to knowledge they are fearsome eggheads and you had better not disagree with them or you will be pulverised! These guys accumulate facts the way other people collect coronation mugs. But the information they possess does not seem to do anything to their lives: they are like fat little babies eating for all they are worth but never actually growing.

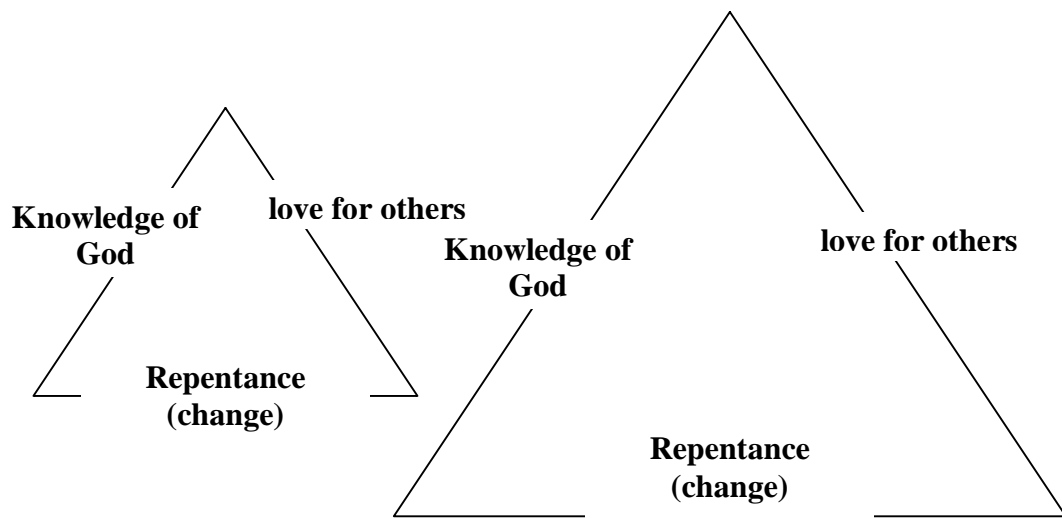
This kind of behaviour is not all that helpful.

But I want to show you that committing yourself to discovering the truth about things is powerful and liberating. Remaining in ignorance is limiting and destructive. The Bible is a book of knowledge and it stretches our understanding. But as our understanding grows other things have to grow too.

It is helpful to think of this as a triangle:

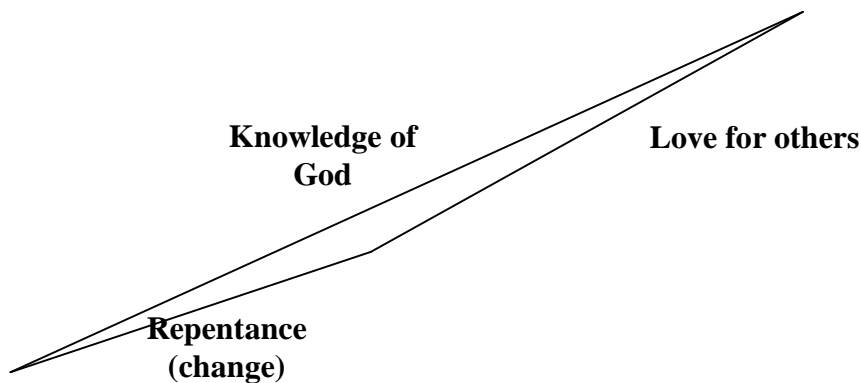
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<sup>1</sup> as in the Yiddish expression of impatience with people who bore you, "Yada, yada, yada!"



There is a balance here because the sides are equal – as your knowledge of God grows so your life changes; the key sign that this is happening is that your love for others grows too. When the triangle is balanced your growing knowledge is producing real change and benefit for others. This is what Peter means by adding knowledge to a life of moral excellence, as he goes on to say in verse 8, *“If you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ”* – productive knowledge means turning what we know into right living.

When this goes wrong the triangle is skewed.



Obviously there is something wrong here. When I look at this triangle I get the same feeling as when I listen to some of my knowledgeable friends!

This is so important. As I grow in my knowledge of God this must have a direct impact on how I live my life and that must show in a growth in the way that I love (Jesus said that love is the true mark of a Christian). When the triangle is symmetrical the result of knowledge is beautiful, when it is skewed growing knowledge often

creates something ugly. There is, in fact, nothing uglier than a knowledgeable Christian who has little love.

### **The Power of knowledge**

You see now that *knowledge* is one of the most important tools in the apprentice's toolbox. Let's look at just how powerful it can be. Here are some examples of how growing knowledge brings freedom and joy.

#### ***Peter – slow and reluctant* Acts 10:9-23 and 28-33 and 44-48**

It is hard to exaggerate the degree of hatred and distrust that there was between Jew and gentile in Peter's day, and he would have learned from childhood that gentiles were not to be touched with a bargepole. Jesus had freely mixed with Jew and gentile alike, and he taught his disciples to preach the gospel to the whole world. Yet the penny didn't drop with Peter – he was Jewish to his fingertips!

The vision in Acts 10 changed all this and sensitised Peter to the possibility that the gentiles could become proper Christians. Then (as if by magic!) the messengers arrive from Cornelius to take Peter to a gentile home. Peter goes against a lifetime of teaching and socialises with Cornelius' family before explaining the gospel to them. Then (as if by magic!) the Holy Spirit falls on the gentile believers and Peter's whole world view is permanently turned 'round.

We ought to be grateful; otherwise we may never have heard the gospel yet!

Peter is an example of a *slow and reluctant* learner. There is nothing in Acts 10 that he had not already heard from Jesus himself many times over. It just had not sunk in. But now Peter is forced to re-examine the way he thinks... the vision is repeated *three times*, the messengers arrive right on cue, the Spirit falls before Peter is finished. Peter is the kind of guy who needed multiple opportunities to learn one simple lesson!

He was a slow learner and a reluctant one. Some years later this happened

#### **Galatians 2:11-13**

The lesson Peter had taken so long to learn was soon un-learned, and Paul had to put him right! What kind of learner am I... slow and reluctant? How can I change this?

#### ***Apolos – quick and teachable* Acts 18:24-28**

Apolos was a bit of a genius; he came from a centre of academic learning – Alexandria, the Oxford or Harvard of the Roman world. There is at least an even chance that Apolos wrote the letter to the Hebrews but when Priscilla and Aquila first heard him preach in Ephesus they looked at each other and thought "This guy's good but he needs help". His theology was excellent but he seems to have been confused about baptism.

The couple I've just mentioned were a significant pair in the early church and whenever they are mentioned the woman, Priscilla, is always mentioned first. Just as we would think of Margaret and Dennis Thatcher and not the other way 'round, it seems that Priscilla had the more obvious or public gift. So when they took Apolos aside to help him develop a more accurate theology I think it is safe to assume that Priscilla did most of the talking.

This gives you a clue to Apolos' character. Though a highly educated male, he was prepared to allow himself to be instructed by a female with a less exalted academic background. Apolos had *a teachable spirit*.

Do you have a teachable spirit? Do you cultivate it – are you always ready to listen and to learn?

What was the result of all this learning for Peter and Apolos? The result of growing knowledge was liberation from legalism and prejudice in Peter's case and an increased usefulness in Apolos' case. When Priscilla and Aquila met Apolos, he was good but more study of the scriptures made him great.

### **How to get knowledge**

Do you want this for yourself? Well here's how. First, you need to cultivate a sense of wonder and curiosity: then you need to feed your mind.

What did Jesus mean when he said (literally) “anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will not enter into it”?<sup>2</sup> Children can be very trusting – and that is a lovely picture of the simple faith we ought to show towards Jesus. But is there more to it than this? A couple of years ago Jonny Depp starred in a film of the life of J.M. Barrie, author of *PeterPan*. In an interview for a movie magazine something Depp said caught my eye.

*Of course, the notion is beautiful; the idea of staying a boy or a child forever. But I think you really can. I've known plenty of people in their later years that were like little kids, had the energy of little children, the curiosity and fascination. I think we can keep that. It's important we keep that.*

**Empire Magazine 2004**

Jonny Depp's comment made me think of Jesus words. What makes kids such wonderful kingdom material is their curiosity and their energy. If you are eating something nice kids come up to you and say... what? If you are doing something interesting kids come up to you and say... what? And kids are always asking questions like... what?

You can't even *become* Christian unless you are curious, like a child. You look at others and think, “Can I have some of that?” You watch them doing what Christians

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 10:13-16

do and say “Can I come with you?” And you can’t grow in knowledge unless you maintain a curiosity about the world around you and about God’s word... what’s does that say... why does this happen... what is on the next page?

If you want to grow in knowledge you must become childlike, open, teachable and curious about things then you need to feed your mind.

Here’s a word of encouragement; you are smarter than you think! Here’s some things you can do:

First, read or listen to people who can teach you what you don’t yet know. Don’t be afraid to stretch yourself. Always have a good book on the go.

Second, read or listen to people you are not likely to agree with. This prevents the ‘hardening of the mental arteries’ that you see in some extreme Christians.

Third, talk about what you are learning with a cell group or with a co-mentor.

Third, get out and do things. As you practice faith so your thirst for understanding increases. We learn as we experience.