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1-800-611-8080 / www.cgom.org
PO Box 54621, Tulsa, OK 74155-0621

THE KNOWLEDGE THAT COUNTS

Is it possible to know the Bible inside out - and still miss the point of it?

Has the Church of God complete knowledge of the truth?

How important is "doctrine" to the Christian life?

by James McBride

Former Russian leader Nikita Khrushchev reportedly could recite the entire New Testament word for word. Thousands of accomplished and eminent scholars have researched and dissected the whole Bible, and have amassed an awesome knowledge of its content. Yet Khrushchev and many of these same scholars would disdain the label "Christian". Some scholars even profess atheism as their "faith"! For such the Scriptures are mere literature. They don't seek out doctrine as a guide to life. All too many Christians reflect a similar approach to doctrine!

The Value of Knowledge

It's clear from the Scriptures that Jesus Christ seeks "perfection" in his people. We must become "*all glorious with no stain or wrinkle or anything of the sort, but holy and without blemish*" (Ephesians 5:27). That is, we are to mature spiritually, to become holy - to "*grow in grace*", as the apostle Peter words it (II Peter 3:18).

However, he also charges us to "*grow in knowledge*". It's the responsibility of God's people to search out from the Scriptures the golden nuggets of pure and wholesome doctrine. And certainly over the years this Church has mined rich treasures of knowledge, unchallengedly derived from the Word of God. We have insight into Bible teachings that for centuries have lain buried in the sinking sands of tradition.

This is no mere academic exercise. For if we are to be truly free, if we are to develop holiness and joy in Christ, if we are to follow the leading of the Spirit - then we need to grow in knowledge.

"*The truth*" said Jesus, "*shall make you free*" (John 8:32). As an example of this freedom, a right understanding of what happens at death in large measure removes death's sting. Our joy in Christ is enhanced by the true doctrine of what at death befalls our "unsaved" loved ones, or the billions of adults and countless children who died not

knowing Jesus.

And how can we "*become holy*" if our doctrine of true holiness is at fault? The word "holy" signifies separation - separated and belonging to God. As God explained to Moses "*...you shall remember all the Lord's commands and obey them, and not go your own wanton ways, led astray by your own eyes and hearts. This token is to ensure that you remember all my commands and obey them, and be holy unto your God. I am the Lord your God*" (Numbers 15: 39-41). True holiness isn't a "sainted look" at a religious celebration. It is submission to what God requires of us! He is jealous, demanding loyalty and obedience of His people. Indeed, a true Christian is a "slave" of Jesus Christ.

It is by searching out and following God's way of holiness as detailed in His Word - not what our own desires dictate - that we learn true holiness. This is knowledge beyond price.

Blemished Fruits

Is the Church, then, doctrinally perfect? Do we now have it all sewn up? Is there no further need for the Holy Spirit's guidance into truth? The fact is, never in history have God's people known the whole truth.

To this day there are stains to remove, wrinkles to iron out. Here and there may be blemished doctrinal fruits. But does the farmer fell the tree because of a few damaged peaches? Does the owner raze his home because of a few warped timbers? Or is minor injury or sickness a valid reason for taking your life? So it is with the Church of God. As a body it is healthy, vigorous, strong and abounding in the work of the Lord. But as long as the church organism is in the flesh there will be warts! Doctrinal blemishes are inevitable.

Jesus promised to preserve his church - it will never die,

never be extinguished from without. Sometimes it is highly visible, sometimes all but eclipsed. But always there will be new Christians to stand where others have died or been martyred or gone astray. The Church continues, however imperfectly, to fulfil its divine commission: to proclaim repentance and deliverance, to make disciples, to warn sinning mankind of the end result of its chosen way, to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God.

Doctrinal imperfection, however, is not solely a twentieth century affliction. It has dogged the Church for two thousand years! God's people have never known all. Nor can we expect today's Church to solve every theological difficulty that has plagued it since its inception.

Notice some of the doctrinal blind spots of God's saints both of the Old Testament and the New. Errors which in no way invalidated their inheritance in the Kingdom of God.

A Universal Faith

Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Daniel - stalwarts of Bible history - had a far from perfect understanding of the truths of God. Yet they will be a part of His ruling Family.

These esteemed men of God did not, for example, fully understand a teaching which in our day is a flagship doctrine of Christianity - that God wants all men to be saved. He waited some four thousand years before making this fundamental truth crystal clear. Here's how the apostle Paul recounts its unveiling: "*It was by a revelation that his secret was made known to me. In former generations this was not disclosed to the human race; but now it has been revealed by inspiration to his dedicated apostles and prophets, that through the Gospel the Gentiles are joint-heirs with the Jews - part of the same body, sharers together in the promise made in Christ Jesus*" (Ephesians 3:3-6).

God welcomes Gentiles. Yet not even the first century martyr Stephen knew this!

Circumcision

Then there's circumcision. It's a rare Christian who would consider circumcision to be essential to the life in Christ. Yet this concept smouldered in the Church for some twenty years before bursting into a flame that scorched Church unity. It was passionately believed by some influential members of the prestigious and august mother Church at Jerusalem. They even thought Gentiles could not be saved without circumcision. Paul hurriedly convened a conference to determine God's intent - and God's Spirit in them led them to see it as unnecessary (Acts 15:28).

But whose salvation was annulled because until then they had believed "*they must be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses*"? Certainly not the apostle James - martyred some seven years before (Acts 12:2). And indeed not any of God's people prior to the Council of Jerusalem. God

certainly wants His people to move towards purity of doctrine, direction of "all truth". He wants us, like little children, to be teachable. It's our resistance to clear truths of Scripture that brings His just judgment upon us.

Prophetic Truth

What then of prophecy? Isn't prophetic understanding a mark of "the true Church"? Surely this is necessary!

If so, then we must exclude a whole galaxy of glittering saints - Abraham, Moses, David, Paul to name but a handful. Then there's Daniel. Surely he of all people understood every twist and turn of prophecy? God gave him skill in all knowledge and wisdom. And he "*had understanding in all visions and dreams*". Did he therefore "know it all"? Judge for yourself, from his own pen: "*And I heard but I did not understand*" (Daniel 12:8). What Daniel saw in vision, and recorded, puzzled him! Indeed he was told to "*Seal the book, even to the time of the end*" (v.4).

In fact it wasn't till the apostle John received the visions recorded in the book of Revelation that a right understanding of end-time prophecy even became possible. This was towards the end of the first century, John alone surviving. Yet without this vital book the detail and sequence of prophecy is sealed to our understanding.

The apostle Paul, for instance, wrote at length about resurrection. But not until John pencilled in the details did it become clear there will be more than one future mass resurrection, each separated by many years.

Peter wrote of earth's "*being kept in store, reserved unto fire...*" - but John's visions are needed for us to see this awesome conflagration in its time context.

John outlived all the other apostles. So it's likely even they were in ignorance of the full scope of the prophecies.

The Churches of God believe we have a sound grasp of the overall direction of future events - knowledge gleaned from long years of study of the Scriptures and history, and guided by God's Spirit. But we "sit lightly in the saddle" - we won't know with absolute certainty until all is fulfilled. Or not!

Wrote Paul: "*Whether there be prophecies they shall fail For our knowledge and our prophecy alike are partial, and the partial vanishes when the wholeness comes.... Now we see only puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we shall see face to face*" (I Corinthians 13:8).

The apostle - God's channel for so much "new truth" - admits his prophetic understanding is incomplete. Isn't it clear that an incomplete knowledge of prophecy won't exclude us from the Family of God! Yet whole denominations originate in the prophetic scenario

concocted by one person.

Time To Change

More important, though, than this failure through ignorance or misunderstanding is another type of prophetic failure. Jesus himself warned of it. Prophecy isn't annulled because it is not fulfilled according to our expectations - especially in regard to the *time* element. How many intricate schemes have been drafted - and torn up - in regard to when this or that prophecy would be fulfilled! Countless hours, miles of print, have been consumed on this vain pursuit.

But Jesus also said, speaking of his return to reward his servants: *"But if he is a bad servant and says to himself, 'The master is a long time coming' and begins to bully the other servants, and to eat and drink with his drunken friends, then the master will arrive on a day that servant does not expect, at a time he does not know, and will cut him in pieces"* (Matthew 24: 26-51).

In other words, the prophecies will come to pass in God's time and in God's way despite our incomplete knowledge.

But notice the vital importance of what Jesus Christ went on to say: *"the master...will cut him in pieces. Thus he will find his place among the hypocrites"* (v.51). Why? Because he misinterpreted the prophecies? Not at all. The bottom line is that our reaction to "prophetic failure" - as we see it - is the key to our personal future. If, when Jesus returns, we are found (however late according to our private interpretation) still totally absorbed in doing our allotted tasks in His work - then we are blessed. We will share in the Kingdom of God (vv.46-47).

The alternative (v.51) is horrific.

Is Doctrine Important?

Jesus - in whom, said Paul, *"lie hidden all God's treasures of wisdom and knowledge"* and who has *"all power"* - assured his Church he would never forsake it (Matthew 28:20). He is the living Head of the Church and walks in its midst. Without committing himself to preserving the Church (nor any individual of whatever standing) from error Jesus in a very real way guides and directs and corrects it - just as he did in apostolic times (Revelation 2, 3).

Sadly, since the earliest days of the Church - and to this day - many Christians have ceased to respond to the Head. They are at sea, anchors dragging and without compass or bearings. And doctrinally lost.

Such a calamity can indeed happen. Throughout history whole Christian communities and individual Christians, whole denominations, have been shipwrecked through gross error, or moral decline, or refusal to grow in knowledge - or simple neglect of what they understood.

The words of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, still ring loud and clear. Addressing the leadership of the people of God in his day he said *"...you always fight against the Holy Spirit"* (Acts 7:51).

The Church of God in first-century Pergamon is an example for today's Church. Jesus first commended them for not denying his basic teachings. He then warned them not to entertain those who *"...hold to the teachings [doctrines] of Balaam...and of the Nicolaitaines"* (Revelation 2:14-15). These teachings concerned idolatrous worship - not serving God in the way and at the times He prescribed. It's a doctrine close to God's heart.

And if change were not evident? *"So - repent,"* said Jesus. *"If you do not I will come to you soon and make war upon them with the sword that comes out of my mouth"* (v.16). So it is important that we do all in our power to get right the true faith.

Jesus has not left his Church rudderless or without guidance. Notice his words to the apostles: *"There is still much that I could say to you, but the burden would be too great for you now. However, when he comes who is the Spirit of truth, he will guide you into all truth"* John 16: 12-13).

Against all odds this guidance to the apostles has been preserved for us - in the Holy Scriptures.

That Spirit of truth is still in the Church of God, still guiding it. And step by step, as the Church is open to it and ready for it he expands our understanding of these same Scriptures. It's our responsibility to seek out and maintain true doctrine.

While we are nowhere promised - in this life - a complete unveiling of the mind of God, we have been furnished with the essentials for eternal life. *"His divine power"*, wrote the apostle Peter, *"has bestowed upon us everything that makes for true life and religion"* (II Peter 1:3). Jesus Christ is committed to reveal to his Church every scrap of information that will expedite his work on earth. And all the power needed to enable the people of God to enter the Family of God.

What Counts?

It's clear, then, that every single one of God's people recorded in Scripture, with the sole exception of Jesus Christ himself, has lived in error to some degree.

While the Church taught circumcision, or proclaimed salvation for Jews only, or had incomplete understanding of the doctrine of resurrection, or misunderstood prophecy - at that time the Church was in error. Or was at best teaching incomplete knowledge. Yet a man like Noah, with his family, alone survived a worldwide flood - without complete knowledge. It is recorded of him: *"By faith Noah,*

divinely warned about the unseen future, took good heed and built an ark to save his household" (Hebrews 11:7). He had but a glimmer of light about the coming Messiah and of God's grand design for mankind. But he died in faith, and will be rewarded at Christ's coming.

Lot, termed "*a righteous man*", fled Sodom's destruction unscathed having only limited knowledge of God's plan and purpose. He simply trusted God.

Then there's Abraham who sacrificed his career, his family, his civilized life-style and "*went out not knowing whither he went*". He wrote, as it were, a blank cheque acknowledging God's claim on the whole of his life. For a hundred years he surmounted trial after trial.

He resisted every imaginable pressure to opt out. Yet he endured, dying with the unique epitaph "*the friend of God*". And without perfect knowledge.

What set these men apart and gave them high esteem with God? Was it that they fully understood doctrine? Or prophecy? Did they comprehend the whole mind of God?

By no means. What counted with these men - and with a countless host of other men and women of God - was their willing submission to what they understood, coupled with the quality of their lives. Typical of them all were God's satisfied words concerning Abraham: "*For I know him that he will command his children and his household after him and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment*" (Genesis 18:19). Years later God gave majestic promises to Abraham's son "*because that Abraham kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes and my laws*" (26:5).

They lacked complete doctrinal and prophetic knowledge. But once called of God they walked with Him. They committed to obedience to His laws according to the knowledge they had. They diligently sought out truth and obeyed what they understood. And they lived - and died - by faith.

This is what counts with God!

Crusade With Us

Today, Christianity is sorely divided. Traditional denominations can't, for example, even agree a common date for Christmas or Easter. Other traditions also split over not only the calendar, but when to observe festivals on that calendar. Clearly, when sincere Bible students can "incubate different offspring from the same egg" it's likely it's not a matter which greatly bothers the egg's producer the Author of the Word!

The Church of God must focus on its divinely-appointed purpose. Tunnel vision focused on disputed doctrinal territory leads only to war. Swollen egos are puffed up as exegetical swords are crossed. Rather, let's concentrate on the foundation truths of God's Word and unite to reach out to a dying world with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Let's focus on the knowledge that counts!

Soon Jesus Christ will return to our planet as Supreme Ruler over every government. With him he will bring rewards for work accomplished by his people. Doctrinal perfection won't be among those works! When this momentous event occurs - will you be found still labouring in his vineyard, still abounding in the work of the Lord despite prophetic appearances? Will he find you have given him your all, dedicated your spiritual and creative and temporal resources to him? Will you have submerged your desire to "get it right" in wholehearted support for the global mission of God's Church, in promoting the true unity of the Church? Will Jesus Christ find you active in your allotted task?

Or will you have abandoned the work of God in a fit of pique because of some error - real or imagined, doctrinal or prophetic - in one or other part of the Church of God? Will you embrace gross error simply because your leader asserts "we were wrong"?

True knowledge is important, and our doctrinal understanding may yet lack perfection. It may be incomplete. Nevertheless let's all take up the challenge of reaching out to our dying world with the bitter-sweet message of the true Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Let's give our best shot to this magnificent crusade!

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