The Christian Way of Knowing

BY JONATHAN R. WILSON

The Christian 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.

hat can we know? How do we know it? How do we know that we know it? Can we be certain that we know what we claim to know? When people claim to know something, are they merely giving us their interpretation in order to preserve their power and protect their interests? These are the questions about knowledge that modernity and postmodernity press upon us.

Does the gospel of Jesus Christ provide us with any guidance in this cultural situation? I will argue that the Christian 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 culture.

Most of us are not accustomed to thinking of faith *as a virtue*, and this renders us vulnerable to the dangers of modernity and postmodernity.

We are susceptible to the dangers of modernity when we think of faith merely as a mental act of assent to a list of propositions, such as a statement of faith. In this view humans may be reduced to disembodied minds who know "objective truth." But what we Christians know by faith is a person, Jesus Christ. Certainly the propositions are essential to identifying Jesus Christ, but they are not the object of our faith. Moreover, 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. This does not lead to a vicious subjectivity but to an understanding of the virtue of faith as personal.

We may be susceptible to the dangers of postmodernity when we think of faith as merely a volitional act of trust in Jesus Christ. In this view, humans may be reduced to "the will to power." Faith, in this instance, is the destruction of my will by God's will. But when we know Jesus Christ by faith, our will is not defeated but transformed. Certainly the bondage of our will to sin is broken, but it is broken so that we may be set free to do the will of God.

As a virtue, faith is the means by which we come to know Jesus Christ and we are transformed in our knowing. Faith transforms our whole way of being: it becomes the habit by which we live and know. By this habituation in faith we grow in knowledge and are better able to be faithful witnesses to the gospel in the midst of modernity and postmodernity.

KNOWLEDGE IN MODERNITY AND POSTMODERNITY

Where modernity is optimistic and confident about the possibilities of human knowing, postmodernity is pessimistic and skeptical. Against modernity's understanding of knowledge as objective and impersonal correspondence with reality, postmodernity argues that knowledge is an interpretation of reality or, more radically, a construction of reality. Against modernity's quest for certainty in knowledge, postmodernity stresses the uncertainty that attends all forms of knowledge. Against modernity's supposedly disinterested search for truth, postmodernity exposes the quest for power and the protection of power inherent in any claim to knowledge.

Since we live in a time of cultural change marked by the breaking down of modernity, we can best identify the problematic nature of knowledge in our culture and the challenges it presents by attending to the postmodernist understanding of knowledge. Two central postmodern views of knowledge prevail: knowledge as interpretation and knowledge as power.

A prolific and influential advocate for the first view is Richard Rorty. In place of the modernist view of knowledge as the correspondence between our mental notions and an external reality, Rorty argues in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) that knowledge is an interpretation by which we are edified. He calls us to maintain an ongoing conversation among competing interpretations. This will not lead us to truth, but to other interpretations, which will lead to still other interpretations...*ad infinitum*. The aim of this conversation is not truth but a more humane society.

Something similar to this view marks our everyday lives whenever we operate with the conviction that "everyone is entitled to his or her own opinion." This conviction typically reflects the underlying judgments either that truth is unobtainable or that it is more important to keep the peace than to challenge a statement. These two judgments reflect precisely Rorty's arguments that (1) truth is trivial and (2) the aim of philosophy is to keep the conversation going in order to form a more humane society. Another way of putting the latter would be to agree with Rorty that democracy is more important than philosophy—that getting along and letting each person have his or her say matters more than arriving at the truth.

Intertwined with this claim that knowledge is interpretation is a second

challenge to the traditional understanding of knowledge. If knowledge is simply one interpretation or construction of reality among other competing interpretations or constructions of reality produced by a person, community, or tradition, then knowledge is not access to reality. Instead, claims to knowledge merely represent access to, or attempts to access, power on behalf of a person, community, or tradition. In this situation knowledge is anything that I can get others to accept as true or that gains power for me, my community or my tradition. This acceptance forms an "interpretive community" that then becomes a base for extending power.

This struggle for power marks many debates about social issues and government policy. Today politics is marked not by a concern with truth but by a concern with what the public perceives to be true. As a result, our social policy debates are shaped by innumerable polls of public opinion that enable us to form bases of power.

Together these postmodern attacks on modernity's understanding of knowledge can cause us great anxiety. Truth, it seems, can be twisted into anything that advances my interpretation of reality and my quest for power. Conflicts are resolved not by our mutual capitulation to "the truth" but only by the dominance or victory of one side or another.¹

Deepening this distress is the loss of belief in knowledge as a path to certainty. Modernity's quest for knowledge was ultimately an optimistic quest for certainty about the world and humanity's place in the world. But if knowledge is an interpretation of how I propose, or my community proposes, to view reality, and if such claims to knowledge are an exercise of power, then we must also abandon as hopeless the traditional quest for knowledge that is certain. As a result, the postmodern age is marked by deep skepticism about the certainty of human knowledge. The best that we can hope for, it seems, is that those who gain power will create a more humane world.

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.

In this situation we face three temptations that may lead us astray, away from faithful witness to the gospel.

The first temptation lures us into support for modernity. Faced with the relativism of postmodernity, we may we believe that the only way to talk about truth is in the language and categories of modernity. We may conclude that the survival of witness to the truth of the gospel depends on the survival of modernity. But (as I argue below) the categories of modernity are not the only way to argue about truth or to witness to the gospel.

Indeed, modernity has often exercised a corrupting influence on Christian witness to the gospel. For example, modernity views knowledge as a mental act by which we grasp an object or, more broadly, an objective reality. Christian faith, however, is not knowledge of an object or an objective reality in the modernist sense; rather, it is knowing and being known by a subject, a person Jesus Christ.

The second temptation lures us in two ways into wholehearted support for postmodernity. On the one hand, we may support postmodernity because we see it as a way of reintroducing Christianity into Western intellectual life. If everyone's opinion is equally valid, then Christian convictions are as valid as anyone else's. What right, on postmodern grounds, has the academy or any other intellectual endeavor to exclude Christianity? Second, postmodernity's turn from knowledge to personal feeling may seem tailor-made for Christian witness. The unprecedented quest for spiritual experience in our society is illustrated by bestsellers such as Eckhard Tolle's *The Power of Now* and *A New Earth*. We may be tempted to package the gospel as an answer to this 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.

The third temptation that we face is more subtle: it lures us to accept the ground on which the debate is being engaged. At present the debate is about knowledge—more specifically about *how* we know what we know—not about *what* or *whom* we know.

One hallmark of modernity is the number of attempts to provide a theory that will unify our knowledge and guarantee its certainty. A hallmark of postmodernity is the number of attacks on these quests for epistemological certainty. But as I will argue in my account of the virtue of faith, the solution for Christians to get beyond the objectivism of modernity and the relativism threatened by postmodernity is not to begin with a quest for another—" new and improved"—epistemology. Rather, we must turn once again to the gospel to discover the "Christian way of knowing" taught by faith.

FAITH AS PERSONAL

Four aspects of New Testament faith will guide our account of the relationship between the virtue of faith and the Christian way of knowing: faith is personal, a gift, communal, and cosmic in scope.²

Jesus Christ is the ground and goal of faith. If we through faith are to know Jesus Christ as a person, then the virtue of faith must be personal—not in the sense of "private" but in the sense that it involves our whole being. Faith transforms us as persons. It is not merely the transformation of what we know or how we know, nor is it merely an act of the will. Rather, faith is the habituation of the whole person in life with Jesus Christ and by

the power of the Holy Spirit, such that our very way of assenting and consenting is transformed.

This implies that our knowing cannot be reduced to a mental act. We do not know other persons as persons by turning them into concepts or ideas, nor do we know them as persons through a purely mental act of our own. Rather, we know them through their whole way of life as persons, through our whole being as persons.

Against modernity, saying that faith is personal teaches us that our knowing cannot be reduced to a detached, objective stance. Persons are known, as Martin Buber famously reminded us, through I-Thou, not I-It, relationships. This does not lead to a vicious subjectivity but to a relationship of subject to subject. If we are to remain faithful to the gospel, we must not reduce our knowledge of Christ to a subject-object relationship or, in the worst manifestations of modernity, an object-object relationship, where an impersonal mind knows an impersonal concept. Rather, our knowing Christ, which comes as we are habituated in faith, is a subject-subject relationship. This way of knowing depends not on an objective, detached, neutral stance but on the passionate commitment of our whole being.

Against the postmodernist claim that since objective knowledge is not possible therefore knowledge is not possible, the virtue of faith teaches that all true knowing is found through the person of Jesus Christ. As Lesslie Newbigin argues, "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."

FAITH AS A GIFT

Faith in the person of Jesus Christ comes not through human initiative or achievement but by God's gift. This conception of faith as a gift teaches much about the Christian way of knowing. For those who are new persons in Christ, all knowing is a gift; it is the result of humility, not pride, and therefore should lead to humility, not pride. Humility, not enlightenment, is the first step toward the Christian way of knowing.

This runs directly counter to the modernist view that knowledge is achieved through human effort in our quest to master the world. This account also equips us to respond in three ways to postmodernist skepticism which, from the breakdown of the modernist conception of knowledge, draws the conclusion that claims to knowledge are interpretations and disguised bids for power. First, Christians offer an alternative conception of the path to knowing – knowing as a gift, not an achievement. Second, we reject the claim that knowledge is mere interpretation. The Christian way of knowing and the knowledge that comes by way of that knowing are given by God in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Yes, we are called to the task of

interpretation, but that task is supremely the task of interpreting the world according to the gospel of Jesus Christ, not interpreting the gospel to fit the demands of the world. In other words, the gospel, by the power of the Holy Spirit, teaches, reminds, convicts, and guides. Third, we refuse to enter the contest for power. Gifts cannot be forced on anyone, they can only be offered. These are difficult disciplines to practice, but they are necessary expressions of the peaceableness that marks those who know that their lives and all their knowing have been given to them.

Thus the virtue of faith as a gift equips us to resist nostalgia for modernity and to witness faithfully to the gospel in a postmodern age.

FAITH AS COMMUNAL

The gift of faith comes to us from God through a community which is unlike any other, namely, the disciple community. Certainly the Church is a human community, an "earthen vessel." But it is also the body of Christ whose telos—the redemption of creation through the work of Christ—is not created by human beings or achieved by human effort.

Only in the disciple community do we find the gifts of the Spirit which are necessary to the formation of faith. In this community the diverse gifts of the Spirit complement each other and keep our knowledge of the gospel alive, enabling us to discern the work of the gospel today, participate in that work, and be formed by our participation in it.

This claim corrects our tendency to concentrate responsibility for knowing in one area of giftedness or in one office of the community. Certainly the Church needs intellectuals, theologians, and teachers. But it also needs administrators who insure that everyone's voice is heard, the merciful who attach ideas to people, prophets who are sensitive to new direction from the Spirit of God, and so on. Only when this diversity of gifts is honored does the Church embody the Christian way of knowing. This deepens the significance of humility as the first step in Christian knowing and teaches the indispensability of charity toward others and engenders a profound practice of friendship.

Although this call to the virtue of faith as communal reflects a Christian transformation of one aspect of postmodernity—namely, the claim by many postmodernists that our knowing is inescapably communal—it corrects other tendencies of postmodernity that threaten faithfulness to the gospel. First, against the postmodernist tendency to view communities in terms of an interminable power struggle, it reminds us that our communal knowing is a gift to be shared, not a power to be imposed. Second, against the fear that postmodernity leads to a vicious relativism, the practice of faith as communal affirms that knowing is relative to a particular telos, Jesus Christ. Finally, against the fear that postmodernity leads to subjectivity, the practice of faith as communal forces us to rely on the Spirit-gifted community, not on ourselves as individuals.

FAITH AS COSMIC IN SCOPE

Since the disciple community witnesses to and serves the Christ who promises the redemption of creation, the virtue of faith changes our stance toward the entire creation. This assertion has its roots in the Apostle Paul's cosmic Christology, most clearly expressed in his letter to the Colossians: "[Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the first born 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" (1:15-17), and "in [Christ] are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (2:3).

We may think that Paul surely does not mean that we can know such things as geography, psychology, and calculus through Christ, but if we consider faith as a virtue, we can see how he claims precisely that. Of course, Paul does not mean that 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.

Paul asserts that "through [Christ] God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things" (Colossians 1:20). This is the reality of all things: they need reconciliation to God, and that reconciliation has been accomplished through Jesus Christ. We may "know" all sorts of things, but we do not know them truly until we know this momentous truth: through Christ God has reconciled them to himself. This knowledge comes only as we know ourselves to be reconciled to Christ. When we know the person of Christ through the gift of faith in the community of the Spirit, then and only then can we begin to know all things.

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. It also means that everything we know must be shaped by the virtue of faith. No area of human knowledge escapes the claims of faith as a virtue.

Against the secularization of modernity that isolates faith in one particular sphere and denies it the status of knowledge, the virtue of faith as cosmic teaches us that we only know those "other" things if we know them by faith. Where modernity alienates the knower from the known and then struggles vainly to overcome that alienation through epistemology, faith declares that all things have been reconciled in Christ and that through that reconciliation we can know all things in their proper relationship to God.

Against the postmodernist capitulation to alienation and its abandonment of epistemology in favor of the will to power, the virtue of faith as cosmic again witnesses to the reconciliation of all things in and through Christ. Against the postmodemist rejection of metanarratives (accounts of the cosmos), the virtue of faith teaches that the gospel is a metanarrative of reconciliation, not an ill-disguised bid for power.

CONCLUSION

To the question "What can we know?" Christians who are habituated in faith answer, "It's not what you know, it's who you know." And we ask in response, "Do you know Jesus Christ?" To the question "How do we know?" Christians respond, "By the gift of faith in Jesus Christ." And we ask in return, "Do you have that faith?" To the question "How can we be certain of what we know?" faith teaches us to respond, "Certainty is not grounded in human powers but in God's gift and the gifts of the disciple community." And we ask, "Are you a member of that community?"

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. 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.⁶

NOTES

1 This result is not necessarily the intention of postmodernist thinkers, but it seems to be where the situation that they describe leads. Most postmodern thinkers do not recognize where we are headed because they lack a doctrine of sin, and they have no saving response because they lack hope for redemption.

2 Though they do not use the language of virtue, two accounts powerfully argue positions similar to mine: Julian N. Hartt, "The Principle of Faith," in *A Christian Critique of American Culture: An Essay in Practical Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 145-164; and Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991).

3 Newbigin, 36.

4 John Howard Yoder gives a practical description of this process in *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 15-45.

5 In other contexts Christians would add, "It's not (just) who you know, it's (also) who knows you." J. L. Packer writes in *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 37: "What matters supremely, therefore, is not, in the last analysis, the fact that I know God, but the larger fact which underlies it — the fact that *He knows me...*. All my knowledge of him depends upon his sustained initiative in knowing me."

6 This article is based on chapter three in my book *Gospel Virtues: Practicing Faith, Hope & Love in Uncertain Times* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 49-71.



JONATHAN R. WILSON

is Pioneer McDonald Professor of Theology at Carey Theological College in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.