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PROLOGUE

In regione caecorum rex est luscus.

“In the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is king.”

Erasmus, *Adagia*

During the Middle Ages, a Northumbrian monk known to us as the Venerable Bede attempted to reconcile his lunar calculations of the dates of Easter with the solar-based Julian calendar then in use. To his dates he added the Latin words *anno Domini* (translated into ordinary English as “the Year of Our Lord”), later shortened to “A.D.” in official records. The reckoning of his years was based on an imprecise calculation of the date of Christ’s birth.

I never gave much thought to the import of the phrase *anno Domini* until a few months ago when comparing biblical references between the “day of the Lord” and the “year of the Lord.” They have completely opposite significations yet are connected at a crucial hinge of moral resolve: to turn away from God and thereby invite existential catastrophe, or to turn toward Him and enter into abundant life.

When Jesus read in the synagogue at Nazareth, he chose a passage from the prophet Isaiah announcing good tidings to the broken-hearted, the afflicted, and to those in bondage. He stopped short of reading the entire passage, though. Had he continued, he would have proclaimed both “... the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God ...” His then-appearing was not the harbinger of vengeance, though, but the proclamation of an auspicious age.

KNOWING GOD

“Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me?”

JOHN 14:9

“**T**he inward knowledge of God.” The words rang through my thoughts like a carillon at Easter! I had pondered the idea many times, but this time the words danced within me and I *knew*. Here at last my lifelong quest to understand the central point of the Christian journey shone in simple clarity—so simple that it is probably the very reason I had overlooked it. I had been reading from an old tract that, as I now saw it, covered the prime question of our existence in one fell swoop: “What is God’s highest intent for us?” The author unpacked the answer like this:

It is of the greatest importance for the Lord’s children to recognise fully that above all other things, His object is that they should know Him. This is the all-governing end of all His dealings with us. This is the greatest of all our needs.

It is the secret of strength, steadfastness, and service. It determines the measure of our usefulness to Him. ... It was the secret of the life, service, endurance, confidence of the Lord Jesus as Son of man.¹

That explanation has proven to be more sufficient than I ever

1. T. Austin-Sparks, “On Knowing the Lord,” Testimony Book Ministry, Bethesda, Maryland, n.d.

dreamed when I first began searching out the meaning of life in my early teens. The fulfillment of our calling in Christ has less to do with attaining anything for God than with simply knowing Him. The apostle Paul—whose sentences remain among the most undiagrammable in all of literature—laid it out like this:²

Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, ... that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection [*exanastasis*]³ from the dead. (PHIL. 3:8-11, RSV)

To truly understand what this means, it is needful to peel back the layers of what has superficially been passed off in Christian circles as “knowing God.”

The New Testament is the crisis of humanity. Have you thought of Christianity like that? Or have you thought of Christianity, well, in its parts, its fragments: atonement for a man’s sin, man’s personal salvation, man’s securing of eternal hope and glory—all the parts of salvation; we have made so much of them. Well, you cannot make too much of the parts, of course, until you reach the point where the parts become less than the whole. And, dear friends, we have got to re-adjust our conception and idea of Christianity at this point, to see that with the coming of the Lord Jesus, a crisis in the whole history of human-

2. Ellipses have been added to boil the apostle’s words down to their simplest sense.

3. The Greek word *anastasis* is always translated as “resurrection” in English. Paul’s use of the word *exanastasis* here is unique in the New Testament. He has added the preposition *ek* (which means “out from”) to the ordinary word *anastasis*: He is not referring here to the general resurrection of believers, but to the first resurrection described in REV. 20:4. (See p. 74 for more on this doctrinal fine point.)

ity is reached. It is the crisis of the final word of rejection of a humanity, a kind of man, and the introduction of an entirely different kind of Humanity with the Person of Jesus Christ. When you grasp that, you know your whole Bible is going to come alive; it will come alive.

What have we come into? What is regeneration? You call it conversion, being “born again,” or you call it regeneration. What is it? It’s generation into another Humanity; altogether different; as a member of a different race of creatures, a different species of Humanity. With the New Testament this immense crisis in human history is introduced.⁴

Once we realize what “knowing God” is *not*, it becomes clearer what it actually *is*. It is a process of transitioning from an earthly humanity to a heavenly one. In fact, the clearer we are on this matter, the more apparent it becomes that the scriptural promises we are told we must claim, the works we are told we must do, and the miracles we are told real faith accomplishes are completely illegitimate notions if their foundation rests upon any other central fact.

I say the heart where the Old Testament ends and the New Testament begins, two halves of human history, two halves of human history, of humanity, right there at that point we come on this great, this immense transition. The New Testament is wholly taken up with the meaning and nature, and fact of this transition; this movement from one thing to another in humanity.⁵

The importance of knowing God is so central to all that concerns us spiritually, that Paul implored his Roman brothers twice in the same epistle to draw close to God by whatever means necessary, even to the laying down of their own lives while they yet lived. He was speaking of more than the cessation of physical life.

4. T. Austin-Sparks, *The Great Transition from One Humanity to Another* (austin-sparks.net, accessed 15 Nov 2024).

5. *Ibid.*

THE NATURAL REVELATION OF GOD

*... That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him,
and find him, though he be not far from every one of us.*

ACTS 17:27

For many years I tried to construct in my head a visual and linguistic model to help me comprehend the Holy Trinity of the Godhead. It was like trying to hold everything and nothing in the mind all at once. The closest I ever came to imagining such a thing never produced more than a ghostly picture that quickly disintegrated like fog on a sunny day. But somewhere I ran across a Coptic essay suggesting the idea of God as a “consuming fire (HEB. 12:20).” That sparked something brand new for me.

It is easy to understand the Trinitarian concept through the metaphor of fire. From the flame proceed the light and the heat, just as the Son and the Spirit both proceed from the Father. And as the light and the heat cannot exist apart from the flame, neither can the Son and the Spirit exist apart from the Father. To see the light is to see the flame; to see the Son is to see the Father (JOHN 14:9). Just as the heat is felt but not seen, so the Holy Spirit (like the wind of JOHN 3:8), is also felt but not seen. Light, heat, and flame, though separately perceived, exist indivisibly in the substance of fire.

But the natural revelation of the Creator is not limited to purely symbolic inferences. I described back in the first chapter how I became aware of a force in the world that wants everything to live. The same idea must surely have occurred to *some* botanists, biologists, and others working closely with multiple kinds of life forms (though

• **Performance-based religion:** *Career-type ministry; ordinary life completely absorbed or hog-tied by the need to have a ministry.*

Some callings do entail long, dedicated periods in which ministry is all-consuming, but here we are mostly concerned with the *obsessive pursuit* of being in some kind—*any* kind—of ministry. Church planting, discipling, counseling, and many other activities are common outlets for performance-based religion, for these can all be carried on without help from the Spirit of God. Individual motivations vary greatly. Some wounded souls become involved in ministry because they find affirmation and identity in doing so. Others are boldly greedy, ambitious, and enjoy control over others. I believe these are common contributors to the rise of false ministries, gifts, and teachings.

Sometimes prominent leaders in church groups and organizations are perceived as having a special gift, calling, skill, or power. I'm not sure who loses the most in some cases—those who gather round them in perpetual dependence or those leaders who find their great works burned up at the end (1 COR. 3:12). They typically do not teach those under them to strip off the Old and put on the New because they have never done so themselves. Were that the case, we would not see so many believers today unable to overcome sin, ongoing situations of life, and many ailments of mind and body.

Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds;

And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him: (COL. 3:9-10, *KJV*)

Our primary defense against what is false does not come from a legalistic, squint-eyed examination of everything that presents itself to us, but from holding fast the centrality of Christ in all matters that concern us. For only by standing firm on this ground and refusing to be lodged from it by any word given forth as coming from the Lord are we able to test all things.

Christianity, is taught in such piecemeal fashion today, that it is easy to lose sight of this centrality. An immature believer will often drift into a group with which they have a natural affinity, or, as time goes on, they may sense that something is still missing and continue seeking answers farther afield (this can go on for years). The first instance runs the risk of sinking into mindless habits, beliefs, and expectations based on group practices. The second instance is likely to invite rebukes from one's mentors warning them that if they read unapproved materials, listen to other teachers, or attend meetings with other groups, they will fall into confusion brought about by "church hopping."

They may *well* fall into confusion, because all Christian groups do not speak the same thing and are not joined in the same mind and judgment (1 COR. 1:10). And why are they not? Because they are led by the dead letter of their doctrinal schools of thought, not the cultivation of knowing God directly. If an individual seemingly runs the risk of getting "off" without the continued oversight of one group, consider that groupism does not provide much protection either: Many groups that began well have met with disastrous ends.¹ Therefore it behooves the rest of us to remain vigilant and continue taking all things that concern us to the Lord in prayer.

Ponder the path of thy feet, and let all thy ways be established.

Turn not to the right hand nor to the left: remove thy foot from evil. (Prov. 4:26, 27, *KJV*)

Unfortunately, what I have described throughout this chapter is the normal experience and not the exception. Many have walked away from the faith for reasons that are entirely understandable. What a cruel twist to be "set free" in Christ only to be oppressed again through spiritual fraudulence! Evangelism, ministry, spiritual gifts, and even quibbling over the technicalities of scripture have often become the centrality of everything instead of Christ himself. But there are other reasons people struggle. In following chapters we'll

1. The Shepherding Movement of the 1970s and 1980s is a great example.

NEW TESTAMENT PATTERNS

The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.

JOHN 3:8

For the believer whose spiritual outlook has been formed through the transmission of church culture and strong secondary doctrinal teachings (as opposed to the first principles mentioned in the earliest creeds), it may be difficult to see why living faithfully, *according to that transmission*, can leave them bored, numbed, drained, and wondering where God has gone in the whole business. If ever the filters actually fall off, such persons may experience the shock and horror of seeing how little today's churches resemble the (presumed) "standard" of the original church in the book of Acts. Many at such a point of crisis abandon their former churches in search of what they believe promises to be a *real* "New Testament church." But this can become a never ending search.

The Pharisees of old overlooked the Son of God, not realizing that "the medium is the message." They were focused on the things coming out of Jesus—signs, works, teachings—and how they might wield him as a political tool. As then, many today overlook the same medium, which now we may refer to as "Christ in you, the hope of glory." Instead, they have fixed themselves on methods and patterns of "doing church," thinking to bring about some great result they are seeking. They have replaced the power of the exchanged life with forms and methods. And what is this "exchanged life" but the con-

THE TITHE THAT BINDS

“Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings.”

MALACHI 3:8

Many years ago I knew a woman with two young children who attended a very prosperous megachurch. Her husband had abandoned the family some years earlier, so that the mother had no alternative but to work at a low paying job while preparing herself for some eventual better employment through studies at a local college. Now this woman had been taught to tithe ten percent of her income to whatever church she attended, which she did for fifteen years. Her fortunes, on a weekly basis, went up and (mostly) down—sometimes dramatically—as she lived from one financial crisis to another.

One Sunday she sat in a pew as the offering plate was passed around. A deep question burned inside her that day as she wondered why she felt so burdened to tithe out of fear that she would miss the blessings of God if she did not. Of course the teaching had always been to tithe out of love, yet there was always an undercurrent of fear attached to not performing the duty. But that morning she summoned up enough courage to be honest with God. “I feel as if I am serving a dark lord,” she told Him. “Where is the God who sets the captives free? Are we now in bondage again?” And with that, she challenged Him to show her the truth and to please be merciful to her if she was wrong.

As weeks passed into months the same ups and downs continued.

THE INNER TEACHING

I am convinced that one of the greatest causes of discontent among God's people is a refusal to be led by the light of Christ rather than by the opinions of teachers. This is evident even among those who appear to have arrived at some spiritual maturity. There is much chasing after the latest zeitgeist and little encouragement to test all things that come into our awareness (1 THESS. 5:21). Decades after we have first believed we are conveniently steered to teachers, pastors, and elders to get answers to spiritual issues, even though the prime directive of these ministers is to bring us to "the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man ... (EPH. 4:13, *KJV*)." The prophet Jeremiah spoke of such a day, and the apostle Paul understood his words as pertaining to "spiritual Israel (ROM. 9:6)."

Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah:

... But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people.

And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. (JER. 31:32-34, *KJV*)

But if I am wrong and we have been saved so that we might remain perpetual pupils with no particular purpose except to attend church services until we drop dead, then please tell me which of these words you find false. For if we do not arrive at the place where we are

(1675-1751) has more recently been suggested as a possible adaptation of a manuscript by Madame Guyon (1648-1717).