

# The Growing Threat of Anti-Intellectual Emotionalism, part 1

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From the seminaries, the pulpits, electronic media, and the pages of some of Christendom's most popular writers, the siren song of an alluring message blares forth. Its simple and seductive philosophy, carried on the air of its confident maxims, deceives much of the public into accepting it as a more palatable Christianity than the faith once delivered to the saints.

This siren song is the sound of anti-theological, anti-intellectual emotionalism. You've no doubt heard some of its claims: "the Spirit is what is important," "Jesus has to be discovered through relationship," "we must stick with the simplicity that is in Christ," "knowledge doesn't save us," "head knowledge is not enough," "don't forget that knowledge puffs up," and so on. All of these assertions contain some truth, and that is what makes them all the more hazardous. When we go fishing, we hope the fish will swallow what is partially real food and partially deadly hook. As believers, we must insure that we don't get fooled by the bait. To succeed, we must exercise our senses to discern good and evil (Hebrews 5:14). So, let's examine some of these ideas.

## **"The Spirit Is What Is Important"**

This anti-theological claim, like many others, implies a false dichotomy: the Spirit is important, nothing else is. Yes, the Spirit is important, but many other things are also important. The Spirit doesn't work alone. Jesus said, "But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach [*didaskō*—the verb of the word often translated as "doctrine"] you all things, and will remind you of all that I said to you" (John 14:26). The Spirit and doctrine are not opposed to one another. The Spirit Himself is a teacher. God has put His Spirit into the words of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16). Doctrine is what Jesus taught and what the Holy Spirit inspired His apostles to teach and to record in what is now Scripture. The apostle Paul wrote, "And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Ephesians 6:17). Rather than somehow being opposed to doctrine and Scripture, the Spirit uses them.

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## **"Jesus Has to Be Discovered Through Relationship"**

It is also a grave error to juxtapose having a relationship with Jesus to knowing about Jesus through studying the Bible. I remember hearing a preacher ask his congregation, "Do you want to read the mind of Jesus? Read the Bible." The Bible is that portion of Christ's mind that He has revealed to us and wants us to know. In His written Word, He is sharing His thoughts with us. How arrogant it is to say that we can know Jesus and have a relationship with Him while rudely refusing to hear what He has to say! It is as if a friend has come to us and said that he wants to share something important with us that's been on his mind, but we curtly interrupt and say we don't want to hear it. We tell him that instead of hearing him, we want to stare at him, sing to him, pray to him, and imagine him as we want him to be in some fantasy, adolescent-type infatuation. What kind of Christians are we if, when Christ speaks to us through His Word, we find what is in His mind to be "dry, dusty, boring, and without spiritual life"? Are we even Christians at all?

Peter tells us to "always be ready to give an answer to everyone who asks you a reason concerning the hope that is in you, with humility and fear" (1 Peter 3:15). What will they who reject Jesus' teachings say to those who inquire about Him?

Inquirer: "So, tell me about this Jesus."

Anti-intellectual: "Oh, I love Him."

Inquirer: "How do you know you love Him?"

Anti-intellectual: "I have a personal relationship with Him. He makes me smile."

Inquirer: "Why does He make you smile?"

Anti-intellectual: "He makes me feel good."

Inquirer: "Why?"

Anti-intellectual: "His eyes go through me."

Inquirer: "Can you explain this?"

Anti-intellectual: "I am always, always, always His."

Inquirer: "But how do you know any of this? What is He like?"

Anti-intellectual: "I can only imagine."

(Anti-intellectual's responses are adapted from various Christian Contemporary songs)

Rather than giving Inquirer helpful answers that might lead Him to understand more about Jesus Christ, Anti-intellectual's responses sound like those of a teenager being questioned by a parent about an infatuation. I'm not trying to insult anyone, and I'm not saying that all of these answers are wrong. Certainly, we should love Jesus and have a personal relationship with Him, and thinking of this can make us smile. But we should build that relationship upon a sound understanding of God's Word. To know the Triune God means we must study Him, and that study is theology. Emotionalism is no substitute.

To know someone is to know facts about that person. When we are physically with someone, we might sometimes perceive things subconsciously about that person by watching him or her or hearing him or her speak to others. But facts they still are, and we will know much more if we listen to what the person tells us. The more we hear, the more we will know. The highest level of truly knowing someone is to understand that person's mind—what that person thinks, believes, desires, hopes, dreams. God has given us His mind so that we can know Him. Read it, and don't fall for the claptrap that we can know Jesus and have a relationship with Him while rejecting what He is saying to us in His Word.

I am not saying that we should be emotionless. God made us with emotions, and they are part of being human. But our emotions can easily mislead us.

### **But What of the "Simplicity That Is in Christ"?**

Without doubt, there is a simplicity in Christ (2 Corinthians 11:3). That is, the Gospel message of Jesus dying on the Cross to save us is a simple message. It is our anchor, and we must never lose it. We preach it to people who are as yet unbelievers and know little of Jesus, but if they are elect, they will understand and believe. We who have been believers for some time, however, while understanding the preciousness of and foundational nature of the Gospel message, are

not to remain at that point. We are to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18).

The writer of Hebrews tells us this: "Therefore we must progress beyond the elementary instructions about Christ and move on to maturity, not laying this foundation again: repentance from dead works and faith in God, teaching about baptisms, laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment" (Hebrews 6:1-2, *NET Bible*). In other words, the Bible tells us there is much to learn, and we should be working to learn it, not hiding behind the excuse that we somehow know Jesus Christ without knowing what He and His disciples taught.

### **"Knowledge Doesn't Save Us"**

This is a spurious argument. Knowledge doesn't save us, Jesus does. His atoning work on the Cross is what saves us, and we receive that salvation through belief. Yet, we could not believe without knowing what to believe, the knowledge of the Gospel. So, knowledge does not save us, but we would not know what to put our faith in without knowledge: "How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in him whom they have not heard? How will they hear without a preacher?" (Romans 10:14). Neither knowledge nor faith save us, Jesus does. Yet, both knowledge and faith are vital if we are to know what Jesus has done for us and how He wants us to live.

### **"Head Knowledge Is Not Enough"**

I think people say this in response to a real problem. We probably all know professing Christians who seem to know their Bibles backward and forward but who show no love for their fellow man, are judgmental bluenoses, or live as hypocrites. Before his conversion, Paul (at the time, called Saul) knew the Scriptures and even knew the Gospel well enough to know that he hated it because it implied salvation outside of national Israel and the law. So, yes, knowledge is not enough. We also need the Holy Spirit and the faith and love that He gives us. To admit that we need spiritual gifts other than knowledge, however, doesn't mean that we should disparage the gift of His written Word. The gifts God gives us work together to make a balanced Christian. Those who have knowledge but no love or who live hypocritically are at best unbalanced Christians, and, perhaps, are not really Christians at all.

By the way, the Reformation cry of "By Scripture Alone" does not mean Scripture without the gifts of the Spirit. It means Scripture alone is the inspired Word of God and the only authoritative revelation of God.

### **"Don't Forget That Knowledge Puffs Up"**

This again depends on the false idea that those who defend the Bible are promoting knowledge without the other gifts of the Spirit. Knowledge alone might puff up, but love will prevent any puffing up without the least need to lower one's knowledge. Knowledge is a good thing and can be used to help others. If you read 1 Corinthians 8, you will see that Paul isn't saying that we must get rid of our knowledge because it puffs up. He is telling us to use love to temper what we do with our knowledge so that we don't offend others.

In part 2, we'll look at the empty confusion caused by the irrational gospel and the importance of the Bible as a lamp to our feet, and a light for our path (Psalm 119:105).