

Recovery of Double Knowledge: Self-Knowledge in Light of the Knowledge of God Part 2

By Dr. Jim Houston

Jim Houston:

And uh, the way that I um I got--the way that Calvin realizes we have to go is with a Trinitarian spirituality. That's to say that we're aware that the very intrinsic way that we relate to God is through God's own character, through His own being. In other words, we can all relate to the Father through the Son, only relate to the Son, through the Holy Spirit, and so that without the Holy Spirit in our lives, there is no appreciation of the mediatorial work of Christ. And without mediatorial work of Christ, there's no approach to the Father possible. And so the way into the heart of God is through His own being, His own Trinitarian character. I was saying at lunch today that often in our denominational life today, we-we assume that God lives a kind of dysfunctional family life. And some of us choose uh to opt it all in the Holy Spirit, and some of us all on Jesus Christ is our Lord. And we fancy that we have a choice as to whether we go through the Spirit or through the person of Christ. It's heretical to say that, it's apostate. That um--we can't break up the character of the unity of the one God.

So, yes, it's not pedantic. It's a reality of His character, His self-revelatory character, that we approach Abba through His Son, and it's through His Spirit that we can appreciate His Son and know Him for who He is. And so Calvin, in the structure of the institutes as well, and the self-disclosure that he sees that God is making to us is through and through a Trinitarian uh, scholar. Trinitarian theologian. Well, when we've uh spoken about these writers, we've come to the end of the 16th century. And we haven't come to the end of the 16th century, we're about the middle of the 16th century. But we've come to the end of the double knowledge. It disappears after that.

And uh, I haven't done sufficient research to tell you what are the some of the contributory factors for the disintegration that takes place. But let me just touch on a few of them. One of the things that certainly did happen was that, especially in France, there was a wide scale deepening skepticism about religious faith, that if the-if the reform was proved that the church had gone off the rails for a thousand years, then Francis Asaul at the beginning of the 17th century says, "Well, you know, if you or, Luther, and you or Calvin alone are right, in all the generations of Christians, then can we trust you as well? And so does it mean that we give up in knowing God?"

And so people like Montaigne said, "Yes, forget about God. Just have the stoical common sense to learn to know about yourself, so you can more pragmatically, more effectively know yourself." Uh but, theologies, this led us up a garden path that's created civil war, bloodshed as it did in the 17th century, 18th century. So France became extremely skeptical about knowing God, and especially through the work of people like Montaigne. And this eruption of Pierism, which among the-in the Roman world was a form of extreme skepticism, began then to be let loose. But unfortunately, it wasn't just simply cynics that became skeptical. It was that the ethos of the culture gave a-a new revitalization of stoicism. So at the end of the 16th century, with the age of the great dramatists like Calderon in Spain and Shakespeare in England, these writers are what you might call Christian Stoics. But of course, there are no such things as Christian Stoics. You're either a stoic or you're a Christian. But they became more stoical than Christian.

And the assumption was that you can learn to be sincere on your own. I was saying uh, how in Hamlet, um, the great cult of the 17th century was "learn to be sincere." The art of sincerity

became the sort of in thing to learn about in the 17th century. "This, above all, to thine own self be true. Is it doth follow the night the day, thou shalt not then be false to any man." You see. So you go on this quest, it's a noble quest, it's a marriage between your ideal self, and the self you know. And if you have that um marriage of uh idealism about being sincere, then everything's fine. Well, this is a worse state to get into than questioning about the nature of God, because it's more will of the wisp to be sincere, when in fact, you don't know your own motives, you don't know your heart, which as the scriptures remind us, the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. And so there were some Puritans, like John Owen, who writes an interesting treatise on um the intrinsic self-deception of the human heart. And he's very realistic about it. In other words, he is not saying that you ca-that you don't know yourself, but he is implying that. So he's right.

But there were others who began to assume there were certain things as a Christian you could do on your own. You could examine your own conscience. And so one of the things that becomes more stoic than Christian in the 17th century, though we think of it as profoundly Christian, this is why it's so confusing, is everybody began to examine their conscience. One of the first of these Puritan's to do so was William Perkins, who lived between 1585 and 1635. And he writes a treatise of conscience in 1596. And in 1606, he gave a series of exhaustive lectures in his own college, Emmanuel College, Cambridge, that was published later as cases of conscience. And what he is implying is, that by cultivating a conscience, you can know yourself. Because what is that? You see, well, Consciencia is a knowing with, but the knowing with, in other words, conscience should really be the double knowledge, you see, it's the conscience of uh, of a

knowledge that is alongside God's presence, God's uh understanding of you and your understanding of Him.

But the double knowledge got lost in the pursuit of conscience. It's one of the things that is interesting, that conscience is not a significant word in the vocabulary of the New Testament. Two, three instances and that's it. In other words, it's something that becomes a cultural artifact of the 17th century. Now, uh what uh Perkins was unexamining is: can you examine your own conscience without a knowledge of a-of God? He doesn't tell you. He leaves that blank. So what is he assuming? We're not very sure, but a later Puritan writer makes us very certain that you can have self-knowledge without the knowledge of God. And that's William Ames, A-M-E-S. He is about contemporary with Perkins. 1576 to 1633, he had spent time in Holland, the Netherlands. And uh, he uh is a very influential writer. And his interest is, of course, being at the Lord's table that we're exhorted in Second Corinthians--in First Corinthian rather--13. No, Second Corinthians 13, verse 5 that we're to examine ourselves, and to judge ourselves in First Corinthians 11:31.

So if the Lord's table is the place where we examine our conscience, then His treatise "Conscience with the Power and Cases Thereof," which he published in 1635, is putting a central focus that on the devotional life of the Christian, examination of conscience is number one. But what Ames has implicitly done is to assume that we can examine our own conscience unaided. It's just something we can do ourselves. Another writer who is making a contribution in this direction. You know, these guys are innocent of what we're judging them of, but uh, because they didn't know themselves sufficiently.

[Jim Houston laughs]

Jim Houston:

But uh, Richard Baxter, 16-15-1691, is one of the most prolific writers of the seventeenth century and one of the most tortured souls as well. And he's like John Bunyan, he spends seven years in doubt about his own salvation. And later, when he had this assurance of faith in 1659, he writes a treatise of about 250 pages on the text of Second Corinthians 13:5, "Examine yourselves to see-to see whether you are in the faith, test yourselves." And so he writes his book called "The Mischiefs of Self-Ignorance and the Benefits of Self-Acquaintance." Well, all this book is about self-examination. And uh, it's pretty obvious that his admiration of the Stoics has influenced him with a kind of stoicism about self-examination. And so, in the right method for a settled piece of conscience, which he writes in 1653, uh he tends to confuse theological certainty with this kind of cultural sincerity that was so prevalent in the 17th century. And uh, and so he gives us a kind of optimism about self-examination.

There are two other writers that leave us, and the trail disappears. The French Catholic bishop, Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, B-O double S U-E-T, who lived between 1627 and 1704. He writes a book called "Traité de la connaissance de Dieu et de soi-même." In other words, "The Knowledge of God and of Myself." And so when you read that title, you say, well, let me get it under interlibrary loan, it's a very rare book. I'm going to read it. And I did. I pursued it. And oh, my goodness me. It's no longer Augustinian. It's entirely Socratic. There is no knowledge of God, it's all a knowledge of myself. And this is what he says, that--no reformer, Calvin would have died, would have turned in his grave, if he had heard this saying. Bossuet says it's from the

knowledge of self that we can rise to the knowledge of God. Can we? Is our understanding of the mediatorial work of Christ? None. He sets the whole reformation back on its track. And so this is a statement that never Gastón would have made. It certainly wasn't the statement that any of the believers through the Middle Ages would have believed.

And uh it--I don't know whether Pascal knew Bossuet's writing at the time, I'm sure he did. He was a very smart chap, was Pascal, great genius, in fact. And this is what Pascal says, "No proud man, what a paradox you are to yourself. Down then feeble reason and let this foolish nature keep silence. Know how much more than merely man is man, and learn from your Master your true condition, of which you are so wholly ignorant. Listen to God." Well, you remember the introductory statement that we made from Pascal at the beginning of our lecture. And so he reinforces, and Pascal is probably the last voice of the 17th century to clearly understand you must never break asunder the double knowledge. But his advice is one of the last. And so instead, we have the popular voice of the pope when he focuses that the proper study of mankind is man, let man know himself. That's his subject matter. That's the rise of secular anthropology and secular psychology.

And in the Enlightenment project, of course, that followed, there was the autonomy of the thinker in knowing oneself. Well, I was intrigued a few years ago to pick up a copy of John Mason's work of 1744 that writes for education, it's called "A Treatise on Self-Knowledge." And this treatise is um picking up on uh Baxter's mixture of self-ignorance, and really what uh now this populist educator, Mason is saying is, "Oh, you know, Baxter you didn't go far enough. You didn't give us all the classical resources about the Delphic adage. You didn't understand the

Socratic method of self-knowledge." You see, in other words, what he's doing is he's totally turning against all the tradition that we've talked about this evening. And he's referring us back to Delphi, not to the biblical scriptures. And uh, and so since then, we've lived with this uh, with this situation. Anatole France, at the beginning of this century, was ironic when, as he thought about Descartes' "I think therefore I am," how he said there's a much more realistic posture than that. And that is "I am ignorant, therefore I am."

[Jim Houston and audience laugh]

Jim Houston:

And of course, uh, we realize that we are increasingly more confused as a result. So, it's a fascinating subject, and uh it's a subject that uh calls for a lot of reflection, uh, for us today. But one of the things that perhaps I might just leave you with that we can explore further, is that when you keep together, this prayer, "let me know Thee oh God, let me know myself," then our perfect posture before God is one of recursion. I don't know whether you know the word recursion, but recursion is when you've got an infinite tunnel of glass mirrors, and at one entrance to the tunnel you have an object that is reflected on the mirror opposite it. And then that mirror is reflected on the other. And you can go all down the tunnel like a madam to Saad's Hall of mirrors, you see. And you have reflection after reflection after reflection. We call that recursivity. We do recursive interactions with each other. When I talk, for example, as I've been doing all evening, and I'm sorry about it, and I watch your eyes, and I see your face, and I say, "Oh, yeah? Does that hit home? Has that been understood? Has that been recognized?" And we have a recursive relationship.

Now, our relationship with God is of the essence recursive. God has stooped to be the God that is with man. God therefore empties Himself to take that posture of relating with us, and speaks to us, by analogy, by symbol, by indeed the incarnate Christ. And our relationship is one of contingency, and reciprocity, and recursivity. That's the whole life of prayer. The life of prayer is when we are in recursive relationship with our God. And so this introduction that we think of in double knowledge is this awareness that in countering each other, and responding to each other, we are changed in the process of that recursivity. So that we become more in His image and likeness the more we're sensitive to His ways, the more we're sensitive to His truth, the more we're appreciative of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. There's that interchange, that reciprocity that deepens communion, one with the other. And so we begin to realize that I am the kind of person that is known of God and I rest in His knowledge of me. And I want to seek to have that knowledge of myself as He discloses it to me, so that He is the source of my identity. He is the guarantee of my significance. He is the one who is my redeemer. Indeed, my Creator is the one who has given me myself.

"And the great gift," says Fénelon, "that I owe to God is the gift of myself." So there's no place for boasting. There's no place for self, uh, affirmation or autonomy. It's all of God. And so it's in that relatedness that I go on in this deeper and deeper level of knowing Him. Well, I think I've said enough to indicate some of the suggested ways in which the importance of this can grow. And so especially when, as we're thinking of spiritual formation in the life of this institution of Biola, and we think of how the resources can be brought together of the uh Rosemead School of Psychology and the Talbot's School of Theology, and we think of all the benefits that this um interaction, one with the other, is that each is having to say to the other, "We're only holding half

a coin, and we only have [unintelligible] when the two lock together." And uh that, uh, is that the knowledge of Himself is essential for the knowledge of myself. But I only grow in faith as I have more self-understanding before Him. So we're now open to questions.

[Moment of silence]

Jim Houston:

One of the things, of course, that immediately challenges us deeply, does it mean that I will not grow in the knowledge of God without the knowledge of myself? Am I implying that? The answer is yes.

[Silence]

Jim Houston:

Yes.

Speaker 1:

I was hoping that somehow you would um comment on [unintelligible] a great number of self-help books [unintelligible].

Jim Houston:

I think a lot of these self-help books are all indicative of the great turn in the way of knowing that took place with uh, Descartes. Descartes did something in the West, he was trying to defend the Christian faith against skepticism. But in-instead of which he made things worse, because he began to use knowledge instrumentally, that knowledge has a power that's instrumental for fixing

things. And so Descartes is the father of Mr. and Mrs. must fix it. He is the-he is the original author of these self-help books. And this fix it mentality that-we want to have the right techniques, then we get the grasp of reality. He's the one that's created this mirage. So he is the father of the technocratic mindset.

[Jim Houston laughs]

Jim Houston:

And we're so riddled with it that we couldn't imagine living the Christian life without it. So remove all self-help books, and what is your Christian life? If you have no books on how to read the Bible, and how to pray, and how to preach, and how to counsel, and how to do all these good things, how to manage your own wife, you see, um, where are you? And that indicates, I think, the state of saturation that this mindset has produced upon us. So it's a very serious condition. It's not a form of innocence that we should be more educated about, it's a radical metanoia, a repentance of mind, that we need to overcome. Is that what you're asking about?

Speaker 1:

Yes.

Jim Houston:

Yes.

Speaker 1:

[Unintelligible] I would say [unintelligible].

Jim Houston:

Well, this appeal is uh to go back to this awareness that uh our epistemology is grounded on God's own person, on God's own presence, and God's own Spirit. So that we need to have a change of mind. Yes. Yes?

Speaker 2:

[Unintelligible]

Jim Houston:

In this direction? The question has been asked is, could I share a little bit of what events have led to me thinking like this? Oh, I suppose it's being in academic life and realizing the inconsistencies. And uh, I was sharing at one meeting during this weekend of how, at one occasion, I was in the Inns of-the-Court of-Inns of Court in London, where the wife of our principal was being divorced, and she asked me to come to stand with her and comfort her. And uh, it was a triangling of three different couples whose marriages were all breaking up because of the messiness they had with each other. And one of them was the professor of ethics of-at Oxford who had written uh-uh-uh one of the best sellers of the time called Teach Yourself Ethics. And the judge nearly withdrew his case for deviousness in life. And so I got very disenchanted with the ivory tower when I saw that kind of thing happening, you see. Somebody who was economic adviser to the British government, and his own life was an absolute mess. So how could he imagine the economic affairs of a whole nation, and at the same time be in such an inward state of mess himself.

So those were the ways that I began to realize the disenchantment of knowing for knowing's sake. And uh, so I did begin to. Then, of course, I did begin to read the Cistercians in the 12th century, and they helped me, because the great debate in 1141 between Peter Abelard and Bernard of Clairvaux was precise to this debate. Are we able to know God by our own cleverness of dialectics and logic? And uh, Peter Abelard said, yes, of course you can—you can know God by Aristotelian methodology. And Vernon said, For God's sake, no. We can only know God by His own character. And so the irony of the Western world is that the debate was is knowledge for knowledge's sake, or is knowledge instrumental for the love of God? And Bernard won the debate, but actually, it was Abelard who has won the influence of the Western world. So this kind of reading began to make me think about these things, you see. Then I discovered that Augustine wasn't alone, Calvin wasn't alone in the double knowledge. I began to link them together like a rosary and see that they were all part of a chain. And there's a strong continuity that these people are not isolated, as we've tried to trace tonight, you see. So that's how it came together. Yes.

Speaker 3:

[Unintelligible] it's the value of the autonomous self [unintelligible].

Jim Houston:

Well, it's the falsification of the self. The autonomous self is the invention of the Enlightenment. It's um, it's the assumption that uh, well, first of all, it's the assumption that if I think then I exist, this is who I am, you see. Whereas some of our philosophers today are telling us that the person

is very much more robust, much more contrary to their reality, than simply the shadow of a ghost called a thinker. And of course, it's only too obvious that you begin to realize that if I think, well, yes, I'm glad I do, but there's a lot to me besides thinking.

Speaker 3:

[Unintelligible]

Jim Houston:

Yes.

Speaker 3:

Just in terms of our, individuation--

Jim Houston:

Yes.

Speaker 3:

God gave us individuation even from Himself.

Jim Houston:

Yes.

Speaker 3:

God gives us dignity of choice.

Jim Houston:

Yes.

Speaker 3:

So how do you rope all of that is with uh [unintelligible]

Jim Houston:

Well, I think that, in other words, when we talk about autonomy in the way that you're talking about it, you're talking more about the particularity of the self. In other words, you're not saying that we're self-contained, or self-ruling, or, or self-controlling. You're saying that we are a particular unique individual. Well, yes, of course. But I think that as sinners, the gift of uniqueness, of particularity, is precisely what we can't handle. Because we oscillate between saying, Thank God I'm not you, and we're arrogant about our particularity. Or uh, [unintelligible] I'm alone without you, you see, or other people don't understand me because I am particular. And so we sort of oscillate between arrogance and anxiety, you see. So the gift of particularity is God's gift of our election. And if it's His gift of our elections, then only God and His Spirit can handle our particularity. I can't do it. And yet, this is perhaps where we are really being challenged to be mature in our faith. And that is that God has called us by name. He has elected us to have our particularity. He's given us kindness, to have space for our formation in our own unique way of-of life before Him.

And what we're most afraid of is being uniquely ourselves before God. This is so strange, it's so scary, so, it's so uncertain. How is my journey in the presence of the Lord going to really uh reach that maturity of the calling that He's given to me? I'd rather hide in the crowd, you see. Uh, there's a book being written by a Japanese psychiatrist that I've been looking at recently as I'm going to Japan. And it's on the whole um cultural understanding of Amei. A-M-E-I. That is to say, that when you've got a litter of puppies all nestling together. Any one of them that strays out of the litter gets lost. He can't handle particularity, there has to be that sort of togetherness, you see. And uh, there is so often a fearfulness among Christians as to really uh having particular in our faith. Of course, our culture is not very kind to people who stand up like that. One of the few that does this is uh Kierkegaard, Soren Kierkegaard against his Danish heat-heath, that's a flat, jut land.

[Jim Houston laughs]

Jim Houston:

Stands up as a lonely fir tree. Very difficult to be a prominent fir tree on a Danish heath. And so there's a novel being written by a Scandinavian about the psyche of Denmark called The Law of Zanti. And it's a book about the Ten Commandments. But all the Ten Commandments, thou shall not be different from anybody else.

[Jim Houston and audience laugh]

Jim Houston:

So you don't stand up, you see, to be counted. You don't have your own convictions. You just all huddle together. And in that, of course, there is no self-understanding. So that's what you're asking about?

Speaker 3:

Yes, it sounded a bit as if you were--when I was reading your books I-I do sense that you believe in uh, that there is an autonomy, differentiation between us and God, and yet there's relatedness.

Jim Houston:

Yes.

Speaker 3:

Inter-relatedness. And yet in hearing you speak, I-I wonder if you were anti-autonomy, but somehow, it's wrong to be separate yet connected. So what I was trying to figure out, how do you work that out--

Jim Houston:

Well, w-w-what we haven't done is, of course, to discuss the uh, the mystery of God's [unintelligible] union of three persons in one God. The nature of God is that each person gives space for the other to be. The nature of God is that each person has their identity in the other. Not in themselves. So that um, it's the job of the Son, if you put it crudely, the job description of the Son is to manifest the uniqueness of the Father. But it's the-it's the work of the Father, in love, to manifest the glory of the Son. And so each finds their identity in the other, and the way we can

express it, and this is to me the heart, not of autonomy, because that word is loaded with all what our culture is talking about. But our Christian particularity that is so wonderful is, I never was more myself, never was more particularly me, than when I am most in Christ Jesus. That's the wonder of Divine Love. That love is more concerned for my significance, more concerned for my identity, more concerned to give space for me to be, unafraid to be, than the love of God. How foolish we are to love ourselves with our own love. It's cheating of ourselves. How wise it is to love ourselves with His own love. It's so liberating. It's so particularizing.

[Jim Houston laughs lightly]

Jim Houston:

That's the good news. Yes?

Speaker 4:

[unintelligible]

Jim Houston:

Oh yes, I do. In other words, this lack of self-reflection, this lack of giving kindness to our own limitations, some of our churches are treadmills. And especially in the Chinese culture, if you don't have a program, how could you be a Christian? So we live programmatic lives. It's killing. No wonder this burn out. And so we have to re-understand that what I do doesn't determine who I am. It's having a functional identity that gives us all that uh, frenetic busyness. Of course, if my identity is in what I do, then I'll get busier and busier, you see. But it's a distortion. It's a cheating of the self. And so we need a radical change in some of our churches. But where we stop and

reflect about this is, does it mean that if I stop being active in the church, that I've lost my Christian identity or even my church membership? So it's a big issue. And yes, I'm being radical.

[Jim Houston laughs]

Jim Houston:

You did hear what I was saying?

[Jim Houston laughs]

Jim Houston:

And we're afraid, aren't we? Well, I suppose there's a time for all things to conclude. So thank you very much indeed.

[Audience applauds]

Worship leader:

Let's close in prayer. God, our heavenly Father. We do ask that in our vocation, in our schooling, in all the things that we do, Father. That Lord, all of it would be a pursuit to know You, to know ourself in that knowledge. And God, that our profession and our education would not become an end to itself. Lord, do keep us from that idolatry to fill some hole within ourself that only You can fill. And Lord, again, uh commit our heart to this process of finding truth, finding you, finding ourselves. Lord, in Your presence as we pursue all that we do. Help us not to pursue it with the desire to find our identity in those things. God be merciful and gracious to everyone here. Give us this kind of heart, We pray, in Jesus' name, amen. Have a good night.