

I Know Whom I Have Believed

by Chip Brogden

The sermon emphasizes the journey of spiritual growth from knowing what we believe, to understanding why we believe, and ultimately to knowing whom we believe in--Jesus Christ.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 13:11, Philippians 3:10, Colossians 2:2, Hebrews 5:12, 2 Peter 3:18

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Mature Faith"

Description

Chip Brogden delivers a sermon on the stages of spiritual growth, emphasizing the importance of moving from knowing WHAT we believe to understanding WHY we believe, and ultimately reaching the pinnacle of maturity by knowing WHO we believe in - Jesus Christ. He highlights the journey from being spiritually immature, heavily influenced by external sources, to becoming a mature believer who is liberated from limiting beliefs and possesses a deep, personal relationship with Christ. Brogden encourages self-examination to ensure continual growth and maturation in the knowledge of Christ, urging believers to embrace questioning, seeking, and a genuine hunger for truth.

Transcript

The Scriptures exhort us to "grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." Our spiritual growth may be generally discussed as occurring in three seasons of development. Please do not use this teaching to examine where others are, but use it to examine yourself and see if you are indeed growing and maturing in the knowledge of Christ.

I will use the terms "immature" and "childish", but not with the intention of disdain the young. I am simply contrasting maturity with immaturity, adulthood with childhood. My children are immature, but I cannot expect them to be anything other than immature so long as they are children. I am lovingly committed to their long-term growth. In the same way, let us not despise the spiritually immature or the weak in faith. Instead, the Word tells us to receive them and watch over them. For those of you who are further along, never forget how many years of God's dealings it took to bring you to the level of experience you take for granted today.

With those words of introduction, let us discuss the beginning season of the Christian life.

The Child Says, "I Know WHAT I Believe"

In the beginning of the Christian walk we are primarily concerned with WHAT we believe. We depend heavily upon other Christians, the pastor, or the church to tell us what we should believe. Our belief systems are established according to what we hear, see, or are taught during these formative years of spiritual development. Not being experienced in the ways of the Lord we naturally give attention to those Christians who have known the Lord longer than we may learn the essential doctrines of our faith. Whoever or whatever influences us as a spiritual child will usually shape and mold us into what we will become twenty, thirty, or fifty years hence.

Participation in Sunday School classes, Bible studies, church attendance, retreats, conferences and seminars is seen as a desirable and necessary step towards becoming a strong Christian. Memorizing a catechism, statement of fundamental truths, or doctrinal position is often a prerequisite to church membership. As the particular belief system is identified and reinforced, the young Christian may come to identify with social labels such as Fundamentalist, Evangelical, Charismatic, or Conservative. Labels are important to the spiritually immature because it allows them to sum up an entire ideology in one succinct title which provides instant recognition and camaraderie with those of the same genre. Baptists believe certain things, as do the Methodists, the Presbyterians, the Lutherans, the Catholics, the Pentecostals, and even the so-called Non-Denominational or Independents. Identifying yourself as one or the other immediately brings you into the good company, fellowship, and relationship with others whose particular belief systems most resemble your own.

New Christians (or old Christians who remain childish) are acutely interested in WHAT they believe, seeking to have all the I's and T's of their personal theology dotted and crossed. In the process they usually major in the minors and strain out a gnat to swallow a camel. Doctrinal discussion and religious wranglings are the seedbed of most vain speaking, arguments, hurt feelings, biting and devouring.

Once they are settled into WHAT they believe it is nearly impossible to convince them otherwise, and any perceived threat to their belief system is met with hostility, anger, confusion, even depression. I heard of a Bible study that was devoted to a particular issue. An outsider posed the question: WHY do you believe this? The indignant answer was, "Because the Bible says so" and a chapter and verse reference was given. But how do you know the Bible is true? Because the Bible is the Word of God. How do you know the Bible is the Word of God? Because the Bible says so. And so on.

Christians at this stage of spiritual growth cannot reply, except to say that you just have to believe it by faith (even though God has never required us to believe something without offering substantial, albeit invisible, proof - but that is a topic for another discussion). The leader of this Bible study could answer to WHAT she believed, but she could not reply to WHY she believed it because her particular belief system would not allow for a frank and open discussion on the inspiration of the very Scriptures she was citing. God said it (or the pastor said God said it), I believe it, and that settles it. End of conversation.

Children are often told to do thus-and-so, and when they invariably ask why, the answer is usually, "Because I said so." Such an answer is sufficient for them at THAT stage, but when the child becomes a teenager a simple "Because I said so" is insulting. As an adult it is offensive. Why is this? Because it does not allow for input, feedback, or questions. What is lost? The experience of LEARNING and becoming mature.

Is the Bible the inspired Word of God? Well of course it is. But not because it says it is, and not because the pastor says so or the church says so, or I say so. Do you know WHY it is the inspired Word of God?

Have you ever wondered why? "Because the Bible says so" is sufficient enough for a new Christian, but you must move beyond the elementary if you ever hope to experience or lead others into the full knowledge of Christ.

The Young Adult Says, "I Know WHY I Believe"

The one who knows WHAT they believe is always threatened by the one who knows WHY. Unfortunately some never grow to the point that they ever ask why. They see no need to ask why, and therein lies the reason for their perpetual childhood, their incessant carnal fighting and vain blabbering. To ask why is to commit the unpardonable sin! To question the church, its leaders, or its teachings is to jeopardize your eternal soul! People with faith are not supposed to ask why. People properly submitted to authority are not supposed to ask why. If you don't know why, they say, focus on what, and don't worry about why.

Allow me to say it as plainly as I can: to discourage the asking of WHY is to stunt the spiritual growth of yourself and others. An immature Christian is one who does not permit himself or others to question anything incorporated into their belief system.

Yes, it is true that many who grow up in the church and begin asking WHY often appear to backslide or end up leaving the church altogether. This healthy questioning, searching, and seeking for truth Jesus called "hungering and thirsting after righteousness." The promise is, "They shall be filled." They are The Blessed, not The Backslidden. Jesus is simply leading them elsewhere because He cannot fill them where they are. The quest for Truth, and the subsequent filling, almost never takes place WHERE YOU ARE, but WHERE GOD WANTS TO BRING YOU. If you are hungry and thirsty for what is right, for what is true, then you will be filled. It did not say where or how, only THAT. I cannot presume to say where or how He may lead you, only that He will.

You see, knowing WHAT you believe brings a certain aura of satisfaction and security which is akin to nursing at your mothers breast. It is an important first step in the Christian life, but that is all a first step, a means to an end, not THE end. We are not suggesting that you do not have to know WHAT you believe. We are saying that real progress begins when you begin to get an inkling as to WHY you believe it. This is the middle stage of spiritual growth. Like knowing what, knowing why is an important step, but it is not the end either. It is merely a rite of passage between childishness and maturity. It is the literal enlargement of one's capacity for Truth, and of course, for Christ Who is Truth. It is the spiritual equivalent of puberty, a time of great change, rapid growth, and of great turmoil, emotionally and spiritually.

An exciting thing begins to happen in the spiritual life of the Christian who desires to grow and mature. It is hoped that after some progress in spiritual things, once the new Christian has experienced a few defeats or disappointments, that he or she will ask, "Is there more to the Christian life than what I am experiencing?" Oh, blessed question! How God has worked long and hard to bring the Christian to this point! And the Answer which God so desires to give us is, "Yes! There is more to this Life! You have but scratched the surface!" The Question often comes to us in the middle of a church service, when everyone else seems to be worshiping the Lord and having a good time. We try to join in but the Question continues to bother us week after week until we resolve to do something about it.

But what usually happens? The church will often reassure the babes that all is well as long as they ignore how they feel, keep attending church, reading their Bibles, saying their prayers, etc. Nevertheless, the One asking the Question will not go away, and it indeed is the bidding of the Spirit of Truth Himself which ignites and fans into flame the holy desire to launch out into the Deep, the very Depths of Christ. WHAT

they believe is no longer good enough, and they want to know WHY. Instead of discouraging these questions, we should welcome and invite them. We even ought to take the initiative and begin asking them of others.

What emerges after this period of soul searching, asking, seeking, and knocking is a core set of values and beliefs that are refined in the fiery furnace of real-life experience, not taught or learned out of a textbook or Sunday school class. It is the difference between singing, "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" because we know the words to the song or because we have truly experienced the great faithfulness of Jesus Christ. We know WHAT we are singing, but more importantly, we know WHY we are singing. And WHY we desire fellowship with other believers. And WHY the Bible is the inspired Word of God. And so on.

Most importantly, Christians at this stage of growth are liberated from the limiting beliefs imposed upon them by other people, even other good people. The younger children are full of argument, opinion, defense, and either/or thinking. For them, the less they think they know the more distressed they become. Pose a question to them that is not in their catechism (literal or figurative) and they will be off to look up the answer so they can impress you with the solution the next time you meet. They haven't yet learned that there will always be someone in the world who is smarter and can come up with a more brilliant argument, right or wrong. It seems their whole goal is to confound the world with WHAT they believe.

Not so the Christians with some maturity. The Christians at this stage realize they don't know as much as they thought they did, but they know what matters. They are no longer straining out the gnat while swallowing the camel. They do not have as many answers, but neither do they have as many questions. Their spiritual life follows a steady, even course.

The Mature Adult Says, I Know WHOM I Believe

There is a certain downside to the intermediate stage of growth, and that is a danger to lean upon our own understanding. Now that we know WHY we believe we are apt to begin teaching the younger ones. People will look to us for answers. We tend to tell them all we know, even more than we know. We are in danger of falling prey to an intellectual faith instead of a Spirit walk. Naturally speaking, teenagers and college students have a lot of knowledge. In fact, according to their own mind, they are smarter and more enlightened than anyone over the age of thirty. Once they reach thirty they will realize how little they really knew about life. Academic learning is no substitute for experience, and experience takes time. In spiritual things we will always be growing. Even the spiritually mature will continue to grow and learn.

We must see the process of maturity through to completion. To illustrate, let us imagine that we here on earth desire to reach the moon. That is a definitive goal which we can see. We can measure the distance and make plans to reach the moon. To us here on earth that is the ultimate in space exploration. Now let us imagine that one day we reach the moon. Just as we become acclimated to this enormous triumph, our eyes turn upward yet again and we see the vast expanse of space, the innumerable stars, planets, and galaxies, stretched out before us for more than 15,000,000,000 light years, and enlarging its borders faster than we could ever hope to keep up. We will never get to the end of it.

Suddenly, we realize all that we have accomplished in reaching the moon is but a drop in the bucket. In the grand scheme of the universe it is so small as to be infinitesimal. Of course you had no idea that the universe was this large while confined to the atmosphere of Earth, but now, having journeyed a bit beyond, you see just how large it is.

This, in a nutshell, is what it is to find ourselves lost in the depths of Christ. The edge of the universe is beyond our reach, but even it is finite in terms of size. This vast universe is summed up into Christ. The Creator is larger than the creation. So it follows that the more we know of Him, the less we realize we know. All the learning and spiritual experience of all the saints since the foundation of the world hardly makes a dent into the richness of Christ.

Job was left speechless after his encounter with God. He entered into a dialogue with the Creator thinking he knew what he was talking about. Thoroughly confounded and reduced to nothing, Job regretted having spoken of things that he knew nothing about. His idea of God was totally shattered. Before he had heard about God, but having seen God, he realized he didn't know anything. Ironically, his confessed ignorance was higher and more noble than the wisdom of his counselors who claimed to know God, but had never seen Him.

This is the difference between revelation and head-knowledge, between seeing for yourself and merely hearing about. The man who says, "I don't know" is finally beginning to know. Once he can see, he can say, "I know whom I have believed" and be accurate, even though he doesn't know anything in and of himself. It is a case of owning nothing, but possessing everything. The Christian is poor in spirit, yet blessed with every spiritual blessing.

Christianity is a spiritual paradox designed to confound man's wisdom and reduce him to Christ. If it were only a teaching or a philosophy, it would be easy to follow. But Christianity is not a teaching or a philosophy, it is a Man. Take away the Man and there is no Christianity. It is all about giving up your own life in order to receive the Life of Another.

The more I write, the more I realize I don't know anything. A million words cannot convey HIM. Everything of me is filthy rags; who am I? Who am I, really? What do I know? Nothing, not one thing. Oh, I've seen a little fragment, and I can hardly express THAT, much less anything beyond that. I am a man of unclean lips, in a generation of people with unclean lips, and like Job there is not much else to do but sit in the ashes and loathe myself. There have been times when I laid down my pen or shut off my computer and said I would never write again. All that I thought I knew I realized I did not know. What I did know I could not find words to describe.

We don't know this Jesus we think we know. He is Wholly Other, totally, supremely, magnificently GOD. Only God can remain silent while we speak blasphemies and heresies in His name. He allows mankind to distort and misrepresent and bring people to a place of despair, just so He can then step in and reveal Himself for Who He really is. And He is never, ever, ever, ever what you thought. Nothing is as you have been told. And then, once you meet Him, you cannot describe Him, except to say He is nothing like what you had been told. Beyond description.

When we realize we don't know, then Christ becomes our Wisdom so we CAN know. When we are children we are apt to say, I know WHAT I believe. As we grow out of infancy and begin to wrestle with the deeper questions and issues of the Christian faith we will learn to say, I know WHY I believe. The ultimate experience, however, is to be brought to a place where we can say with confidence, I know WHOM I believe.

Knowing WHAT is a beginning. Knowing WHY is progress. Knowing WHO is maturity.

There is a time in our life when we penetrate the veil and from henceforth we KNOW Whom we have believed. It is no longer a question of belief, reason, argument, or opinion. We simply know.

Wait a minute, someone will say. First you say we cannot know Him, then you say that we can know Him. Which is it? All I can say is, it is both.

The child is preoccupied by WHAT, the young adult is consumed by WHY, and the mature believer is obsessed with WHO.

A brother wanted to know what holiness was. So, he found over 200 Scriptures on the subject, arranged them in order, and committed them to memory. Yet, he still didn't know what holiness was. He felt empty inside. Finally he met an elderly sister who was holy. He finally saw Holiness, and it struck him to the ground. He then knew, because he saw. What he saw was not a concept or a teaching, but Holiness living through the elderly saint. It was not a virtue or a code of conduct, but a Person, Who was expressing His holiness through a yielded vessel.

Another brother was in a similar situation. He was emphatic about what he believed until someone with equal or greater argument confronted him. This occurred one day and someone pointed out several supposed "errors" in the Bible. This caused the brother to be very alarmed. He went to the same elderly lady and informed her of these alleged errors and wanted to know her opinion. She simply stated that the knowledge of God did not depend upon the answering of these questions. He thought, perhaps not to you, but to me it is important! So he spent the next year investigating what this other person had told him and found it to be untrue. But, had he simply known God He would not have found it necessary to study the whole thing and reason it out. The elderly sister was right, the knowledge of God did not depend upon the answering of those questions. If you know Who, knowing what and why become less significant.

No one illustrates this better than Paul the apostle. As the final hours were upon him, what was his testimony? He did not say, "I know what I believe." A man of extraordinary intellect and education, he had forgotten more about Judaism and Christianity than most people will ever know.

He did not say, "I know why I believe". Of course he knew why he believed. He didn't have to say it. The years of persecution and prison had made him better, not bitter. For the first time in his life he knew what real joy was. But even knowing what and why would not be enough to carry him through this much suffering.

What was his secret? "I know WHOM I have believed, and I am confident that He is able to keep that which I have committed to Him."

You can start out with WHAT, sort through it with WHY, but it ultimately leads to WHO.

Who else? Christ as all in all. Everything leads to Him. All the questions, all the answers. Everything is reduced to Him, for He is the sum of all spiritual things. When we are reduced to Him, then we will be satisfied. Let us lose our life that we may gain our Life and know Whom we have believed. Amen.

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