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Dr. Keith Stanglin is Associate Professor of Historical Theology at Harding University. Having taught at the University since the fall of 2005, Dr. Stanglin is leaving this summer to become Associate Professor of Scripture and Historical Theology at Austin Graduate School of Theology in Austin, Texas. For these seven years, he has been a major asset in the College of Bible where he has taught classes in Bible and church history while doing scholarly research on the writings of Arminius. Dr. Stanglin recently delivered the following address in the chapel of the College of Bible and Ministry, and we wanted to share this sample of his excellent work in this edition of Salt, Leaven & Light.

Knowledge: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly
Keith Stanglin

As we are here to honor our graduates, and particularly those who have excelled in their studies, it seemed especially appropriate to speak about knowledge.

Let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance…

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction. (Prov. 1:5, 7)

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Pet. 1:5-8)

I have chosen the topic of “Knowledge: the good, the bad, and the ugly.” I will take these descriptions of knowledge in reverse order.

Knowledge, the Ugly- This type comes in a couple of forms. First, there is knowledge falsely so-called. It is ignorance that passes uncritically as knowledge. Our society is full of this kind of knowledge. “Religion is responsible for all the atrocities perpetrated throughout human history.” I had a student in my office this week telling me how Christianity was culpable for the Nazi Holocaust. Or how about this Enlightenment myth: Religion is based on irrational faith, but science is based on indubitable reason. We could multiply examples of lies that pass for truth because people are too lazy or ignorant to know the difference, both outside the church and inside.

Another example of the ugly also comes from many directions, including from Christians. This is the outright rejection of knowledge altogether. It happens when someone not only is satisfied with his own intellectual stagnation, but also positively scoffs at the prospect of intellectual labor. Such people despise their education. I have always found it strange when students complain about the academic rigor of an academic institution of higher education, like a university. It’s like complaining that a comedian made you laugh too much, or that a concert was just too awesome. It’s puzzling. Instead, one should complain if the comedian is mirthless, if the musicians are incompetent, and if the course is not intellectually challenging.

Humanity’s widespread aversion to intellectual labor is a result of the fall. Anti-intellectualism is a (Continued on page 2)
“Make every effort to add to your knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love.”
(Peter—2 Peter 1: 5-7)

“Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.”
(Paul—I Corinthians 8:1)

“If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.”
(Paul—I Corinthians 13:2)

(Continued from page 1)

reflection of fallenness. The human tendency to take an essential component of the image of God—our intellect—and subject it to a slow death by neglect, to bury this talent given by divine grace, is worse than ingratitude. It’s faith seeking…nothing. It’s just distorted, ugly, so I won’t spend any more time dwelling on it.

Knowledge, the Bad- What is an example of “bad” knowledge? Here again, there are a couple of forms. First, there is the endless pursuit of knowledge of things of little worth. This knowledge may be true, but it is trivially so. As worldly people, we may know many things, but our knowledge is not particularly virtuous. Why is our appetite for worldly things insatiable? Some cannot get enough movies, or reality TV. Others can never have too much baseball or basketball. If we offered degrees in video gaming, I know some students who, in light of their specialized expertise, by now would have earned a PhD in the game, “Call of Duty.” But like Jesus told Peter, “You are thinking not divine thoughts, but human thoughts” (Mk. 8:33).

And even if we do not actually possess an appetite for greater holiness, we can usually get ourselves to pay lip service to certain virtues from 2 Peter 1, realizing we need more. We need more faith, goodness, self-control, perseverance, godliness, and love—the theological virtues, the virtues of the will and affections. But sometimes it’s hard—in churches, and even in schools—to get the same kind of verbal support or lip service for the virtuous kind of “knowledge” that 2 Peter mentions, or as Hebrews puts it, the virtue of “moving on from elementary teachings to build on the foundation.” We cannot handle the meat. Just a little taste of theology, a little pinch of history, one bite of biblical exegesis, a little morsel of vocabulary, and we have had more than our fill.

Another example of the bad knowledge may be when something is known as true, and perhaps even virtuous, but the knowledge is an end in itself. This is the kind of knowledge that, as Paul says, “puffs up” (1 Cor. 8:1). What makes it bad? Not that the knowledge is incorrect, but that it is selfish. The ability to “fathom all mysteries and all knowledge” (1 Cor. 13:2) by itself—without love—is nothing! Well, there may be a sort of love there: Love of self, love of being right, love of attention and praise. But it is knowledge unaccompanied by the love of the One worth loving above all else.

Knowledge, the Good- Although knowledge without love can puff up and can rightly be called a “vice,” ignorance or anti-intellectualism is never a “virtue.” Knowledge, rightly ordered and rightly pursued, is good and beautiful. The biblical passages that encourage growth in knowledge are numerous. Consider, as one example, I Cor. 3:1-3, where Paul refers to milk-fed Christians as “fleshy.” Also note Eph. 4:11-16, where Paul states that the goal is to be infants no longer, tossed back and forth by the waves, but to grow up into maturity. Increased knowledge is a goal to which we are called, even if the goal is only proximate, and itself a means to something higher.

The mistake we often make is to dichotomize between head and heart, knowledge and love, and then feel like we have to make an exclusive choice between the two sides. But this is a false dichotomy, a widely accepted lie. Knowing and doing are intimately connected. It is better to do than to know, but knowing is the basis of doing. The knowledge or understanding is a result of a faith that makes progress. “Add to your faith...knowledge” (2 Pet. 1:5).

“I believe in order that I may understand,” as Anselm of Canterbury put it; or, put another way, “Faith seeking understanding” (not faith seeking nothing). Then that understanding or knowledge is a means to an end. Here is some unsolicited advice for students (and all life-long learners): Don’t despise your education. Instead, make the most of it. Press your professors to help you see the practical benefit of learning Greek and Hebrew, history and theology. In fact, if you are going into ministry of any kind, you must be—you will have to be—as well rounded and broadly educated in the liberal arts and sciences—and even more so—than any other

(Continued on page 3)
group of students on this campus. That is, if you want to have a productive ministry in a complex, global context.

What is your ministry going to be? To what duty have you been called? You owe it to the educated and uneducated people who will sit in the pews to hear your teaching and preaching, whose children you will be instructing, you owe it to the nominal Christians, to the agnostics and atheists to whom you will reach out, and you owe it to the God who called you to these tasks, to give your all—heart and mind—in preparation for this solemn ministry. While you are here, let your motto be, “faith seeking understanding.”

There is no more worthy object of our contemplation than God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There is nothing else more worthy of our reflection and study. Even here at Harding, especially here at Harding, do not be distracted from that one thing.

In Phil. 3:8, Paul speaks of the “surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus.” Some will point out, “Paul does not say knowing facts about Christ, but knowing Christ.” This is right. Once again, though, it is “both/and,” not “either/or.” Knowing someone (knowledge of acquaintance) is certainly more than simply knowing about them. It is union with another. Relational, experiential knowledge is more than knowing data, but it at least includes “knowing about.” I cannot say I know my wife unless I also know some things about her. The more I know about her, chances are, the better I know her; and vice versa: The better I know her, the more I will know about her. It is the same with God.

Gregory the Great said, “Love is itself [a form of] knowledge.” Based on the first and greatest command—to love God with your whole mind—I would add that seeking to know is an expression of love. You seek progress in the things you love. Just like some can seek worldly pursuits interminably and never be satisfied, never have enough. What will our interminable pursuit be? Why not something that can change our lives, and the lives of others?

Ps. 105:4 says, “Look to the Lord and his strength; seek his face always.” This is an eternal command. The pursuit of God and knowledge of God never stop—not now, not in eternity. We have only begun the journey that will have no end. For God’s beauty draws us “further up and further in.” The more we learn of God’s love, the clearer the vision of God’s face, the more attractive this Beauty becomes. As we seek God’s face always, forever, there will be enough to keep us busy for an eternity—always more to learn, forever more to see. We will rest satisfied in God’s presence, but remain eternally restless in the insatiable pursuit of God’s face.

For now, we are privileged to get a small foretaste of what it means to seek and to know God. God has revealed himself in his Spirit-filled church, in the communion of saints who sit around us and who have gone on before us. He has revealed himself in the bread, wine, and water. He has revealed himself in the proclamation of the word, and in Jesus Christ. The search has begun! Don’t waste one moment of it. “Seek his face always.”