

# *Covenant Epistemology:* Restoring Love, Wonder and Wisdom to Scholarship and Seminary

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## **Introduction**

Thank you so much for inviting me to participate in this conference. I'm so impressed that you students engage epistemology, and that you organize student conferences. And I'm honored that you have invited covenant epistemology into both those endeavors. It is wonderful that you have brought me back to this place I love, this place which nurtured me and covenant epistemology.

My thesis in this paper is as follows: Scholarship and seminary on the defective Western modernist epistemic default can be abstract, impersonal, critical, isolated, dry, and in-house. But as they are embedded self-consciously in covenant epistemology and covenant ontology they become life-giving, caught up in gospel encounter and the coming of God. All of you gathered here are deeply involved in seminary training for Christian living and ministry, and you are all involved in scholarship. So what I will be arguing is that the very enterprises in which we are invested will benefit from what I call epistemological therapy. Kindly do not hear me as accusing you personally of any of these unappetizing qualities. The problem is more systemic than personal. Do hear me as lending life-giving epistemic reorientation to our joint cause.

Here's a little analogy that may help give a sense of what I am trying to do in this talk. Only a few years ago I read for the first time a hippie-era classic that was published the year I turned 21: Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.<sup>1</sup> The main character is a motorcycle lover, both riding and maintaining his machine. The journey he and his son take across the West becomes his own "Chautauqua," or reflection, on the puzzle of technology. Technology, many have felt, and continue to feel, seems to have adverse effect on society, and to be in league with imposing bureaucratic systems. His question is, effectively, is the motorcycle itself the problem because it is a machine? Is it excluding quality and artistry and humanness? It's also a question of whether we can reconcile science and the humanities. His conclusion is that the problem is not with machine itself, but with some spirit, effectively a defective epistemology, which haunts it. It's not the bike that needs fixed, but the epistemology. Fixing the epistemology makes the motorcycle that much more of a beautiful thing, and brings it into harmony with life and reality. I'm going to argue something analogous with respect to seminary and scholarship.

First I will sketch covenant epistemology. I do this both to acquaint you with the epistemic stance from which I draw my proposed thesis, and also to sketch its contours in the place where it began to be formulated and for which it is named. To sketch covenant epistemology is, third,

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<sup>1</sup> Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values* (New York: Morrow, 1974).

essentially to do epistemological therapy, to reorient an epistemic default. Specifically, I want to talk about how covenant epistemology ensconces the redemptive encounter as the proper epistemic paradigm, and how this epistemic reorientation frees up reality itself to a dynamic wholeness in which God may be seen to come. I will finish with a sketch of what such a reorientation might involve for seminary and scholarly work.

You should know that my book, *Loving to Know: Introducing Covenant Epistemology* appeared in 2011.<sup>2</sup> Since then I have been getting to know it, taking steps to expand its implications and applications. This talk is just such a step. So I will do some summarizing, I want to emphasize what I have been reading and pondering in the last year.

## The defective default of modernist epistemology

I begin with the beginning claim of the book, however, that most people don't realize that all the knowing they do involves them in an implicit epistemic stance. We can recognize it quickly by stopping to think about how people generally conceive of what knowledge is. Without any consideration, we think knowledge is...facts, data, information. It is statements and proofs. Acquiring knowledge involves only a linear, passive, transfer of information. We presume that facts and data are accessed through analysis, through a kind of dismembering to get down to individual bits. Data is measurable quantities, expressible in the 1s and 0s of computers. The amassing of information we deem to be education and scholarship.

This pervasive epistemic default, as I call it, involves an epistemological dualism. Most people align knowledge with science, with reason, with the mind, with theory, with objectivity, with abstract concepts, with the public square. We distinguish this privileged cluster from belief, faith, values, emotion, art, embodiment, particularity, from which we strive to purge the privileged member of each binary. Where knowledge is information, we might *do* with that information is not *itself* knowledge. It is interpretation, application, packaging, etc. Things such as commitment or faith or emotion or service are not knowledge. They are add-ons, some of which we must minimize, and some of which we must prioritize. But knowledge itself is pure information.

This epistemic default is known among scholars as the modernist epistemological habit which continues to pervade Western culture. Rene Descartes' mathlike thought experiment that suggested his own disembodied mind as the Archimedean anchor of certainty birthed the modern self and yielded a totalizing vision which proved to shape modernity. It can be connected with the rise of science, the ascendancy of reason known as the Enlightenment, the industrial revolution, modern economics, individualism and mass society—yes, they go together; and optimism regarding progress and the future. But while modernist epistemology has engendered immense good, it has simultaneously proved culturally damaging. In the memorable words of philosopher Marjorie Grene, Descartes stood “on the knife-edge of modernity—on the knife-edge of disaster.”<sup>3</sup> What is more, the Cartesian epistemic vision has this way of eliminating all challengers, and also of expanding interminably.

In his little critique of E.O. Wilson's *Consilience*, called *Life Is a Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition*, renowned writer Wendell Berry refers to this default epistemic

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<sup>2</sup> Esther Lightcap Meek, *Loving to Know: Introducing Covenant Epistemology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Marjorie Grene, *The Knower and the Known*. (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1974).

presumption as “reductivist epistemology.” He fights it tooth and nail, in the name of the lively particularity of covenantal communal membership, cross-disciplinary conviviality in scholarship, and reverent care of the miracle of life. Berry says that the primary reductionism is to say that knowledge, meaning, experience, can be reduced to language. This, he says flatly, is false.<sup>4</sup> Epistemology must honor the more than explainable; to reduce life to the scope of our explanations is to give up on life.<sup>5</sup>

Modernist epistemology is intrinsically atheistic, occluding God and the ever-miraculous newness of his involvement in his world. For all that, it is widely acknowledged that Protestant Christianity climbed into bed with modernist epistemology. The Christian church offers no language for doxology, as Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann argues, in our “royal consciousness” of Enlightenment-spawned consumerist satiety, no epistemology that accords with the miracle of the resurrection and the imagination of an alternative vision for which we may hope.<sup>6</sup>

Missiologist Lesslie Newbigin has famously argued that the West has no ears even to hear the Gospel, due to its defective epistemology. Positively, he argues that the Gospel can only be itself in a plausibility structure of which it alone is the cornerstone.<sup>7</sup> David Kettle, following in Newbigin’s footsteps, argues that knowing God and being known by Him must be the paradigm of human knowing and culture; the extant converse, the theoretical paradigm, is a horrendous logical inversion. It has domesticated the church itself, bringing on the Winter of Western Christianity. Epistemology is key to unleashing the Gospel.<sup>8</sup>

Scholars in the reformational tradition, true to *semper reformanda*, also responded epistemologically to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century challenges of higher criticism of Scripture, and of Darwinian evolution, by tapping the then-new idea of worldview, and of presuppositions. But apart from an epistemological *semper reformanda*, worldview itself succumbs to the defective epistemic default. Apart from specific epistemological therapy, worldview is understood either to be an unavoidable bias to be minimized, or pieces of information that we arbitrarily choose to head our data chains.

In addition to this handful of voices, significant philosophical and cultural challenges have been thrown at the hydra of modernism from very soon after its birth. Despite their efforts, however, I believe that modernism survives and grows—what I call a “perforated” modernism—fueled these days by a moral passion for philosophical naturalism, physicalism, or materialism. Ever expanding technology appears to fuel it as well.

What makes modernist epistemology destructive, and actually self-destructive, is that this vision also marginalizes essential dimensions of knowing, of being, and of humanness. It occludes a central, mutually transformative dynamic. It depersonalizes knower and known by truncating

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<sup>4</sup> Wendell Berry, *Life is a Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2000), 151.

<sup>5</sup> Berry, *Miracle*, 3, 6-7.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001); *Truth-telling as Subversive Obedience*, ed. K. C. Hanson (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011) 50-51.

<sup>7</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

<sup>8</sup> David J. Kettle, *Western Culture in Gospel Context: Towards the Conversion of the West; Theological Bearings for Mission and Spirituality* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011). See also my review of Kettle’s book: *Tradition and Discovery: The Polanyi Society Journal* (34:1, 2012-13) 74-76.

both severely. This approach to knowledge also reduces reality to 1s and 0s, for no categories remain to apprehend anything else. Both knowing and being are thereby denuded—pared down to two-dimensional bits. I believe that the defective default hobbles knowledge, scholarship and education, cutting them off from reality.

Modernist epistemology, our tacitly held, defective, epistemic default, foments disengagement, irresponsibility, indifference, boredom, cluelessness, hopelessness, skepticism, cynicism, atheism, secularism, societal and environmental damage of all sorts. It excludes adventure, confidence, risk, wonder and wisdom. Nowhere in this account is there room within knowledge for wonder, epiphany, hope, redemption, wisdom, or God.

Not only might the Protestant church be domesticated and dying, but I believe that education and scholarship may be threatened as well. It's easy to see that if knowledge is information, content, statements and proofs, and scholarship and seminary training concern knowledge, then scholarship and seminary training can have the feel of epistemic dualism. The defective epistemic default pervades them with an implicit effort to distinguish them from the marginalized items: belief, faith, opinion, emotion, praxis, art, embodiment, particularity, or conviviality—and, for Wendell Berry's sake, we must list, dirt. It implicitly occludes, as I said, things such as wonder and wisdom and redemption and even God from knowledge! For this to be true of Christian scholarship and Christian seminaries would be beyond sad to painfully ironic. And this might be why a lot of people I know have felt a disconnect about participation in these ventures.

On the defective epistemic default and its consequent dualism, seminary and Christian scholarship, as knowledge, consist of impersonal, disconnected bits content, focally apprehended, to the end of certain, comprehensive Christian information. Christian scholars can appear just as much “talking heads,” in Jamie Smith's memorable phrase, as any others. Christian scholarship and theology can appear to have little to do with ordinary Christians' personal relationships with Christ. And the alternative is to abrogate both knowledge and scholarship. Indeed, some well-meaning believers do just this. The choice appears to be disembodied scholarship or no scholarship—no knowledge at all.

I have up-to-date, firsthand experience of the epistemic state of students beginning seminary, now that I am teaching at Redeemer Seminary in Dallas. Serious, intelligent, Christians with a heart for ministry still arrive at seminary with their defective epistemic default intact, unexposed and unhealed. In the absence of epistemological therapy, all the erudite, doctrinally profound, learnings such students acquire in seminary classes fall right into the defective default, tacitly adding to a penchant for comprehensive Christian information to the end of certainty, disconnected from life and, actually, from the student's relationship with Christ and passion for his or her church.

Several students exhibit anxiety about scholarship in general, and seminary, unsure how it goes with their hearts' desires to love the world in the name of Christ, fearful that it will deaden their first love. And then there are those who work arduously in pursuit of an ideal of certainty, feeling sure that falling short is sin. Many fear what they deem to be postmodern relativism, not knowing any better about postmodernism than to think that. For where knowledge is certain information, the alternative is relativism. I call epistemological dualism, “Certainty or bust.” All of them seem to long for a more embodied, integrated, Christian experience.

This unidentified defective epistemic is proves hazardous to health and spirituality. Let me tell you about Travis. Having grown up in a nominally Christian home and making his way to true faith in Christ, a few years ago Travis discerned a call to pastoral ministry. From that hour, he became plagued with doubt with regard to his knowledge of God. It has become so severe that, now that he is a seminary student, he can barely bring himself to tackle his homework. He plays video games to relieve the angst, and he has been getting more and more depressed.

In his other life, Travis is a hitting coach. He actually told me that he was a better hitting coach than former Kansas City slugger George Brett. Reading Brett's book, Travis could tell that the slugger failed to understand his own success at hitting. Now—that is confidence! But Travis, until reading *Longing to Know*<sup>9</sup>, could not see that his own epistemic Charlie horse would relax if he could go at all knowing the way he goes at coaching batting. I encouraged him to read the book—an assigned text he was having a hard time bringing himself to read—by promising this. His response was, “But how do I KNOW it will help??? I fear it will only make things worse.” I am happy to report that he's made it through the book, and the Charlie horse is indeed relaxing.

Once you recognize the pervasive effect that one's epistemic orientation may have on seminary and scholarship and beyond, you can imagine how revising it would quite possibly be pervasively therapeutic. And since modernist epistemology is especially incongruent with Christianity, it appears that a certain sort of epistemic reorientation might be an out and out blessing. My hope is that covenant epistemology offers this. It takes on this defective epistemic default so as to revitalize all knowing, by reorienting knowledge to a paradigm that is itself the Gospel.

## Reorienting the epistemic default: Covenant epistemology

At the core of covenant epistemology remain the central insights of Michael Polanyi, the idea of knowing as subsidiary-focal integration.<sup>10</sup> Casting knowing along these lines, which I will describe presently, cuts through epistemic dualism healthfully like nothing else I know. And it does so in such a way that it allows the entrée of theological motifs such as covenant and redemption. It thus spawned covenant epistemology. It readmits hope and wonder, love and wisdom into the heart of knowing. And it readmits the basics—humanness, reality, and God.

According to Polanyi, all knowing, whatever the field, works the same way: we subsidiarily rely on clues integratively to achieve and focus on a coherent pattern. So, for example, when you are reading, you rely subsidiarily on the marks on the page, not focally. You integrate from them to their meaning. When you bike, your felt body sense of balancing is subsidiary. Your focus is (had better be) on getting where you are going.

All knowing involves focal awareness responsibly achieved through integration from clues of which we are subsidiarily aware. My Framean gloss—as in theologian John Frame<sup>11</sup>—on the Polanyian account is to say that those indwelt subsidiary clues consist of three intertwined

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<sup>9</sup> Esther Lightcap Meek, *Longing to Know: The Philosophy of Knowledge for Ordinary People* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, corrected ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962); *The Tacit Dimension*, foreword by Amartya Sen (Chicago: University Press, 2009); Meek, *Loving to Know*, chap. 4.

<sup>11</sup> John Frame, *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987); Meek, *Loving to Know*, chap. 6.

sectors: the existential (my lived, felt, body sense); the situational (the world, the place of my puzzlement); the normative (any and all authoritative guides and directions, all theoretical frameworks, including presuppositions). Together they all serve to extend my body into the world, the way any tool or instrument does. This very accessible triad of subsidiary clues invites into all knowing everything from the Word of God, language, tradition and community, to our felt body sense and our particular situatedness in place and history—including the dirt we love.

So knowing, engaging the world, is hermeneutical: to be human, and to understand, is to interpret. Polanyian subsidiary knowledge makes profound, helpful, sense of presuppositions and worldview: these are subsidiarily indwelt, not focal or arbitrarily chosen. We indwell them to unlock and engage the world. I believe that this re-accords a place to wisdom into knowing.

Another great dimension of this approach is that it allows us to recognize the epistemic experience of being on the way to knowing—of anticipative knowing. On the way to knowing, you must rely on clues in your effort to make sense of a puzzlement. You only half-understand the significance of clues. We can know and not know what we know. But this feature makes very helpful sense of antithesis and common grace in tandem. To cast knowing as pilgrimage is to enable humble common cause of believers and unbelievers, wheat and tares, together.

Subsidiary-focal integration is also heuristic. In a trajectory of coming to know, or discovery (also learning), we scrabble and struggle anticipatively to indwell the clues in such a way that it evokes a coherent, transformative pattern. Successful integration to a coherent pattern unlocks reality's possibilities. My favorite pronouncement of Polanyi's became the focus of my dissertation: "We know we have made contact with reality because we experience a sense of the possibility of unspecifiable future manifestations." This is an epistemology that requires hope, and that may restore doxology and the prophetic imagination of alternative visions.

We also may expect that our insight changes us. Knower and all clues are transformed as reality graciously self-discloses and breaks in. Knowing changes the knower. Every aha! moment of insight grows us as persons and as knowers. Reality knows us. This is an epistemology of transformation.

On the basis of these "hints of interpersonal reciprocity," I have developed covenant epistemology. Covenant epistemology contends that the paradigm of knowing is, most fundamentally, not impersonal theory, but interpersonal, covenantally constituted, unfolding relationship between knower and yet-to-be-known, to the end of, not comprehensive, static, absolute, information, but rather, more dynamically objective and ongoing communion.

Students of Mike Williams will recognize his signature understanding of covenant as unfolding relationship in this last sentence.<sup>12</sup> Covenant is the first theological motif I layered onto subsidiary-focal integration. It was Annie Dillard's description of waiting to see a muskrat that prompted my recognizing covenantal behavior in efforts to know.<sup>13</sup> Then, what Williams' formula provided was a conduit from knowing through covenant to relationship. For where there is covenant there are persons in relationship. Knowing is covenantal; therefore, there is something of the relational, of familial or communal intimacy, in knowing.

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<sup>12</sup> Michael D. Williams, *Far as the Curse is Found: The Biblical Drama of Redemption* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2005); Meek, *Loving to Know*, chap. 7.

<sup>13</sup> Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: HarperCollins, 1974); Meek, *Loving to Know*, chap. 2.

Covenant, thus, signposted what I call interpersonhood. This is what I labored especially to develop in *Loving to Know*. I explore John Macmurray’s conviction that personhood itself is essentially being-in-communion.<sup>14</sup> Personhood’s fundamental unit is not I, but I and You. In human life this is first, mother and child. That becomes both the first knowing, and the intimate, interpersonal context of all knowing. To come to God, then, is to enter a relational communion that has been signposted all our lives. Martin Buber provides an account of I-You encounter that thinly veils the reference to knowing and being known by God, and that sets up this encounter as the core paradigm of knowing.<sup>15</sup> His work suggests helpfully how we may “take the I of I-You into all our I-its.” He enjoins us to “say, You, and listen.” This is the sort of thing I have in mind for the epistemic healing of seminary and scholarship.

My exposition of interpersonhood is to the end of making a case that knower, and known, and knowing, all bear telltale hints of interpersonhood. But here I want briefly to describe just one juicy nugget of it, one which displays how it is that the redemptive encounter may be seen to be paradigmatic for all human knowing. James Loder, as part of his account of convictional knowing, called, *The Transforming Moment*, offers an account of the deep dynamic of humanness that drives the longing to know.<sup>16</sup> According to Loder, humanness has four dimensions. You should picture what I say here from the vantage point of yourself living life. Dimension 1 is the world around you, your situation. Dimension 2 is your sense of yourself as distinguished from the world around you. Arguably we become aware of this dimensions in this order (take *that*, Rene Descartes!) Much of the time many people think that these two dimensions constitute our lives. Our task is to cope with the world.

But the third dimension, by definition, lies outside our control, and when it turns up, it far outruns the other two dimensions. Loder calls it, the void. The void is any occurring sense of the possibility of non-being. This can happen when you see flashing lights in your rear-view mirror, or when, perish the thought, a loved one dies. It can come over you for no reason at all.<sup>17</sup> It is a sense of your contingency—that you might not exist. It may be a sense that you certainly aren’t going to exist for long, unless a miracle of deliverance transpires. Psalm 107 contains several verses, each with stories of people who experience the void. The Israelites caught between Pharaoh and the Red Sea were experiencing the void. You should let it sink in that the void, Loder has said, is the third dimension of humanness! Full-fledged humanness requires the void!

In the void, what you need to do is neither deny it, nor resign yourself to it. According to the psalm, what you need to do is to cry out for deliverance. Three people I know and greatly respect have insisted to me that the cry for deliverance is the one cry God hears.<sup>18</sup>

Dimension 4 is the Holy, the gracious, delivering, possibility of new being. Like the void, the Holy is an essential dimension of humanness. The inbreaking of new being, of the gracious Other, recenters us in Him to become a self who gives love. It gives us a new reality.

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<sup>14</sup> John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, Intro. Frank G. Kirkpatrick (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities, 1991); Meek, *Loving to Know*, chap. 8.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970); Meek, *Loving to Know*, chap. 9.

<sup>16</sup> James E. Loder, *The Transforming Moment*, 2nd ed. (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1989); Meek, *Loving to Know*, chap. 10.

<sup>17</sup> I attribute this insight to Martin Heidegger, in his essay, “What is Metaphysics?” in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, rev. ed., ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper, 2008).

<sup>18</sup> John Buswell, John Stanley, and Dan Allender.

It's easy to see that the developing of the 4 dimensions of humanness in our lives accords with our conversion. In Gospel redemption, Jesus graciously breaks in to save us and to transform us. Reality changes as we are born anew.

But what Loder shows is that this dynamic of humanness is just what fuels the longing to know. Indeed, that trajectory begins when we run up against a void—something we are without that we realize we need. There is no linear self-help procedure that ensures a solution. Rather, we cry out and wait to be visited from without with insight. We do all we can to invite it. But if and when it comes, it is gracious. We, the knowers, find ourselves transformatively known.

The four dimensions of humanness show how redemption aligns with subsidiary-focal integration. To cast knowing as a transformative event which occurs in mutuality, binding knower and known in unfolding relationship, allows us to begin to tap the Gospel epistemologically. We may take the redemptive encounter, liturgically reenacted in the Lord's Supper, as the proper paradigm of knowing. Every aha! moment prototypes and signposts his coming. To know him is to be known by him. It is to know ourselves and the world, together with others in pilgrimage with whom we are joyously, covenantally, bound. Knowing on this paradigm is fraught with the sweet intimacy of abiding in Christ. And all knowings, in turn, prototype and signpost knowing God.

Covenant epistemology accords with being, reshaping how we typically think of reality. Reality itself no longer is revisioned into two-dimensional ones and zeros, nor we into automatons. It is no longer suspected, and it is no longer static and passive. Our loving to know confers dignity and freedom that invites reality itself, including God, ever to come surprisingly and transformatively in newness. It allows for Brueggemann's imagining of an alternative vision. Reality is gift, as theologian Philip Rolnick and others aver.<sup>19</sup> Reality comes in newness, akin to the descent of God. Reverend John Ames, in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*, says, "Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration. You don't have to bring a thing to it except a little willingness to see."<sup>20</sup>

In the past year, I have thought more about what I call covenant ontology. We profess that creation is God's revelation. I think the doctrine allows us to see all real things as constituted literally by his promise, his covenanting let there be. Promise makes reality. (And where there is covenant there are persons in relationship. It's relationship "all the way down," as they say.) But what I only just have thought is that we should expect to know the creational word by indwelling it, the way we know the written word by indwelling it. And we should expect the creational word to be living and dynamic the way the written Word is. I'm taken by the fact that reality can change in, say, an hour. Yes, reality is reliable, as the Lord's "crystalized" steadfast love. But just because it is, it is also inexhaustive and ever surprisingly new. Learning and scholarship will never approximate the last word. But far from being discouraging, that beckons us to launch out in delight. For the goal isn't comprehensive information; it is communion.

Covenant epistemology calls us to *knowing for shalom*. On this account, insight potentially heals both knower *and* known. Our knowing should move the world in the direction of shalom. Knowing should be therapeutic. This connects knowing integrally with the cultural mandate. And in our own lives, once we have been epistemically reoriented to transformation, we become

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<sup>19</sup> Phillip Rolnick, *Person, Grace, and God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007); Meek, *Loving to Know*, chap. 13.

<sup>20</sup> Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (Picador, 2006) 245.

*semper transformanda*—catalysts of ongoing transformation. Our epistemic practice, shaped by the redemptive encounter, orients us in blessing toward God and his world. It is the epistemic posture of blessing the nations.

Covenant epistemology renders our efforts to know as appropriately a matter of *inviting the real*. Inviting the real involves a posture that humbly welcomes and embraces the risk of the gracious incursion of the real. It is the posture of the Hebrews, according to Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, to which we should aspire: where the Greeks learn in order to comprehend, the Hebrews learn in order to be apprehended.<sup>21</sup> What we may not wrest indifferently in a robot-like, indifferent, harvesting of mute “facts,” we may hope in grace to have revealed to us as we behave properly, personally, hospitably—as we practice epistemological etiquette—good epistemic practice—to invite the real.

The following are five loci of a lengthy catalog of epistemic practices.<sup>22</sup> It is worth giving further thought and discussion to how these might be implemented with intentionality in scholarship and in the classroom. First and foremost is *love*. We do not know in order to love; rather, we love in order to know. We promise to love, honor and obey so as to invite the gracious self-disclosure of the other. We love in hope of understanding. And understanding must be rendered more on the lines of communion rather than exhaustive information. Love is the central, all encompassing, epistemic practice. As author Annie Dillard says, and Episcopal priest/cook Robert Farrar Capon as well, it is the lover who sees.<sup>23</sup>

Second, *composure*. We compose ourselves as knowers. In fact, we grow as knowers as we are known by the real in its gracious inbreaking. Every little aha! moment grows us. Every healthy interpersonal encounter grows us. As we mature in the care and noticing regard of others, we are composed, and we become better at knowing. Robert Pirsig, in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, argues that the main ingredient it takes to fix a motorcycle is...peace of mind. That’s composure!

Third, *comportment*. Comportment involves binding yourself covenantally to live life on the terms of the yet-to-be-known. It involves something like hospitable welcome, a readiness to listen deeply.<sup>24</sup> It involves exercising trust, obedience, humility, and patience toward the not-yet-known. This seems to me to be the opposite of critical analysis, which can be dismissive and unhearing. It does presume the worth of the effort, and trusts goodness of reality. Why would reality disclose itself to suspicion?

Yet I must insert a note about suspicion as potentially an appropriate comportment for knowing. As you can see from my epistemology of love and relationship, suspecting does not come easily to me personally. But I do not believe this invalidates covenant epistemology, which we might describe as knowing the way it ought to be. The key structures of covenant epistemology—relationship, mutuality, love, trust—are just the sort of thing that would easily be damaged through betrayal or abuse of power. This, I believe, only underscores the viability of covenant epistemology. But the prospect of betrayal and abuse of power—yea, this grievous pervasive reality—means that a posture other than trust and openness is sometimes necessary for self-

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<sup>21</sup> The paraphrase of my colleague, Dr. Robert Frazier.

<sup>22</sup> These five are actually *loci* of a lengthy list of practices I cull in chap. 15 of *Loving to Know*.

<sup>23</sup> Dillard, *Pilgrim*; Robert Farrar Capon, *The Supper of the Lamb: A Culinary Reflection* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1967).

<sup>24</sup> George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

preservation. I am learning this through my first baby steps into the work of Paul Ricoeur.<sup>25</sup> As with many other important European intellectuals, he underwent the horrors of Nazism in World War II, spending years in a concentration camp. Where truth has been coopted, loving in order to know appropriately involves some suspicion.

The postmoderns have joined the chorus of voices challenging the defective epistemic default, exposing by means of suspicion its inappropriate power domination.<sup>26</sup> Indeed they serve as examples to us who would reorient our epistemic posture from a modernist one. We can see that it has hurt us and that it has done so in the name of power. That's suspicion.

Recently on NPR I heard a piece commemorating the passing of Huell Howser, a Tennessean who made his way to California, settled, and fell in love with it. Apparently he produced travelogues of not usually visited sites in the state. He was widely loved and known by his signature refrain: "That's amazing!" Reports *Morning Edition's* Shereen Marisol Meraji, "Howser's show might take him to a park or a local business, but wherever he went, he was invariably excited. Amazing is the word that comes up over and over; he found everything he encountered "amazing." She speaks also of his "eternally excitable presence." The audio report featured a comment from Matt Groening, creator of *The Simpsons*, known for being a cynical show. "Well, at first, you know, you think, oh this guy—he's an idiot. You know...he's so naive, he's amazed at everything. And then you realize, he's a genius." Groening continues: "In this world of cynicism and pseudosophistication, a guy who is willing to be genuine is really refreshing." I tell you this to context my point about suspicion and underscore the value of a comportment of love and delight to invite the real.

A fourth locus of epistemological etiquette concerns *strategy* of a certain sort—of an intimate, connected, empathetic sort. We must put ourselves in the place where insight is likely to come. We must exercise the kind of noticing regard that confers dignity on the yet-to-be-known. We must delight; delight, says David Bentley Hart, is the premise of any sound Christian epistemology.<sup>27</sup> We must listen indwellingly—meaning, trying to get inside the thing we are trying to understand. Nobel Prize-winning geneticist Barbara McClintock has said that her best epistemic practice involved listening to the ear of corn, having a feeling for the organism.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, *communion*. The goal of our knowing is itself a best epistemic practice. Our epistemic goal is friendship with God and his world. Understanding a computer or a dog issues in delightful, ongoing, perichoretic (that means dance-like; the Cappadocian Church Fathers (and mothers) deemed perichoresis the dynamic movement of the Holy Trinity), knowing and being known.<sup>29</sup> Since communion is both goal and practice, the Eucharist, liturgically reenacting our redemptive encounter with Christ, additionally becomes great schooling for inviting the real. Communion is the seat of ongoing wonder and growing wisdom.

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<sup>25</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself As Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>26</sup> Here I have in mind esp. the work of Michel Foucault.

<sup>27</sup> David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 253.

<sup>28</sup> Referenced by Parker Palmer in *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998).

<sup>29</sup> Colin Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

## Covenant epistemology for seminary and scholarship

As Parker Palmer says, the shape of our epistemology is the shape of our lives.<sup>30</sup> It is the shape also of our seminary and scholarly endeavors. Changing out our epistemology, reorienting a defective modernist epistemic default with covenant epistemology, I believe, will yield a blessed result.

Details of doctrine, theology and scholarship are meant not to be focally amassed, but rather subsidiarily indwelled in submission to profounder insight. Just as words on a page make sense only if we relate to them subsidiarily, and gain profounder meaning as we in fact do so, so we attend from scholarly subsidiaries to invite, not deduce, a profounder, richer, transformative communion with the real. The epistemic posture of seminarians and scholars may be that of love, and of wonder, of waiting to be apprehended, graciously, by wisdom. It may be, in Simone Weil's words, waiting for God. We may wait in expectancy and hope that gives space for the gracious disclosure of a dynamic real. This is to love to know, and to know to love.

The goal of seminary and scholarship is not comprehensive, expert, Christian information. It is communion, friendship. Scholarship may be seen to be a delighted consent to being, to the continual freshness of the other in mutuality. We may acknowledge and cultivate an intimacy in knowing between knower and known. And this sort of seminary training and scholarship, rooted in the love which is at the core of all things, cannot help but spill over to bless the nations.

As born of care and carried by pledge, knowing on the covenant epistemology model is neither *dismissive* nor *critical*. As rooted in subsidiaries, and thus in self-giving trust, it is rooted in the concrete, in our felt bodies and in the dirt of our fields and the embracing spaces of our homes. It is not *abstract*, nor do we feel the epistemic need to abstract it. As knowing for shalom, it is intrinsically outward oriented. It cannot be *in-house*. It cannot be contained in the *ivory tower*. It never has the air of *finality*, but rather of endless adventure. The *talking head* transmutes to playful, humble, self-giving, to the end of raising up "co-celebrants of what is" (Walker Percy's term).<sup>31</sup> And where delighters inspire others to delight, we cannot call that scholarship *dry*.

In the core of such scholarship and seminary work beats its heart of Gospel and grace, or waiting for redemption, for the descent of God. The knowing itself testifies to and invites these things. An epistemic default that has redemption and grace at its core accords most happily with the study and scholarship of people born of God.

Finally, let me say that your heart, I feel confident, is at this moment burning with joy at this prospect. That's because this is in some way already true of you, as humans and as believers and as scholars. What this talk means to do is to accredit that burning joy, and reinstate it as the true dynamism of your knowing, your scholarship, and your seminary preparation. May the Lord himself blow on these coals of your care as you love in order to know.

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<sup>30</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *To Know as We are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1966).

<sup>31</sup> Walker Percy, "Naming and Being" *Signposts in a Strange Land* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1991) 131-8.