

Hebrew Thought
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"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding"
(Psalms 111:10).

This text from the Psalms is not nearly as familiar as the parallel text from Proverbs 1:7, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. Proverbs 9:10 parallels the Psalms text: the fear of the Lord is beginning of wisdom. These texts suggest a fresh way of reading the Bible, based on the patterns of Hebrew thought.

We are generally most familiar with the patterns of Greek thought: logos, pathos, and ethos. Beginning with thought (logic), we move toward relationships (pathos) and behavior or action (ethos). The center point is mental. The foundation is logic, with values and actions built on the foundation like a pyramid. Thus, to most of us today, the most important thing is that something makes sense. Ours is a religion that begins with thinking and facts more than with relationships. The Hebrew thought patterns are different. In the center is relationship with God, from which flows relationship with others and action. Thus Jesus can say the first command is to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and the second (growing out of the first) is to love one's neighbor. Much of the Old Testament covenant law is designed to show how these two great commands work out in everyday life and action. Peter's list is instructive: add to your faith virtue, knowledge.... (2 Peter 1:5ff).

Noting this contrast between Greek and Hebrew thought patterns is not designed to diminish the importance of knowledge for New Testament Christians. Education must be a high priority in a society that wants to advance. Christian education helps believers in Jesus Christ better understand God's ways. However, education for the sake of education is not a panacea. In fact, education that is purely mental cannot accomplish the purposes of God. It is not enough to know. Knowledge must be combined with relationship with God (faith and obedience) and relationship with others.

For the Hebrews, wisdom gained by obedience was superior to pure knowledge. Wisdom gained by knowing and doing the will of God often did not line up with logic. But in the unfolding of history, the church was influenced by the Greek culture and scholars like Socrates and Aristotle, and thus knowledge-based systems became more influential in the educational programs of the church. As we have outlined, the Greeks believed that the way to gain knowledge was based on reason and analysis. The result for the modern church has often been a programmed faith that seeks to do a few certain (religious) things correctly with little apparent interest in relationships or behaviors.

Two Old Testament stories illustrate the point. When the Israelites, led by Joshua, marched around Jericho seven times blowing trumpets, one sees a Hebrew model of decision-making: relationship to God that results in pure obedience without demanding logic. Logic and reason play no part in the decision to march around Jericho. How can such an action overcome a city? What possible good can come from such an action? When Elisha instructs Naaman to go wash in a river to be healed of leprosy, the instructions clashed with his intellect. One again sees the progression of Hebrew thought: focus first on obedience that comes from relationship with God. Then action follows, bringing the good life.

The contemporary church has developed a knowledge-based, programmed system. Obedience motivated by a heart fully devoted to following God is too seldom in view. In some cases, the church has replaced unquestioning obedience with reason, logic, and slick marketing with attractive programs to entice people into the church. Other churches have programmed worship, salvation, and obedience so that discipleship (genuinely following Christ) and relationship with God (prayer, study, and meditation) are hardly mentioned. We could take several mighty steps forward by going backward to the Hebrew approach to life. God is at the center. From our loving, obedient relationship with him grows the actions of godly living and relationship with others. It is all about following Him, regardless.