



RESURGENCE

The Digital Age—A New Dark Age?:

A Look At How Christianity Can Speak To Those Lost In A Storm of Information

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Stephen Hawking wants to explain everything. The astro-physicist, best known for his work with black holes, longs to build a scientific theory called the Unified Field Theory. If ever fully constructed, this theory would encompass the entire universe and pull together all of the knowledge of science and humanity. This, of course, is not a new attempt. In fact, this is what philosophers have been trying to do for ages—to create a theory or system which explains and unifies everything. But scientists and philosophers alike have become only more frustrated in their quest for such an over-arching explanation. If one traces the flow of philosophy, it might even be said that the philosophers have given up on this quest and, after centuries of defeat, have taken up a different set of questions. Stephen Hawking, Albert Einstein, and other scientists who have tried their hand at this have been no more successful. When I heard Stephen Hawking speak in 2000 about his search, what I heard was a man in despair. Brilliant as he is, his own way of thinking about the universe and trying to tie knowledge together has only led him to despair because he could find no greater meaning.

As Christians, we need to deeply understand how the gospel impacts and gives us a responsibility concerning knowledge as well as understand how a lost world around us is drowning in a storm of information that they don't know what to do with. We live in a unique time in terms of knowledge. Never before in the history of mankind have so many people had the ability to learn (literacy) and had the access to such a vast array of information and even other cultures. With a vast network of libraries and information systems, particularly the internet, one only needs to travel one block over or click a button to access just about everything mankind has ever known or experienced. But mankind is adrift in its thinking. This boom of knowledge it would seem has led to only more despair. People complain of feeling more disconnected and more discontented than ever before. Some of the prevailing secular attitudes of our time include that nothing can be truly known (including God) and, despite some attempts by scientists such as Hawking, that knowledge and truth cannot be unified but are defined according to the individual. In relation to scripture, our modern culture wants to make it equal to Edith Hamilton's compendium of Greek Mythology, information and stories which do not communicate truth.

Beginning with Petrarch, the Renaissance looked at the Middle Ages, especially the early Middle Ages, and called it the Dark Ages because of its lack of progress, its lack of significant literatures and histories, and because of life being bleak—all a result of their lack of information and disconnect from human reason. Though in many ways, we see now that this was an unfair assessment, in other ways, they had a point. Perhaps the Middle Ages were "backward," but then again, so is every age when you get right down to it.

With all of our advances, with our "superior" technology, with a vast amount of knowledge available at the click of a button, modern man is truly no better off. Perhaps what we have here is our own version of a Dark Age. The Middle Ages was stunted by a lack of information, and the modern age is stunted by a glut of information and no idea how to judge it or what to do with it. This is no small point. Mankind came through its first Dark

Age with a return to knowledge and reason. The only solution for modern man (and the only true solution for any age, really) will be the gospel. Only Christianity can unify all knowledge, only Christianity can merge faith and reason, the "upper" and "lower" stories as Francis Schaeffer calls them.

As with the thinkers of the Renaissance or the Enlightenment who vaulted human reason to undue heights, modern man trusts in his own reason to save him. It is not reason or knowledge that saves us but Jesus Christ himself. But of course, we learn of Jesus Christ, study the scriptures, grow in faith, etc. The difference is: whether we begin with man as the starting point or with God as we ought. In his famous poem "Essay on Man," the Enlightenment thinker Alexander Pope writes: "Know then thyself, presume not God to scan, / The proper study of mankind is Man." It should not be surprising then that just two lines later Pope must refer to man as "a being darkly wise and rudely great...[who] hangs between...born but to die." Though we are long past the Enlightenment, these sentiments surely are at the forefront of the modern man's mind. Modern man, who believes that God cannot be known and man is left to study himself only and must somehow save himself.

Truly, this phenomenon of modern man and the problem of knowledge comes in many forms. Let us look more specifically at a few identifiable terms and specifics.

Postmodernism, the main identifiable intellectual movement of our age, has attempted to equalize information. Postmodernism wants to put the Bible on the same plane as everything else. It wants to reduce Jesus to a teacher or a prophet, and in fact ignores claims that he made about himself. In its rejection of thesis/antithesis and adoption of synthesis, it proclaims that one opinion is just as good as another no matter if it represents truth or not. Thus, we have sayings such as "we'll agree to disagree" or "to each his own." But the Bible is authoritative, it unifies all knowledge, all truth where no other thought-system or belief-system could. Without such an authoritative guide and without an anchor of not just supposed, self-defined truth, but true truth, one can imagine the societal and even personal chaos that could result.

Complicating such a view is the fact that we are now living in what is now being called by some thinkers a "post-literate" society. Many, especially in the West, are technically literate, that is, they technically can read, but are functionally illiterate, or, they choose not to read or they can only read in a simple way or understand literal meanings. Some champions of the new media forms do not see this as a negative and embrace new forms of communication. But one only needs to read Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death* to understand the dangerous implications of a media-driven epistemology. And Postman was writing even before the advent of the internet and other such technologies. It will take decades to fully understand the results of a shift away from a fluent, text-based literacy to a "computer" literacy, but so far, the studies in education and psychology have not been positive. In short, our advanced technology has left us dumbed down and numbed, unable to think critically or in a sophisticated manner.

Modern man often comes with these presuppositions. It is important for us to realize this when speaking with him. It is important for us to help him think through the consequences of these beliefs.

But the church in our time has sometimes failed just as much in its thinking about knowledge. I've been in several churches that, in relation to my or others' struggles, have quite literally said "oh, don't worry about it...don't think too much...just have faith" or that my faith would require a "leap." When someone speaks of a "leap of faith," this is modern existential theology. Modern existential theology finds its roots common to that of secular

existentialism, with Kierkegaard. In speaking of Kierkegaard, I don't mean to suggest he was a bad man and certainly don't mean to pin a great downfall solely upon him, but his writings do mark a major turning point. When Kierkegaard writes about Abraham going to sacrifice Isaac, he writes of Abraham having a "leap of faith," in other words, Abraham having to leave logic behind and trust God anyway. But Kierkegaard does not recognize the reason that Abraham does in fact use, for God had revealed Himself to Abraham. Francis Schaeffer addresses this in detail in *The God Who is There*:

Kierkegaard said this was an act of faith with nothing rational to base it upon or to which to relate it. Out of this came the modern concept of a "leap of faith" and the total separation of the rational and faith. In this thinking concerning Abraham, Kierkegaard had not read the Bible carefully enough. Before Abraham was asked to move toward the sacrifice of Isaac (which, of course, God did not allow to be consummated), he had much propositional revelation from God, he had seen God, God had fulfilled promises to him. In short, God's words at this time were in the context of Abraham's strong reason for knowing that God both existed and was totally trustworthy. This does not minimize Abraham's faith shown in the march to Mt. Moriah and all the rest, but it certainly was not a "leap of faith" separated from rationality. (Schaeffer 15-16)

When Christians allow faith to be separated from reason, we have not been true to the scriptures. True Christian faith does not abandon reason—faith in the acts of Christ, faith in what God has said, these are observable and real. And we are destroying a great witness—a witness that says that God himself is here, that He can be experienced, He is real. And real people who have real questions will need a real God.

Whereas some theologians or philosophers rejected reason or subjugated it to a separate, lower realm, and whereas some philosophers, such as in the Renaissance, placed human reason above all else, Christians ought to see that whatever term we use (knowledge, reason, wisdom), it is a gift from God that we might have it—that we might *know* Him, *know* His scriptures, *understand* them, and *believe*. For as Jesus says in John 5:24, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life." So, thinking and talking about this topic should result in glorifying God even more.

At this point we should offer a disclaimer and proclaim that though we are talking about knowledge, Christianity is not just an intellectual exercise. Perhaps one of the strongest things I could say here is that truly many have known the facts and not believed. But when we think about hearing about Christ and coming to faith, the topic is, of course, often faith. It is perhaps less often that we talk about the hearing, the understanding portion. It is important to have a whole understanding here, just as it is important to have a whole understanding of the characteristics of God, or the person of Jesus Christ, and to remember that when we speak of one characteristic, we are not doing so to exclude the others. It is ultimately important to understand that only Christianity has the answers that man is seeking—it is the only thought-system that can unify the entire knowledge and experience of the universe, it is the only thing that can help man to deal with and negotiate the knowledge and information he encounters.

Above the entrance to 30 Rockefeller Center, home to NBC television studios, is a relief sculpture that reads "Wisdom and Knowledge shall be the stability of thy times." This quote comes from the book of Isaiah, chapter 33, verse 6 (King James version)—but is seriously taken out of context. The quote, emblazoned above the entrance to a highly symbolic

building, seems to mean just what it says—that we should look to wisdom and knowledge to save us. But I offer the ESV translation of verses 5 and 6: “The Lord is exalted, for he dwells on high; he will fill Zion with justice and righteousness, and he will be the stability of your times, abundance of salvation, wisdom, and knowledge; the fear of the Lord is Zion’s treasure.” Let there be no mistake in clearly seeing the difference in the message between the passage itself and the mis-contextualized verse portion. Wisdom and knowledge separated from the gospel will surely not stabilize or save man. Knowledge taken out of context of the gospel leads to confusion and only more lostness. It is time for Christians to reclaim an authoritative place concerning knowledge and to act missionally. A study of this topic should result in being more missional—in being broken that your neighbor, your co-worker, your brother, sister, parent, or child is lost in their own thinking, that in their fallenness and lostness, they need God to break in upon their life and redeem them. Thinking about this topic and having a Biblical understanding of it as well as thinking about where our culture stands on the issue should lead to being missional. Reflect today on how the gospel has changed your own thinking and how that might speak truth into someone’s life.