

LEARNING JESUS



KNOW, LOVE, SERVE
PART 7

T. M. MOORE

A REVISION STUDY FROM
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

Learning Jesus
Know, Love, Serve: Part 7
T. M. Moore
Susie Moore, Editor and Finisher

Copyright, 2020 T. M. and Susie Moore
The Fellowship of Ailbe

Except as indicated, Scripture taken from the New King James Version. © Copyright 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Cover image: Yahoo images.

Contents

Welcome to <i>Learning Jesus</i>	4
1 Learning Jesus	5
2 Sum and Substance	8
3 Keys to Learning Jesus	11
4 A World Transformed	13
5 The Gospel without Compromise	16
6 Christ and Creation	19
7 Light in a Dark World	22
Questions for Reflection or Discussion	24

Welcome to *Learning Jesus*

In this series we have been considering what is required of us, as disciples of Jesus Christ, in getting to know Him better. Only as we increase in the knowledge of the Lord will we grow in love for Him. And only as we grow to love Him more will we be more faithful and fruitful in serving Him.

Our study comes to a conclusion in this part, as we examine specific approaches and examples for a life more consistently engaged in knowing the Lord. We can and must increase in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, and many avenues for learning Him are available to us. We need to choose the paths on the highway to knowing Christ that are best suited for us, and make steady progress in our journey.

ReVision studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

And if you find this study helpful, please let us know. How have you benefited from this study? Go to our website, www.ailbe.org, and use the Contact Us button to share your story.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 Learning Jesus

Nothing is more precious or valuable.

Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord... Philippians 3.8

Looking back

It seems a good time to look back at the ground we have covered thus far in considering the question of how we may increase in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. Paul considered such knowledge the kind of “excellence” that is worth losing everything else to obtain. That is, he regarded learning Jesus “to be of surpassing value – to be exceptionally valuable, to surpass in value, to be better” than anything he possessed or might possess (Louw and Nida). Hopefully, we have come to believe that increasing in the knowledge of Jesus is extremely important. Only as we begin to take up that calling will we realize the surpassing excellence of it.

We began our study by saying that, as disciples of Jesus Christ, we are called to be *learners*, and what we are to learn is Jesus Himself (Eph. 4.17-24). Learning Jesus is the highest calling and most excellent adventure anyone can undertake, and all who call themselves Christians and followers of Jesus are called to embark on this journey as the defining motif of their lives.

Such learning doesn’t just happen as a result of time passed in the faith. It is a “difficult task”, as Solomon explained, and we must make up our minds to take it on, to be defined by our commitment to learning Jesus, so that we increase in love for God and our neighbors as we grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Two primary sources are available to us in journeying toward the knowledge of Christ: the Word of God and the world of God. Each of these provide reliable insights to Jesus and the will of God. The Word of God is of the first importance, for it provides the defining light for understanding all else (Ps. 36.9). As we grow in the knowledge of Jesus, Who is everywhere present in the Scriptures (Jn. 5.39), we gain the perspective, insight, and protocols we need to seek the revelation of Jesus Christ in His works in the creation.

By concentrating carefully on these two resources, compiling insights and conclusions from each, combining and comparing our findings, communing with the Lord in them, and conversing with others about what we are learning, we may expect to see more of Jesus and to discover more of His will, so that we know, love, and serve Him more joyfully, faithfully, and consistently in our lives.

Three categories of disciplines are available to help us in our quest. The disciplines of *theology* are the most important, because they establish the footprint and cornerstone for the house of knowledge we are hoping to construct. The disciplines of *the humanities* and *the sciences* help us to understand ourselves, our neighbors, and our world in ways that point us to Jesus, empower us to know Him, and equip us to live richer fuller lives as His followers. We do well to make good use of these disciplines as part of our journey of increasing in the knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Looking ahead

It remains for us, therefore, to bridge the synapses between the knowledge of Jesus Christ and what we are studying in Scripture and the world, so that the spark of learning makes the leap to Jesus, and our knowledge of Him increases. How do we get from what we’re reading or studying – in Scripture, the humanities, or the sciences – to the Treasury of all wisdom and knowledge, our Lord Jesus Christ?

Learning Jesus is a bit like looking for an image in a stereogram – a “magic eye” picture. What we see on the

Learning Jesus

surface is a monotonous pattern of lines or images, connected and repeating over and over. What we're looking for in all this is not just the lines or the images, or even the pattern by which they are linked. We're after something deeper, something more mysterious, and more profound than what we readily observe. In each stereogram a 3-D image is embedded, and only by having some sense of what that image looks like, and by concentrating diligently, will that image begin to emerge. It does no good to seek the image of a *widget*, let's say, if we don't have some idea of what a widget looks like. But if we're seeking an image of the Parthenon, and we know this to be a columned ruin with a triangular façade; and if we *know*, because the maker of the stereogram has told us so, that the Parthenon is to be discovered in that orderly arrangement of lines and images and patterns; then if we'll look hard enough and persist long enough, in due course the image of the Parthenon will begin to emerge, more real and wonderful than all the surface images combined.

The same is true with Jesus. Our Father has told us that Jesus is there to be discovered in Scripture, in the world, in the words, works, and patterns by which God unfolds the story of redemption and keeps the world together. Finding Him can be the most exciting, most wonderful, most transforming, and most excellent experience of our lives. But we must know Him Whom we are seeking to learn more of through our reading, studying, observing, and discussing; and we must stay on task until He reveals Himself, and draws us more deeply into His being and essence (2 Pet. 1.4).

In this final section of our study, therefore, we will consider ways of bridging the synapse between Jesus, Whom we know – if only in part – and whatever we may be reading and studying in the disciplines of learning He has made available to us. In essence, we'll be answering the question, "How do we get from here to Jesus?"

Looking beyond

But since our goal is to know, love, and serve Jesus with increasing joy and fruitfulness, we will also consider practical ways in which our increased knowledge of Jesus might issue in grace that leads to thanksgiving and the glory of God through our lives (2 Cor. 4.15).

Knowing Jesus, and increasing in the knowledge of Christ, is not a matter of mere personal gratification. To be sure, knowing Jesus is thrilling, wonderful, joyful, and fills us with peace, hope, and contentment. But Jesus intends to overflow from us to fill the space around us with Himself – all our relationships, roles, and responsibilities (Eph. 4.8-10). We are the censer, Jesus is the incense, and the Holy Spirit is the fire Who causes all that we are truly learning about Jesus to emanate through us into the world around.

So we need to think specifically about the people in our lives, the places we go, the work we do, and all the ways we interact with culture, that we may learn Jesus so well that He shows up in all of these, increasingly and undeniably.

So let us press on to bring our journey into the knowledge of Christ toward the finish line – or should I say, the finishing line, that we may be more fully and completely finished in Jesus, and furnished by Him to spread the fragrance of His knowledge everywhere.

For Reflection

1. Have you made the commitment to increase in the knowledge of Christ? How are you working to improve in this most basic calling of discipleship?
2. How would you explain what it means to a new believer to increase in the knowledge of Christ? How can we do this? What should we expect as a result of this effort?
3. Have you mapped out your Personal Mission Field? Watch this brief video ([click here](#)), download the worksheet, and map out the people and places where God is sending you with the fragrance of the knowledge

of Christ.

Next Steps – Preparation: What will you have to “count as loss” to increase in the excellence of knowing Christ? Have you developed a plan for growing in the Lord? Review that plan, then share it with a friend, and ask your friend to pray for you as you press on in knowing the Lord.

2 Sum and Substance

He is the Alpha and Omega of all knowing.

In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace which He made to abound toward us in all wisdom and prudence, having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself, that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth—in Him. Ephesians 1.7-10

The end from the beginning

We want to get to some practical guidelines for connecting whatever we may be learning with Jesus. But before we do, further words are in order to reinforce the view that all true and God-honoring learning is learning about Jesus. No matter the discipline you choose to employ, the goal is to know Jesus, to love Jesus, and to serve Jesus. We must be clear about and convinced of this, or we'll be easily distracted or defeated in our journey of knowing.

An old joke tells about a man obsessed with golf, so much so that his wife insisted he see a counselor. The counselor showed the man a series of Rorschach cards, to which each response had something to do with golf – a particular club head, a link at some course, a dog-leg, green, or rough. After a bit the counselor opined, “This test would indicate that you do have a problem.” To which the man replied, “Don’t blame me, Doc. You’re the one showing me all the golf stuff.”

All knowing is like this. That is, all knowing is circular. It *begins* somewhere familiar and cherished, so that everything else we might come to know *ends up* at that same place. If your basic assumptions about the world are that reality is purely objective, everything reduces to some form of matter, nothing has any intrinsic purpose or meaning, evolution is the driving force for all of life, and values are merely relative and contingent; and if you’re comfortable in that framework, and find it to meet your basic needs, then whatever you learn from any source is going to be tucked safely within that paradigm, to reinforce your basic convictions. It all looks like golf.

But if you are a Christian, and you know Jesus Christ as the beginning and end of all knowing; you know that He created everything and sustains it all; that He has infused or embedded His glory in everything that exists; that He can be known, loved, and served through His Word and works; then your approach to knowing *cannot* be satisfied with the secular and naturalistic dead end. You *must* and you *will* seek to draw back the veil of all knowledge until you come, through whatever you are learning, into the eternal, majestic, brilliant, and transforming Presence of Him Who is the Alpha and Omega of everything. Everything you learn will be Jesus, and the more you learn of Him, the more you will love Him, and the more readily, joyfully, and consistently you will serve Him.

The world is a stereogram, and Jesus is in there. All the world is a Rorschach test, and Jesus is the answer – the *ultimate* answer – to everything we want to learn. The harder we work at knowing Jesus as He is revealed in the Bible (Jn. 5.39), the more we will be able to see Him, through the various disciplines of knowing, present in and refracted by everything that can be studied or learned. Knowing the end of any project of study or learning as we go into it, makes that project just that much more of an adventure.

God’s will for our learning

As we search the Scriptures, we want to learn how God’s will applies to our life, for the day ahead as well as for the larger picture of life as a whole. We expect Him to speak to us, but we will only discern His way for our lives as we seek it in line with His purpose. And God’s purpose, as Paul explains, is to sum-up and to

Learning Jesus

bring together under one Head, everything in our lives, and all things besides, under the Lordship of Jesus Christ (cf. 2 Cor. 10.3-5).

God is administering the world to exalt and advance the rule of King Jesus. All things in life, and all things everywhere, only find their true meaning with reference to Christ. What is not put under the feet of Jesus, and offered for His service and glory, will be destroyed by Him, and those who deny or oppose Him in any point will be frustrated, judged, and condemned. The inexorable, irresistible flow of history and the development of the cosmos are toward Jesus Christ, and being summed-up or explained in Him. We do not deny, and we do not apologize for taking Jesus as the starting-point and destination of everything we might come to know. Because what we know of Him from the Bible insists that this must be the case, if we are to know anything truly and with a view to glorifying God.

God is glorified in all things when we see them as tending toward Jesus. We should be able to increase in the knowledge of Jesus from whatever we choose to learn. By looking at our lives and the world through the lens of Christ, risen and exalted, we can expect that God will reveal His glory and His will, thus enabling us better to know, love, and serve Him in all things. As we thus pursue the journey of knowing and learning, from within the *Christian* circle of learning – the *Christian* encyclopedia – we will become more fruitful and consistent in the stewardship of our Kingdom calling, and more visible as followers of Christ.

Rules for the journey

Knowledge of anything is incomplete until it is related to Christ and acknowledged as from His treasury. What does this require?

First, all knowledge is about something, and since all that exists has its being from and by the Word of God, we must begin the pursuit of knowing by embracing as the end of our pursuit some clearer understanding of Christ. Why do we want to learn anything? To know Jesus better! All knowledge, whatever we may read or study or learn, must lead to a clearer and more expansive view of Christ; and we must press ahead in whatever we're learning until the knowledge of Christ begins to emerge from the patterns and images and lessons presented in our study.

Second, as we have previously observed, all knowledge should lead to worship, since to know Christ is to worship Him. Some component of worship should be included in all our knowing. Begin in prayer. Keep a Bible near at hand. Talk with the Lord about whatever you're studying, and don't hesitate to give Him thanks or praise when anything offers a glimpse of His greatness or glory.

Third, all knowledge, being knowledge of Christ, must be invested according to His agenda, which is that His Kingdom should come on earth as it is in heaven. Thus, all knowledge must be made to serve the purpose of glorifying God by good works that make disciples, build the Church, and further Christ's rule over all things. As followers of Christ, we are always learners, and whatever we are learning must be for the sake of advancing the righteous, peaceable, and joyous rule of King Jesus. Whatever we learn or are seeking to know must be for Jesus' sake, must issue in good works and truthful words, and must help to make it so that Jesus increases in us and we decrease.

The more we learn, the better we will know Jesus. The more we know of Jesus, the more we will love Him. And the more we love Him – by whatever means or discipline we take up on our journey – the more He will show Himself through us, embodying and proclaiming His Kingdom with ever-increasing glory.

For Reflection

1. Why is it important to understand that all knowledge is circular? How would you outline the *Christian* circle of knowledge?

Learning Jesus

2. How should it encourage us in our reading and studying to believe that Jesus might reveal Himself and His will at any moment, any point in our journey?
3. What can you do in your reading and study of Scripture to make sure that each day you are increasing in the knowledge of Jesus?

Next Steps – Preparation: What’s the next project – reading or study – that you plan to undertake to increase in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ? What will you do to make it a more worshipful experience? What do you hope to learn about Jesus from it? How do you hope to increase in good works?

3 Keys to Learning Jesus

The goal of all learning is to learn Jesus, and here are the keys.

This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart; who, being past feeling, have given themselves over to lewdness, to work all uncleanness with greediness. But you have not so learned Christ, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness. Ephesians 4.17-24

Keys to learning Jesus

We are truly learning when we learn Jesus. Everything we have considered in this study intends to help us increase in the knowledge of Jesus Christ – not just head knowledge, but intimacy of friendship, trust, and obedience, so that the love of Jesus flows through us to our world.

As disciples, called to be learners, our goal is to increase in Jesus, as John the Baptist explained (Jn. 3.30). This is what the Holy Spirit is doing within us, as He works with the revelation of God's glory – whether from His Word or His works – to transform us into the image of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 3.12-18). Whatever we read or study, we must strive to take every thought captive and make it obedient to Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 10.3-5). Learning Jesus, so that we know, love, and serve Him more consistently and more fruitfully, is our basic calling as His disciples.

Paul outlines five keys to learning Jesus: Repent of sinful ways (vv. 17, 19, 22); submit all your thinking to the light of God, that is, His revelation in His Word and creation (v. 17, 18, 23); devote yourself to seeking holy affections (vv. 18, 24); keep your eye on Jesus (v. 21); put on the righteousness and holiness you see in Him (v. 23).

I want to say a bit more about each of these, taking them in order of importance.

See Jesus

Since we belong to Jesus, and everything we might learn can help us increase in the knowledge of Jesus, so that we may live for Jesus in all we do, then seeing Jesus must be the primary focus of all our learning. This begins, of course, with learning to see Jesus in all of Scripture (Jn. 5.39). Jesus is in every text of the Bible. All Scripture gives us glimpses, perspectives, and angles on the Person or work of our Lord Jesus Christ, and we must read and study with a view to build up, in the eye of our heart (Eph. 1.18), an increasingly clear and compelling image of Jesus in all the stages of His existence.

We must see Him eternally present in the mind of the Son, prior to His incarnation, and as the prophets of the Old Testament sketched out His coming and work. We must see Him as He walked the earth, heralding and exemplifying the coming Kingdom of God. We must see Him exalted in glory and upholding the cosmos and all things. And we must envision Him coming again in glory. By meditating on Christ and communing with Him in all these phases of His existence, we will see more clearly what we are to become, and what we will one day be when we see Him face to face (1 Jn. 3.1-3).

Bask in the light of God's glory

There is no substitute for daily reading and meditation in the Word of God, accompanied by listening and

Learning Jesus

prayer. Nor does anything excuse us from this daily discipline. We must be exposed to the light of God's glory over and over, and continue meditating on that light throughout the day, and as we undertake any other studies in pursuit of the knowledge of Christ. The light of God's Word and works will show us where any darkness yet remains in our lives, and guard us against straying into the darkness of our unbelieving age. In the light of Christ, emanating from the Word of God, we will be able to discern any other light of God in the various disciplines of study, and to steer clear of teachings that are in any way contrary to the vision of Christ and His glory.

Repent

In the light of Jesus and the glory radiating from Him, we will see our sins more clearly, and we will be able to discern the sins of our world and the errors or shortcomings of whatever we may be studying in our journey to increasing knowledge of Christ. Then we can repent of our sins and pray for the sins of the world, that men might know the striving of God's Spirit and come under conviction and grace for salvation. By keeping the Lord Jesus always before us, we will be able to see where things we're reading or studying deviate from His righteousness and holiness, where men prefer darkness rather than light, use their minds futilely and in ignorance, and blacken their hearts with fleshly lusts. And we'll see these in our own lives, so that we may come to despise them, forsake them, and chart new paths. We will take whatever is good from our studies to reinforce our vision of Jesus, and we'll allow the light of God shining through our studies to lead us to repentance wherever it may be required.

Seek holy affections

The heart is the heart of the matter in all aspects of human life. From it flow all the issues of life (Prov. 4.23), so we must be careful to cultivate those affections that incline us to seek the Lord and enable us to cling to Him. Holy affections are those that help us to increase in love for Jesus, hope for glory, desire for His Presence, hatred of sin, longing for eternal life, and zealous to obey Him in all things. Any desires or inclinations in our heart that do not move us to increased seeking of Jesus, but distract our vision and journey away from Him, must be acknowledged, denounced, repented of, and replaced with those feelings and longings which keep us moving toward Christ.

Put on Jesus

Our goal in knowing Jesus is to be like Him. Jesus fulfilled all the holy and righteous and good requirements of the Law of God, and He commands us to seek the same (Matt. 5.17-19). With the Law as our guiding standard, we will know how we must love God and our neighbors in every situation. We put on the holiness and righteousness of Jesus as we attend to the Spirit's teaching about the Law (Ezek. 36.26, 27), submit to His convicting guidance (Jn. 16.8-11), pray for His filling and power, that we might live as witnesses for the Lord (Eph. 5.18-21; Acts 1.8). The more we make reading and meditating on the Law of God, and all His Word, our daily and continuous practice, the more we will increase in Jesus Who is revealed there (Ps. 1).

Fix these keys in mind as you take up any course of study in your journey to know Jesus, and you will find that you grow consistently – and joyfully and fruitfully – in Him.

For reflection

1. Why is it so important that we continuously nurture a clear and compelling vision of Jesus from His Word?
2. How would you explain what it means to repent of sin to a new believer? Is repentance a one-time action, or should we practice it continually? Explain.
3. In which areas of your life are you conscious of needing to do more work in learning Jesus?

Next steps – Transformation: Begin putting these five keys to work as you pursue increasing in the knowledge of Jesus. It might be helpful to keep a journal, using these keys as headings to guide your study.

4 A World Transformed

Medieval Ireland shows the transforming power of knowing Jesus.

And many who had believed came confessing and telling their deeds. Also, many of those who had practiced magic brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted up the value of them, and it totaled fifty thousand pieces of silver. So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed. Acts 19.18-20

The Gospel in Ephesus

Luke records the astonishing impact of the Gospel among the pagan people of mid-first century Ephesus. Beginning with just a handful of unlearned almost-Christians, the knowledge of Christ spread rapidly through the entire city. Then it broke out into the countryside, capturing the hearts of multitudes, until “all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19.10).

The impact was dramatic. Evil spirits, which had kept people blind and deluded for generations, were sent packing. People woke up to the harm that their wicked ways were doing to themselves and their neighbors, and confessed their sins and forsook them publicly. Those whose private devotions and other practices had enabled deluding spirits and false worldviews to plague the populace, brought their books and paraphernalia and burned them publicly. So powerful did the knowledge of Christ become in Ephesus that the ancient worship of Diana, the city’s goddess/protector, was threatened, and ultimately disappeared.

The book of Acts fulfills many purposes, one of which is to tell us what to expect when the knowledge of Jesus Christ becomes the driving force in a life, a city, a region, and the world. What we should expect is a world turned upside-down (Acts 17.6), as people confess Jesus as Christ, Savior, and King, and begin to practice the knowledge of Christ unto righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

We read about the Gospel in Ephesus and are duly impressed, but not quite to the point where we expect the Lord to do something similar in our city, community, region, state, or nation. We seem to regard stories like the one told in Acts 19 as Bible stories, true events restricted to times circumscribed by the pages of Scripture, but not to be expected – much less sought – in our own day.

We would think differently if we knew Jesus like a fifth-century runaway slave from Briton.

The Gospel in Ireland

Patrick had been stolen into slavery from his home in the west of Briton when he was sixteen years old. For six years he was made to tend sheep in the west of Ireland. And for all of those six years, day and night, he repented of his lackadaisical trust in God, and pled with God for forgiveness and deliverance.

And then one night a voice instructed him to flee. He obeyed, and thus began a movement of God’s Spirit which brought the knowledge of Jesus to some of the most hardened pagan people the world had ever known.

Pre-Christian Ireland was a rough place. Hundreds of Celtic tribes, divided into family fiefdoms, ruled and fought and stole one another’s cattle and let one another’s blood and caroused with false deities in unspeakable ways for centuries. Yet when push came to shove, they could rally together with such ruthless force that not even the Roman legions dared to confront them. So when bands of Irish raiders took to robbing, pillaging, and kidnapping along the shores of neighboring Briton, there wasn’t much anyone could do.

Yet as Paul might say, “But God...”

Patrick’s return to Ireland, supported only by his inheritance, began a movement of God’s Spirit that so far outstripped what He did in Ephesus and Asia that one historian has described the result of Ireland’s conversion to Christ as the saving of Western civilization. Kuno Meyer, one of the great modern historians of the Celtic Revival (ca. 430-800 AD) wrote, “The charge that is so often levelled against Irish history, that it has been, as it were, in a backwater, where only the fainter wash of the larger currents reaches, cannot apply to this period. For once, at any rate, Ireland drew upon herself the eyes of the whole world, not, as so often in later times, by her unparalleled sufferings, but as the one haven of rest in a turbulent world overrun by hordes of barbarians, as the great seminary of Christian and classical learning, ‘the quiet habitation of sanctity and literature,’ as Doctor Johnson called her in a memorable letter written to Charles O’Connor. Her sons, carrying Christianity and a new humanism over Great Britain and the Continent, became the teachers of whole nations, the counsellors of kings and emperors. For once, if but for a century or two, the Celtic spirit dominated a large part of the Western world, and Celtic ideals imparted a new life to a decadent civilization” (*Ancient Irish Poetry*).

Much to learn about Jesus

The conversion of pagan Ireland to a nation of believing Christians, comprised of communities flourishing in literacy, culture, and law, which sent from their best families thousands of missionaries to England, Scotland, and Europe, is one of most remarkable and least-known stories from the history of the Christian movement. It is proof that the miracle of Ephesus can still happen, and testimony to the transforming power that flows from knowing and loving Jesus Christ.

The contemporary witnesses to this period – in written materials, devotional histories, poems, art, and speculative theology – have been largely overlooked by Christians today. But the study of this period – combining the disciplines of historical and spiritual theology, history, and the arts – yields refreshing insights to the Lord Jesus Christ and His power to turn the world rightside-up again. In the records and artifacts from this period we discover saints who risked their lives to take the Gospel to far places; missionaries who defied pagan kings and status-quo-protecting church leaders; artists so devoted to glorifying Jesus and spreading the knowledge of His glory that they would not allow their names to get in the way of their work; poets of sublime beauty; and people from every walk of life who saw in everything they did a summons to prayer and a prompt for praise.

In the remaining installments of this study, we’re going to see how, by using various of the disciplines available to us for increasing in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus, we can tap into some of the spiritual perspective, incentive, and energy that allowed the people of ancient Ireland to save civilization and turn their world upside-down and rightside-up for Jesus. We’ll go to medieval Ireland looking for Jesus. We’ll discover the light of God’s glory emanating from many people and places. Hopefully, we will repent of our unbelief and doubt, seek holy and courageous affections, and put on Jesus in new and transforming ways.

And we’ll learn that the Jesus Who transformed Ephesus and Ireland is able and ready to do that same work in our midst today.

For reflection

1. Why don’t Christians today expect God to work like He did in Ephesus in Acts 19?
2. How much do you know about St. Patrick and the Celtic Revival?
3. In which areas of your life would you most like to be transformed more completely into the image of Jesus Christ? How will you be different as that transformation occurs?

Learning Jesus

Next Steps – Preparation: Pray that God will put a hunger in your heart to increase in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. How will you prepare to improve in this matter?

5 The Gospel without Compromise

Only the pure Word of the Gospel can change the world.

I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. Galatians 1.6, 7

Trending to fail

The direction of contemporary Christianity in the West is decidedly *not* toward transforming the world. Over the past two generations, declines in church attendance, the flight of young people from the pews, moral failures on the part of Church leaders, moral and cultural debasement across a broad front, and the replacement of faith in God by faith in politics and economics, betray a faith that is weak, foundering, and failing in its mission to turn the world rightside-up for Jesus.

Why is this happening? For the past 100 years, prophetic voices have been warning against the growing tendency on the part of many to try to fit the hopes of Christianity to the demands of the times, to accommodate the faith to the beliefs, values, and preferences of an unbelieving and secular age. We have considered that the best way to *change* the world is to *become more like it*. Is it any wonder that we're not succeeding?

Do people prefer pop music and beats to traditional hymns? Out with the hymns, then, and in with praise music and rock bands. Would people rather have their Sundays free for personal matters? In with the Saturday evening praise services. Do some folks think that God should accept them just as they are? In any community you can find "inclusive" churches which will accommodate your moral preferences. Do we take offense at being reminded we are sinners in need of repentance? In with anecdotal sermons designed to avoid sin or cover it over with soft promises of never-failing grace. Is the work of shepherding and making disciples too demanding? Let's put in more programs and salt them with lots of fun instead. Are we concerned that our freedoms to worship and believe might be encroached by secular and atheistic movements? Let us turn not to prayer and repentance, but to politicians of a particular stripe. Tired of steeples and stained glass? Let's make our churches look like shopping malls. Find reading the Bible too demanding or convicting? Pastors will gladly relieve you of it, explaining that all you need is to come hear them preach. Convinced that bigger and better is the best indication of spiritual health? Then find the largest church in your community, one that incorporates as many as possible of the above accommodations, and lull yourself into thinking that you've found a true faith community.

We've decided that our Jesus can't overcome the trends of our day, so rather than trust and obey Him to do so, we simply go with the flow. We have settled for another gospel – not the Gospel of the Kingdom preached and lived by Jesus and Paul, but another gospel, a gospel of mere-salvation-and-good-enough-for-me.

Our Celtic Christian forebears would have counted us among those who need to hear the Gospel of the Kingdom.

Nothing but the truth

Leaders of the Celtic Revival (ca. 430-800 AD) such as Patrick, Brigid, Colum Cille, Brendan, Columbanus, and Gaul understood that only the pure and uncompromised Gospel of Christ and the Kingdom can convert a soul and transform a culture. They came into worlds rife with paganism, sensuality, self-indulgence, moral impurity, oppression, misery, and cultural depravity, and they demanded repentance before the holy God, and undivided devotion to the crucified and risen King of kings. They did not offer a soft road to salvation.

Instead, they demanded discipline, explained that hardship and opposition would be common, and taught people to know joy, peace, safety, courage, and purpose in the Presence of Jesus and His Father.

The writings of and about these great leaders are unequivocal. Being a Christian means repenting of all sins, giving oneself entirely to Jesus, being renewed in Him day by day in the Word and prayer, giving of oneself and one's possessions for the needs of others, boldly proclaiming Jesus as King and Lord, obeying the Law of God, and keeping oneself pure from the sinful world. Celtic leaders insisted that only by increasing in the knowledge of Jesus through daily faithfulness can such a life be sustained, and such a movement of faith be enlarged.

In Ireland, Scotland, Gaul (modern France), Switzerland, and Italy young people by the thousands flocked to leaders who told them the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, and thus gave them a faith not only to live for but to die for if necessary. As they came to know Jesus, thousands gave themselves to mission service as martyrs for the Gospel of their beloved King.

In the period of the Celtic Revival, martyrdom came in three colors, and all true believers wore one of these. *White* martyrs gave up everything in their old life and started anew with Jesus, fulfilling their calling within a faith community, and increasing daily in the knowledge of Christ. *Green* martyrs went off on their own, with the blessing of their community, to live off the land and do the work of evangelizing and making disciples that raised up new Christian communities by the hundreds. And *red* martyrs proved their faith by the shedding of their blood, refusing to accommodate to the world, though it cost them their lives.

Celtic Christians knew Jesus. They knew how He lived, and how He died. And they knew that He had been raised from the dead and exalted to the highest place of authority in all the cosmos; and that He could be trusted in all He said and whatever He commanded them to do. They took up the mantle of martyrdom and brought the freedom, peace, joy, and righteousness of the Kingdom of God to uncounted multitudes of people all over Europe through their faithful witness to the uncompromised Good News of Christ and His Kingdom.

The truth about Jesus

The greatest opposition to the spread of the Gospel by Celtic preachers and missionaries came not from pagans, but from compromised Christians, who were comfortable in their worldly faith, and unwilling to give up anything for Jesus. In the minds of Celtic Christian leaders, these people did not know Jesus at all. And this was proved throughout Europe, as young people fled the ranks of nominal, compromised churches, and sought out the truth about Jesus that Celtic preachers and missionaries proclaimed.

Patrick, Columbanus, and other Celtic Christian leaders knew Jesus, and knew that He could change the world. But only if He was truly proclaimed, and His Law truly and faithfully obeyed. They understood their mission was not to fit into the world, but to transform it. And that meant dying to self, taking up a cross, holding firm to their confession of Christ, taking over and transforming culture, and laboring to bring as much of their world as came within their reach under the transforming power of God's grace and truth.

For four centuries, they shaped the world to look more like the Kingdom Christ proclaimed and promised. For four generations, we in the Western Church have been doing exactly the opposite. Isn't it about time we stopped deceiving ourselves, and looked again to those – like the people of Ephesus and the leaders of the Celtic Revival – who continually increased in the knowledge of Jesus Christ, realized more of the presence, promise, and power of His Kingdom, and turned their worlds rightside-up for Him?

For Reflection

1. Do you agree that churches today have compromised with the demands of a secular and unbelieving age? Explain.

Learning Jesus

2. Read again the paragraph that begins, “Leaders of the Celtic Revival...” How well does this summary describe your own experience as a follower of Christ?

3. What can you do to begin knowing Christ more like Patrick and Columbanus did?

Next Steps – Transformation: In your life sphere – your Personal Mission Field – where should you expect the Gospel of the Kingdom to make an impact? What would that look like? Make that impact a matter of daily prayer and work.

6 Christ and Creation

Celtic Christians saw Jesus in the works of creation.

*All Your works shall praise You, O LORD,
And Your saints shall bless You.
They shall speak of the glory of Your kingdom,
And talk of Your power,
To make known to the sons of men His mighty acts,
And the glorious majesty of His kingdom.* Psalm 145.10-12

God in His works

Celtic Christians believed that, if you wanted to talk intelligently about God, you had to know Him from His Word and His works. That is, you had to “read” both books of divine revelation – Scripture and creation – and employ these in knowing Him and making Him known. Columbanus, that great missionary to Europe, wrote, “Understand the creation, if you wish to know the Creator; if you will not know the former either, be silent concerning the Creator, but believe in the Creator” (*Sermon 1*).

Mission-driven as they were – Celtic Christians knew that talking to their pagan neighbors about the Bible, while important in proclaiming the Good News, would not be the best place to *start* a conversation. Start with where these people were, because the Celtic peoples of Ireland were deeply enmeshed in the world of creation. Trees, lakes, streams, animals, plants, skies, clouds, hills, caves, wells – all these were important to pagan Celts, and were a significant focus of their religion. Talking about Christ through creation would have been like a “bunker bomb” for the Gospel proclaimed through Scripture, opening a door for the light of truth to invade lost souls.

To talk to unbelievers about Jesus, you have to be able to show that He is God and Lord, not merely in the Bible – which few in those days could read, and few in our day *will* read – but in all of creation. The riches of the knowledge of the Lord in creation can open the door for the greater riches to be found in His Word.

The more Celtic Christians learned to see Christ in His works, the more their faith in Him grew, the more they loved Him, and the better equipped they were to bear witness to Him and speak of the glory of His Kingdom.

Here’s an important lesson we can learn from these ancient believers. “Understand the creation!”

Let’s look at some examples of their love for the world Jesus created and upholds.

Poetry

Celtic Christian poetry from the period of the Celtic Revival (ca. 430-800) shows us believers seeking to increase in the knowledge of Jesus along several of the avenues of knowing we have considered in this series. First, poets took the time to *observe and reflect* on creation, as if they were scientists, trying to understand the nature and possible uses of the world around them. They sifted their observations through the *grid of theology*, both Biblical and systematic, as they sought to connect their observations with their convictions. Finally, some of them cast their conclusions in *art forms* – poetry, painting, and sculpture – as a way of expressing what they had come to understand about the creation, and of communicating their views to others.

Here, for example, is an excerpt from the *Psalter of the Quatrains*, Canto I, from late in this period. It is one of several stanzas in this lengthy poem which asserts the sovereignty of Christ over all of creation:

King over creation, on which the sun looks down,
King over the depths of the ocean,
King south, north, west, and east,
against Whom no struggle can be maintained...

We hear in this verse echoes of many of the psalms, such as Psalm 24: “The earth is the LORD’s, and all its fullness...” Because this is so, all creation points to the Lord, to praise and magnify His greatness, as we see in a line from Colum Cille’s *Noli Pater* :

Let the summits of heaven, too, praise you with roaming lightning,
O most loving Jesus, O righteous King of Kings.

Jesus made the world and assigned us to care for it, to understand its “mechanism and harmony”, develop and use its potential, and use it in serving the purposes of His Kingdom. Here again is Colum Cille in his poem, *Altus Prosator* :

The Most High, foreseeing the mechanism and harmony of the world,
had made heaven and earth, established sea and waters,
and the seeds of plants, and the bushes in thickets,
sun, moon, and stars, fire and [all] needful things,
birds, fish, and cattle, beasts and animals –
and last of all the first man, to rule them through foreknowledge.

Other poets celebrated the delight of creation, its variety and beauty, the way God uses it to meet our needs, warn of His power, remind us of His grace, or even suggest courses of action in following Him. The world, for Celtic Christians, was not merely there to be used and worn out. It is the creation of God, ruled by Him, delegated to us, to be received, honored, appreciated, used, and preserved for His glory and praise. Our own experience in the world can be greatly enriched by paying attention to these ancient poets.

Art

The same is true in art. For pre-Christian Celtic peoples, art and poetry played a major role in their lives and their religion. It was only natural that Celtic Christians should use these media to proclaim Jesus and His Kingdom.

The *Book of Kells* is the best-known work of art from this period. It consists of a Latin version of the gospels, lavishly framed and interspersed with a wide variety of artistic embellishments. Zoomorphs - plant and animal figures – weave around the edges and through the text of pages in stylized, exaggerated form, as if to remind readers of Scripture that God also reveals Himself through His works.

So also on the carved high crosses that began to appear late in this period. Reliefs of flora and fauna frame and embellish panels of Biblical scenes and Bible stories, asserting the sovereignty of God and the centrality of Christ in both Scripture and creation.

For Celtic Christians, creation was more than just the temporal/material setting for their spiritual journey. Using a variety of disciplines, poets, artists, theologians, missionaries, and everyday folk drew on the creation to increase their knowledge of Christ, and to outfit themselves to live for Him. Studying their art can provide us with many insights to the Lord Jesus through the avenues of art, theology, and creation, and can help us to be better prepared to worship and bear witness to Him.

Learning Jesus

For Reflection

1. What might we expect to learn about Jesus by paying more attention to creation?
2. Why are poetry and art useful means for communicating Gospel truths? Why is there so much poetry in the Bible?
3. What can we learn from Celtic Christians about using various disciplines to improve in the knowledge of the Lord?

Next Steps – Preparation: Online, look at some images of the Book of Kells or Celtic carved crosses. How do plants and animals figure into these works of art? How can this help us in appreciating creation's role in helping us to increase in the knowledge of the Lord?

7 Light in a Dark World

Celtic Christians gathered the light of learning into a worldview.

*How precious is Your lovingkindness, O God!
Therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of Your wings.
They are abundantly satisfied with the fullness of Your house,
And You give them drink from the river of Your pleasures.
For with You is the fountain of life;
In Your light we see light.* Psalm 36.7-9

What Dark Ages?

Toward the end of the last century, the late Carl Sagan famously insisted that, because of Christian extremism in the middle of the fourth century, the light of learning went out, and the Western world gave itself a frontal lobotomy that lasted a thousand years (*Cosmos*).

That's a clear and clever metaphor. It's just not true. Following the events that Sagan rightly deplored – the murder of Hypatia and the burning of the library at Alexandria – the light of *true* learning, learning that grows in the light of Scripture and leads us to the Light of the world, began to brighten considerably. Some of the greatest thinkers of the fourth and fifth centuries – Augustine, Jerome, Ephrem, the Cappadocian Fathers, Boethius, and more – began to articulate the outlines of a Christian worldview as the light of Rome was sinking below the horizon of history. Great works such as *City of God*, the *Vulgate Bible*, *The Pearl*, and *The Consolation of Philosophy* would inspire kings and thinkers for the next thousand years and beyond.

This is not to condone the unlawful actions of passionate but misguided believers in fourth-century Alexandria (whose mistake was thinking political action was the way to secure their freedoms). It's simply to insist that the “Dark Ages” – which we've all heard about since we began to be taught “history” – never really existed. The light of learning never went out in the West or the East, because the Gospel continued to spread and bear fruit; and that Good News unfurled a new way of thinking about the world, a way in which all roads led not to Rome, but to Jesus.

That worldview was picked up and adumbrated by scholars, poets, and artists during the period of the Celtic Revival.

The Celtic road

The Church Fathers created the “roadbed” for the highway of Christian learning. In their day, thinkers in the Celtic Christian tradition would add solidity and illumination to that highway, both in writing and by their art.

Thinkers from the period of the Celtic Revival (ca. 430-800) created a handful of profound writings designed to enfold all of history and creation in a Christian encyclopedia, with Jesus at the center. Colum Cille's majestic poem, *Altus Prosator*, outlines from creation to consummation the work God does on earth to honor and exalt His Son. The seventh-century *Liber de Ordine Creaturarum* offers a majestic summation of all creation – visible and invisible – as the domain of Christ. A larger, more comprehensive, philosophical, and enduring treatise on the same theme was written by Eriugena at the end of this period. His *Periphyseon* is the most outstanding example of speculative philosophy, grounded in Scripture, from the entire Middle Ages.

What these writers did for thinking Christians, anonymous artists and poets did for the rest of the faithful. We've mentioned already the lavish illustrations in Celtic illuminated manuscripts, such as the *Book of Kells*, and the *Lindisfarne Gospels*, as well as the exquisite carvings on high crosses. In these especially, Jesus is

presented as not only the quintessence of life and all knowing, and the center of all human aspiration and hope, but the focal point of the entire cosmos, and Ruler of all peoples and things. Many an unlearned Christian would have received ample and inspiring edification in Christ as his pastor explained those paintings and carvings, and read the works of obscure but faithful poets from this period.

Celtic Christians not only added paving to the road of Christian worldview; they also spruced up the railings of Biblical and creational revelation with stories, poems, works of art, and acts of social reform, all of which made clear to everyone that Jesus is the Source, Reason, Explanation, and End of all such earnest endeavors.

Darkness or light

If there ever was such a period as the “Dark Ages”, I can only believe we are living in it now. The Light of Jesus Christ is shining brightly through any number of readily-accessible translations of Scripture; and able commentators and teachers abound to help us discover Him there. He is equally radiant throughout creation, where His grandeur, wisdom, goodness, bounty, mystery, power, and love are everywhere on display; and many tools, resources, and teachers wait to guide us further along in our knowledge of Christ by drawing out His glory in all His works.

The darkness exists where these great lights are denied or ignored. In our day, they are denied by the unbelieving world, and ignored by the vast majority of those who claim to be followers of Christ. Jesus is speaking to us, as He has been from the beginning, calling us to know, love, and serve Him. Our Celtic Christian forebears understood the importance of seeking Him in all His revelation, and declaring His glory to the world by every means. Shall we betray their legacy by our cold indifference to increasing in the knowledge of Jesus? Will we continue to be content with “just enough” of Jesus to keep us comfortable in our faith and assured of our salvation? Shall we not press on, through every available avenue of learning, toward the upward call of the prize of God in Christ Jesus?

Let it not be said of us that we allowed the light of true learning, in every sector of the Christian encyclopedia, to go out – whether in our generation or the generation to come.

We have a choice. *You* have a choice. You can choose to shrug off the calling to seek Christ and His Kingdom, and to gather His Light from every source to illumine your mind and journey in life. You can simply say this is not your thing. Too difficult or demanding. Takes too much time. And as you do that, don't forget to hope for the best for the generation that follows you, that somehow, without our example and encouragement, and despite the maelstrom of false teaching and information that swarms them daily, they'll find their way to Jesus by themselves. Instead, let us work hard to build the road that leads to Jesus through every subject, discipline, and arena of learning, and to bring others along with us as we do.

The Light has dawned, and the darkness is receding (1 Jn. 2.8). Is it receding, or will it gain ground, in you?

For reflection

1. What do people mean by referring to the “Dark Ages”? Why do the times we live in qualify as such?
2. What are the greatest obstacles keeping you from a more concerted effort at increasing in the knowledge of Jesus Christ?
3. What would you say to a new believer to urge him to press on toward the goal of the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus?

Next Steps – Transformation: Make a plan for growing in Christ in the year ahead. What will you do today to begin implementing that plan? Tomorrow?

Learning Jesus

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. What does it mean to “learn Jesus”? Where can we turn to help us in learning Him?
2. What are the keys to learning Jesus? How consistent are you in using these keys?
3. What makes the Celtic Revival such an important period in Church history?
4. What can we learn from the Celtic Revival about increasing in the knowledge of Jesus Christ?
5. What’s the most important lesson you’ve learned from this final installment in our study on learning Jesus? How are you putting that lesson to work in your daily life?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. Visit our website at www.ailbe.org to learn more.

We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship. You can contribute to our ministry by using the contribute button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 360 Zephyr Road, Williston, VT 05495.

Thank you.