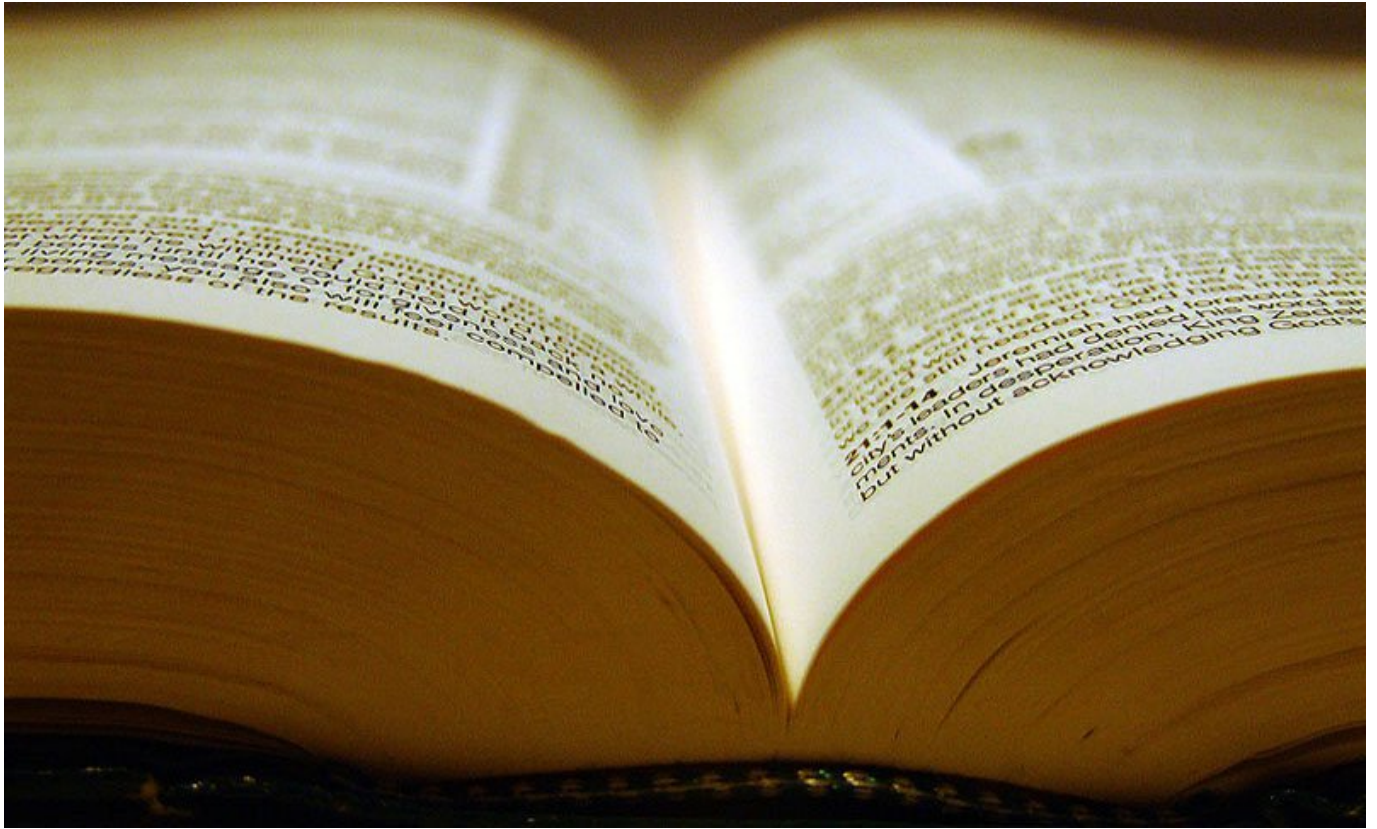
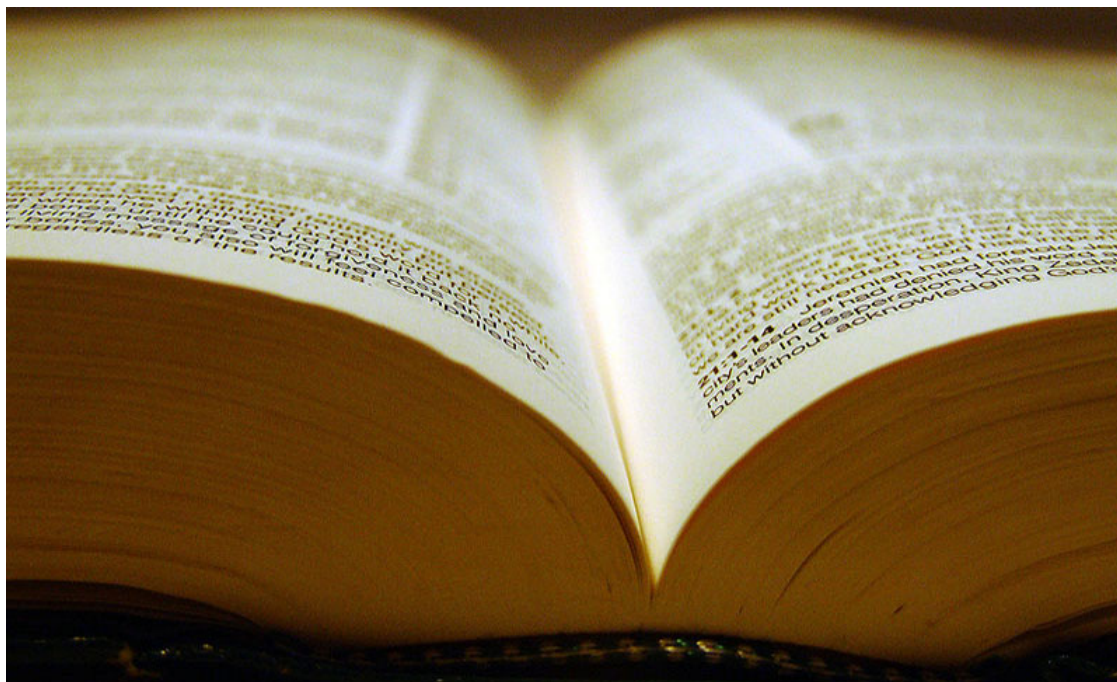


From ashes to beauty (Deacon James Bryant)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



The synergy of wisdom, understanding, and knowledge functioning together is set forth many times in both the Old and New Testaments. Wisdom, understanding, and knowledge, implicit in all three of these words in their root meanings are the connotations of right and wrong, character, and discernment between good and evil.



The thread of wisdom, understanding, and knowledge runs through both the Old and New Testaments

“And I have filled him with the Spirit of God, in wisdom, in understanding, in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship.” (Ex 31:3) In the words of Exodus, the artist is invested with wisdom, understanding and knowledge. What is the significance of these three attributes? They are the basis of the creative process, of how to cope successfully with life’s challenges and overcome our own shortcomings, of how one can successfully create and design, as well as solve problems. Many times in the Old Testament these three attributes appear together, particularly in the Psalms and Proverbs. “The Lord by wisdom hath founded the earth; by understanding hath he established the heavens. By His knowledge the depths are broken up, and the clouds drop down the dew.” (Proverbs 3:19-20) Let us go into some depth as to the meaning of these terms, both in a secular, contemporary context, as well as a Biblical and Orthodox context. Toward the end of this section are selected excerpts from scripture.

Wisdom

Let us begin first with wisdom, starting with a secular or contemporary dictionary definition. From Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary wisdom is:

1. **An accumulated philosophic or scientific learning: knowledge**
2. **Ability to discern inner qualities & relationships: insight**
3. **Good sense: judgment**

4. **A wise attitude or course of action**
5. **The teachings of the ancient wise men**

The Biblical meaning of wisdom is slightly different. From the Hebrew root words *hakam* & *hokmah* meaning making wise – teaching, denoting intelligence. The essential idea of *hakam* represents a manner of thinking and attitude concerning life's experiences, including matters of general interest and basic morality. It also means prudence in secular affairs, skills in the arts, moral sensitivity, and experience in the ways of God.

The wisdom of the Old Testament is quite distinct from the other ancient world views. Reflected in Old Testament wisdom is the teaching of a personal God who is holy and just and who expects those who know Him to exhibit His character in the many practical affairs of life. This perfect blend of the revealed will of a holy God with the practical human experiences of life is distinct from the speculative wisdom of the Greeks. The Greek emphasis on wisdom lay in the intellect, the acquisition of knowledge in order to lead a good life. The Old Testament emphasis on wisdom was grounded in the fact that human will was to be subject to divine causes and divine will in every aspect of life. Hebrew wisdom was not intellectual, speculative, or theoretical, but was practical, based upon revealed principles of right and wrong, to be lived out in daily life. This practical wisdom is derived from the revelation of God, the source of all wisdom. His wisdom is expressed in the context of His omnipotence and omniscience.

In contrast to the dictionary definition, wisdom from a Biblical perspective is:

1. ***A manner of thinking***
2. ***Prudence***
3. ***Experience***
4. ***Practical and skillful***
5. ***Moral sensitivity***
6. ***Human will subject to divine causes based upon revealed principles of right and wrong***

Wisdom is not just knowing facts, possessing information, or knowing about things. The word itself carries the connotation that wisdom is not theoretical or speculative, but is a manner of thinking and attitude, prudence plus experience, and is practical. Wisdom is also invested with a moral sensitivity. It is basically the human will subject to divine causes based upon revealed principles of right and wrong. In contrast to the secular definition, wisdom is an attribute of God that we

are to exhibit. There is no true wisdom without moral sensitivity. There is no true wisdom outside of God. A practical working definition of wisdom for the purposes of this paper is as follows: Wisdom is the “Know Why”.

Understanding

Starting again from a secular perspective, Webster’s defines understanding as:

1. **A mental grasp: comprehension**
2. **The power of comprehending; capacity to apprehend general relations of participants**
3. **The power to make experience intelligible by applying concepts and categories**
4. **A friendly or harmonious relationship**
5. **An agreement of opinion or feeling: adjustment of differences**
6. **A mutual agreement not formally entered into, but in some degree binding on each side**
7. **Explanation, interpretation, sympathy**

From a Biblical perspective, the definition of understanding is derived from the Hebrew word *bin*. Its main usage is comprehension or insight. The background of the verb form is to discern. *Bin* includes the concept of distinguishment that leads to comprehension. Further, it means knowledge which is superior to the mere gathering of data. It is necessary to know how to use knowledge, and this where understanding comes into play. *Bin* is a power of judgment and perceptive insight, and is demonstrated in the use of knowledge. Understanding is not related to or equivalent to IQ. In the context of the Orthodox Church, this may explain the phenomenon of the fools for Christ, those who from all outward appearances are impaired mentally and behaviorly, but are capable of profound insights from God. It is the ability to perceive pertinent data with the senses, and has the connotation of attentive observation or consideration. It is the ability to gain insight. The seat of insight is the heart in Old Testament terms, and referred to as the nous by the Church Fathers. It is the nous which discerns the working of God. Understanding does not come automatically. The acquisition of understanding requires a persistent diligence. The implication is that one is at fault for not acquiring and having understanding, and the penalty for not pursuing understanding is being subject to God’s punishment. Finally, it carries the connotation of the ability of a teacher to convey discernment to his students.

A Biblical definition of understanding can be summarized as follows:

1. ***Comprehension, discernment, insight***
2. ***Power of judgment and perceptive insight***
3. ***Goes beyond the accumulation of knowledge***
4. ***Requires persistent diligence, does not come automatically***
5. ***Connotes the presence of character***
6. ***Your fault if you don't have it***
7. ***Perceive pertinent data with the senses***

Understanding is not merely one's ability to comprehend, or IQ level. Understanding does not come automatically, but requires persistent diligence. While wisdom is accompanied by moral sensitivity, understanding connotes the presence of character. Character is what makes moral sensitivity operational. Understanding has with it the ability of a teacher to convey discernment to students. Similarly as with wisdom, it is not the accumulation of information. It is the ability to select acquired information for a purpose. In Biblical terms, it is your fault if you have not acquired it and do not have it. To sum up, understanding is the "Know What".

Knowledge

The secular definition of knowledge from Webster's Dictionary is:

1. **Cognizance: The fact or condition of knowing something with familiarity gained through experience or association**
2. **Acquaintance with or understanding of a science, art or technique**
3. **The fact or condition of being aware of something**
4. **The range of one's information or understanding**
5. **The fact or condition of apprehending truth or fact: cognition**
6. **The fact or condition of having information or being learned**
7. **The sum of what is known: the body of truth, information, and principles acquired by mankind**

Biblical knowledge from the Hebrew word *yada* is a general term for knowledge, particularly that which is of a personal, experiential nature. It expresses a multitude of shades of knowledge gained by the senses. Knowledge has to do with thinking or contemplation. The practical application of the word is in having the possession of skills, such as hunting, learning, sailing, playing a musical instrument. Further, it is technical knowledge or ability. In certain contexts it means to distinguish between or to know good and evil, as in moral cognition -

having eaten of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It is an objective awareness of things both good and evil.

A Biblical definition of knowledge can be summed up as follows:

1. ***Experiential knowledge***
2. ***Being in possession of practical facts or information***
3. ***Skill in practical matters such as hunting, learning, sailing, playing musical instruments***
4. ***Technical knowledge or ability***
5. ***Objective awareness***
6. ***A sense of moral cognition***

Knowledge is parallel with wisdom and understanding, Knowledge is technical ability along with objective awareness. In Biblical terms, it has the connotation of moral cognition – the ability to distinguish between (or make judgments about) good and evil, and skill in the practical ability to distinguish between good and evil. It is the perception possessed by wise men. It is skill in practical matters. To sum up, knowledge is the “Know How”.

Interrelationship of Wisdom, Understanding, and Knowledge

Wisdom, Understanding, Knowledge. – The Know Why, The Know What, The Know How. Interesting order of priority: wisdom first, understanding second, and knowledge third. It is not an accident that they are most often ordered that way in the Scriptures.

A simple example may illustrate the interdependence of wisdom, understanding, and knowledge. A fourteen year old very likely has some knowledge of cars. He has ridden in them since infancy, maybe even in his early teens has driven around in a parking lot, or out in the country. Some grew up in rural areas and drove on unpaved roads long before being old enough to be licensed. Now such a teenager might even know a great deal about cars, be able to fix them, tell you all about various models, describe how to drive, and have even a high level of practical skill. What he doesn't yet have is the practical skill to sort out the information he has and why to use it, not to mention the information he has not yet acquired, in order to drive safely. In short, he has acquired some Know How.



The driver must not only have acquired the skill of driving (knowledge), he must have the ability to distinguish and make the right choices from among a great deal of conflicting information (understanding), and he also must have assimilated and accepted the rules of the road (wisdom)

Out on the road are many variables, and they are constantly changing. He is in the middle lane entering an intersection, the light is turning yellow, there is an oncoming car with a left turn signal blinking partially blocking his lane, there is a pedestrian who has not yet completed crossing the intersection blocking the left turner, there is someone directly behind him tailgating, there is an AID car with siren and lights flashing coming from the left. Yes, he can drive a car. He may even have great skill in operating a motor vehicle in and of itself. Can he successfully sort out of all the variables the pertinent data which will enable him to make the correct and safest decision? Chances for success are not very great, as he has not acquired the Know What.

Something else is missing. He has never read the DMV rules of the road. He does not know the overall context in which he is expected to perform, to use his knowledge and skill, to select the pertinent and correct data from all the information and variables coming at him which will allow him to make the right decision. He should never have entered the intersection. He does not have the Know Why.

In this little scenario, the driver must not only have acquired the skill of driving (knowledge), he must have the ability to distinguish and make the right choices from among a great deal of conflicting information (understanding), and to

successfully complete this task and all the others in his future driving experiences, he also must have assimilated and accepted the rules of the road (wisdom). The teenager in this case has started at the wrong end of the scale. He has gone after knowledge before understanding and wisdom. He acquired some Know How before acquiring sufficient Know What, and failed to acquire any Know Why. Drivers Ed really begins with learning the rules of the road (wisdom), and proceeds to learning about all the circumstances of the road (understanding), and then one gets behind the wheel and acquires the skill to operate a car (knowledge).

It is the Tree of Knowledge that Adam and Eve ate of, the Tree of Know How, without having acquired the understanding and wisdom to properly utilize that which they had acquired. Wisdom, understanding, and knowledge, implicit in all three of these words in their root meanings are the connotations of right and wrong, character, and discernment between good and evil.

The synergy of wisdom, understanding, and knowledge functioning together is set forth many times in both the Old and New Testaments. The Book of Proverbs is particularly rich in illustrations. Here are only a few excerpts:

"For the Lord gives wisdom, from His mouth come knowledge and understanding." Proverbs 2:6

"When wisdom enters your heart and knowledge is pleasant to your soul, discretion will preserve you; understanding will keep you." Proverbs 2:10

"Wisdom says my mouth shall speak truth...they are all plain to him that understands and right to them that find knowledge." Proverbs 8:7-9

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding." Proverbs 9:10

Wisdom is found on the lips of him who has understanding...wise people store up knowledge." Proverbs 10:13-14

The young princes of Israel in the Book of Daniel were "...gifted in all wisdom, possessing knowledge and quick to understand." Daniel 1:4

Daniel says further that "God gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding." Daniel 2:21

There are some admonitions throughout the Scriptures regarding wisdom, understanding and knowledge:

"Your wisdom and your knowledge have warped you." Isaiah 47:10

"Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom." Jeremiah 9:23

"Knowledge puffs up" 1 Corinthians 8:1

We have come to live in a culture that only cares about acquiring the Know How, with less interest in the Know What, and almost no interest in or acquisition of the Know Why. Having the Know How without the Know What and especially without the Know Why is like being an unguided missile or a loose cannon, dangerous with a lot of potential going in the wrong direction with the wrong focus. Western civilization since its departure from the Orthodox faith has focused on the aspect of knowledge, the Know How. The acquisition and the study of knowledge since the 12th century and the rise of Scholasticism along with the glorification of the intellect have led to a departure from the true spiritual heritage of Christianity and the Orthodox faith. The acquisition of knowledge has become an end in itself. The assumption was made that man's intellect remained intact after the Fall, and that he can come to know God through the acquisition of knowledge. Studying theology became the objective rather than becoming theology. The investigation and study of the created world as a means to know God became a quest resulting in knowing things about God, but not knowing God. The quest became an end in itself detached from the initial objective of theosis, and thus eventually becoming detached even from any moral or ethical considerations. God became irrelevant. We cannot put the knowledge about creation to good use without the moral framework provided by God, without knowing God. We can know about creation without knowing God. Better to know God than to know about creation.

The overemphasis on acquiring knowledge can keep one in ignorance. Without being accompanied by understanding and wisdom, great intellect and great knowledge can result in a monumental form of ignorance. It is possible in our culture to be an intellectual moron. 1 Corinthians 8:1 tells us that knowledge puffs up, but love edifies. The admonition here is against pride. The Church Fathers tell us that humility is the opposite of pride. No matter how much knowledge or Know How one has acquired, one must be humble enough to be willing to submit one's Know How to appropriate context of the Know What and the Know Why.

Wisdom, understanding, and knowledge are the tools and means the artist has at his disposal to bring forth a work of art. They are also the tools mankind uses to properly, in a moral and ethical context, create or invent anything. With an over emphasis on the Know How (knowledge) and without the balancing effect of

sufficient Know What (understanding) and Know Why (wisdom) no wonder there are so many inventions and technological advances that pose a great threat to the stability and well being of the planet, from nuclear science to bio-tech, as well as in politics, education, and language. The whole deconstruction movement in art today is an outgrowth of the abandonment of wisdom, understanding, and knowledge in favor of a purely subjective view of all aspects of life, in opposition to objective reality, indeed, in denial that there is anything such as objective reality. No matter how much knowledge or Know How one has acquired, one must be humble enough to be willing to submit one's Know How to the proper context of the Know What and the Know Why.



Artists teach through the works they create, and historically, they mentored those who wished to become artists.

Implicit in the Biblical understanding of the role of the artist is teaching. What the artist creates communicates and teaches values, or the lack thereof. Artists teach through the works they create, and historically, they mentored those who wished to become artists. There were no text books until very recently. Artists as teachers or mentors should convey wisdom, understanding, and knowledge to those who would follow after them, not just the Know How. These are the tools and means the artist uses to bring forth a work of art. They are also the tools mankind uses to create or invent anything.

The thread of wisdom, understanding, and knowledge runs through both the Old and New Testaments. Here are a few examples:

"For the Lord gives wisdom, from his mouth come knowledge and understanding." Proverbs 2:6

"The Lord by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding He established the heavens; by his knowledge the depths were broken up, and clouds drop down the dew." Proverbs 3:19

"Attend to my wisdom, bow your ear to understanding, that you may regard discretion, and your lips may keep knowledge." Proverbs 5:12

Wisdom says my mouth shall speak truth...they are all plain to him that understands and right to them that find knowledge." Proverbs 8:7-9

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding." Proverbs 9:10

"Young men...gifted in all wisdom, possessing knowledge and quick to understand." Daniel 1:4

"...attaining to all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the knowledge of the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." Colossians 2:2-3

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom." Colossians 3:16

"If any of you lacks wisdom let him ask of God." James 1:5

Following is one of my favorite passages from the Old Testament. It is indicative of not only our age, but of my own ignorance and presumptions. Using a contemporary phrase, for me it is "awesome" as well as humbling. The wisdom, understanding, and knowledge we have acquired is but a drop in the ocean of God's Creation, compassion and love. It is all of Job 38:1 – 42:6, after Job's friends and counselors have spoken to him, wherein God answers Job and questions him. All of it is worth reading. In part it is quoted below:

"Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said 'Who is this who darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Now prepare yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer Me. Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me if you have understanding...Who has put wisdom

in the mind or has given understanding to the heart?’” Job 38:1-4, & 36

Finally, Isaiah in speaking of the coming Messiah says “The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom, understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.” (Isaiah 11:2) St. Nikolai Velimirovic has this to say about the Isaiah passage, and about wisdom, understanding, and knowledge: “The spirit of wisdom – this is the vision of heavenly mysteries; the spirit of understanding – this is the comprehension of the ties of the visible and invisible worlds; the spirit of counsel – this is the separation of good from evil; the spirit of might – this is the authority over created nature; the spirit of knowledge – this is the knowledge of the essence of created beings; the spirit of the fear of the Lord – this is the recognition of the divine power over both worlds, and submission to the will of God.”⁴ Only the Lord Jesus Christ was fully invested in all of these attributes, and we are to become conformed to the likeness of Christ.

Would that the artist, indeed all of us, begin to grasp the true nature of wisdom, understanding, and knowledge.

1. St. Nikolai Velimirovic, *The Prologue of Ohrid, Volume 2*, Serbian Orthodox Diocese of Western America, 2002, p. 194

Deacon James serves with Fr. James Bernstein, at [St. Paul's Antiochian Orthodox Church](#) in Brier, Washington. He has been a practicing principal architect for 38 years, and has designed several Orthodox churches, including The All-Merciful Saviour Monastery. Visit Deacon James, and his work, at his own architecture company, [The James Bryant Group LLC](#), or email him directly here: jebryant@frontier.com.