

P.S.

I'm stupid and I'm proud

A FEW MONTHS AGO the PS column considered the dangers of spiritual snobbery. But there is a corresponding and opposite danger, the danger of inverse snobbery, which is also worth considering.

The opposite of taking pride in one's achievements, one's status and possessions, is to take pride in the absence of them, the humble nature of what one has, what one does, and where one has come from. This breeds a different sort of "I thank Thee, that I am not as other men are", but one which is just as real, and potentially just as obnoxious.

Ironically for a world which sets so much store by status, society has moved in some respects towards the encouragement of inverse snobbery. There is a certain 'cool' in our culture, perhaps, in coming from a working-class background or in being psychologically 'screwed up' and neurotic. Paul Walsh, the CEO of Diageo (the company behind Guinness and Smirnoff vodka) is alleged to have deliberately cultivated and emphasised his North of England accent because it distinguishes him from other CEOs and makes him sound tough and a 'man of the world'. Meanwhile, Oxford and Cambridge universities fall over themselves trying to find as many state school and underprivileged recruits as they can.

Some of this is nothing but conventional snobbery in disguise: look where I came from and how I have transcended my humble origins and expectations to rise to my current greatness! Or again, in days gone by there might have been a danger for our community (more working class than it is today) to have taken pride in a level of Bible knowledge and understanding that was superior to those who had formal training in the clergy. In these days of the democratisation of knowledge and a higher level of formal education within the community, this is likely to be less of an issue.

There are two aspects of inverse spiritual snobbery which are worthy of reflection, however. One is the danger of pride because we have renounced a certain level of worldly attainment and material possession. Yet (to put it crudely) there are unlikely to be prizes for denying ourselves material luxuries and outward symbols of status if that denial generates more pride than having them! Similarly, if we are forever harping on about having refused

promotion or taken a less-demanding career to devote ourselves more to the work of the Truth, we may betray by our boasting that we have missed something of the point.

A second point relates to knowledge. One observer of society put a certain kind of inverse snobbery relating to knowledge like this: "The culture has embraced things like the 'I'm stupid and I'm proud' thing". It would be a shame if we were ever to show the spiritual equivalent of this.

And yet it is a danger. In a community which has traditionally emphasised knowledge and understanding of the Scriptures, there is always scope for a backlash against 'knowledge for knowledge's sake'. This can occasionally seem to surface in an attitude which (defensively?) takes pride in not knowing, in not doing Bible study, and (deliberately?) not enjoying or even attending events which have a lot of Bible content.

Whilst it is true that knowledge in isolation will not get us very far, neither will ignorance. The remedy (if there is indeed a malady) is not to attack knowledge or to refuse it, but instead to insist that the further question is asked as to how that knowledge may change hearts and lives. To know alone is certainly not enough; to know and to do is required. But unless one knows first, one can hardly know what to do or why one should do it. To cast out the knowledge invites ignorance, rather than responsible and enlightened, doing. If it is true that the Scriptures are shot through at every turn with Divine principles and ideas, then it would seem unlikely that there will be much in the way of Scriptural knowledge which we shall find redundant. Not if we are looking for the deeper meaning.

So the criticism of 'knowledge for knowledge's sake' starts to sound like something of a red herring. Is there actually anyone out there who pursues it or who thinks that living the Truth doesn't matter? I suspect there are relatively few. In fact, I seem to have met more people who criticise 'knowledge for knowledge's sake' than those who actually subscribe to the principle! We must be careful not to fall into the inverse snobbery trap where knowledge of God's Word is concerned. It is one of those good things of which it is very doubtful one can get too much.

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