

**TAUGHT BY GOD***Martin Bleby*

The title of this paper comes from some words of Jesus in John 6:45:

*It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.'*

What time is this referring to? Who is included in the 'all'? What does it mean to be 'taught by God'? How do we know what we know? What are the implications of this for our preaching and teaching, and for how it is to be received?

**Not of Human Origin**

In Galatians 1:11–12, Paul speaks of how the gospel came to him:

*For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.*

*How did the gospel come to us? Were we taught it by others, or did we receive it through a revelation of Jesus Christ?*

I remember early in my ordained ministry having to read Galatians 1 as the second lesson at Evensong. I introduced it with a few words off the top of my head, to the effect that Paul made sure that he got the gospel from the other apostles, so he could reassure the Galatians that the gospel he proclaimed was accurate and duly authorised. I guess that reflected what I understood at that time as to how the gospel had come to me—I had been taught it in theological college, and I had been authorised with it by one in apostolic office by my ordination. As I then read aloud Galatians 1 in that little country church, I was startled to hear that Paul was not saying that at all! He was saying something quite different. In 2:2 Paul says he did lay before the other apostles 'the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles', and he makes the point in 2:1–10 that he is one with the other apostles in the fellowship of this gospel. But he did not get it from them. It was the gospel that he had already been proclaiming up to then for over seventeen years.

How did it come to him? Paul makes clear:

*I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.*

The words, 'nor was I taught it', were a particular difficulty for me. How did he know it if he was not taught it? And what does that say about all the people who taught me the gospel? Indeed, what did it say about the teaching activity I was now engaged in, as a minister of the gospel? Was I talking about the same thing that Paul was, or something else?

I guess I consoled myself for a while with the notion that Paul, being an apostle at the beginning, needed to have a special revelation in order to get the gospel started, particularly among the Gentiles. His 'revelation of Jesus Christ', which he goes on to speak about in Galatians 1:13–17, occurred on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1–22), and surely that was special just to Paul. Yet Paul speaks to the Galatians as if something of a similar order has happened to

them. When Paul speaks of how the gospel came to the Galatians, he nominates their believing what they heard as having ‘started with the Spirit’ supplied by God. This is in contrast with those who are seeking to give them instruction and direction merely ‘according to the flesh’ (see 3:3; 4:23; compare Romans 8:12).

I knew there were also other scriptures, such as 1 John 2:20, 27:

*But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and all of you have knowledge [Other ancient authorities read you know all things] . . . As for you, the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and so you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, abide in him.*

It seems there is a way of knowing, that pertains to rank-and-file Christian believers, that comes directly from God, and is not dependent on human teaching. There were also the words quoted by Jesus: ‘they shall all be taught by God’. ‘All’ sounds like everyone, not just the select few.

### **How Does the Gospel Come to Us?**

We may then ask the question: How has the gospel come to us? Were we taught it by others? Or did it come by a revelation of Jesus Christ?

Before we answer in a way that may seem obvious to us: that we were taught it by others—as came most naturally to me at first in that country church—it may be worth considering certain experiences that we or others may have had. Have we ever been listening to a Bible-reading, or a sermon, or someone else speaking, and had the distinct impression, ‘I have just been spoken to by God’? I think what came to me as I read from Galatians 1 in that country church was one such instance. It upended me, and showed me something that I had not seen before. Have we ever been preaching ourselves, or speaking in conversation, with what we thought were just words, and someone has come to us afterwards and said, ‘God spoke to me through what you said’? Such experiences are not to be despised. It could be that they indicate to us the true way of knowing for human beings: that we are all to be taught by God.

This was the way the gospel came to the Thessalonians, a group of people noted for their ‘work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ’:

*For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction . . . We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God’s word, which is also at work in you believers (1 Thess. 1:3–5; 2:13).*

While human agency in proclaiming the gospel is very much in mind, its power in people’s lives is seen to lie in the reality of it coming to them directly from God.

### **It is Written in the Prophets**

When Jesus said, ‘It is written in the prophets, “And they shall all be taught by God”’, what prophecies was he referring to, and of what time do they speak?

The most direct reference is to Isaiah 54:13:

*All your children shall be taught by the LORD,  
and great shall be the prosperity of your children.*

This is posited of a time when God's people, God's bride, at present 'afflicted . . . storm-tossed, and not comforted' will be honoured and adorned, as with precious stones:

I am about to set your stones in antimony,  
and lay your foundations with sapphires.  
I will make your pinnacles of rubies,  
your gates of jewels,  
and all your wall of precious stones.  
All your children shall be taught by the Lord . . . (Isa. 54:11–13).

This corresponds with the picture of the 'new heaven and a new earth' and 'the new Jerusalem . . . prepared as a bride adorned for her husband' in Revelation 21 (see particularly vv. 9–21). We may project that into the future, but what is unveiled there is the reality of God's people that has been in building over the ages (see e.g. Eph. 2:19–22; 1 Pet. 2:4–5).

Jeremiah 31:31–34, the promise of 'a new covenant', picks up the theme:

But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more (Jer. 31:33–34).

This direct knowledge of God, without needing to be taught by others, would come by the action of God that brings the forgiveness of sin. Jesus at the last supper indicated that this time had now come, and would be fulfilled in the action of the cross, with a view to the coming kingdom:

Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the [new] covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom' (Matt. 26:27–29).

This being 'taught by God' would be not just for Israel but for all the nations:

In days to come  
the mountain of the Lord's house  
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,  
and shall be raised above the hills;  
all the nations shall stream to it.  
Many peoples shall come and say,  
'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,  
to the house of the God of Jacob;  
that he may teach us his ways  
and that we may walk in his paths.'  
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,  
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem (Isa. 2:2–3).

Note how the teaching from God consists of God's 'ways', 'paths' and 'instruction' (*torah*)—God's saving moral righteousness.

Yet Israel, and those of all the ages, did not need to wait for these 'days' to come to pass before they could know this being taught directly by God. It could be a present and living experience:

O God, from my youth you have taught me,  
and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds.  
So even to old age and grey hairs,  
O God, do not forsake me,  
until I proclaim your might  
to all the generations to come. (Psa. 71:17–18).

There was a time as a young man when I adopted that as my ‘motto’—and it has proved true.  
This can be the longing of our hearts:

Make me to know your ways, O Lord;  
teach me your paths.  
Lead me in your truth, and teach me,  
for you are the God of my salvation;  
for you I wait all day long (Psa. 25:4–5).

*What has been our experience of being taught by God?*

### **Two Ways of Knowing**

Doubtless, when God teaches us, He does so out of the abundance of His own wisdom and knowledge and understanding. It is by this wisdom that God created and governs and sustains the whole of His creation:

The Lord by wisdom founded the earth;  
by understanding he established the heavens;  
by his knowledge the deeps broke open,  
and the clouds drop down the dew (Prov. 3:19–20).

Note that in Job 28:28, ‘the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to depart from evil is understanding’. In other words, this wisdom of God from which God teaches us is not just informational. It is rightly relational, and it is morally righteous. In Proverbs 3:18, ‘wisdom’ and ‘understanding’ (Prov. 3:13) are designated as ‘a tree of life’. This could well be a reference to ‘the tree of life’ in the garden of Eden (Gen. 2:9; 3:22); as distinct from ‘the the tree of the knowledge of good and evil’, which brings death to human beings who eat from it (Gen. 2:17; compare Prov. 8:35–36). It would appear that the normal human condition, as created by God, is for us to be taught directly by God—to ‘live . . . by every word that comes from the mouth of God’ (Matt. 4:3: Jesus quoting Deut. 8:3). Could it be that ‘the tree of life’ and ‘the the tree of the knowledge of good and evil’ in the garden of Eden (Gen. 2:9,17; 3:1–24) stand for two ways of knowing: one that is ‘taught by God’, that is the way of life, and the other that is our vain attempt at self-indoctrination, apart from God and over against God—our bid to be ‘as God’ ourselves (Gen. 3:5)—which comes under the sentence of death?

We could ask ourselves: How do we know what we know? Are we taught by God, from God’s own wisdom, righteousness and love, or are we out to get knowledge and power for ourselves, according to our own self-constructed notions of so-called wisdom, morality and relationships, apart from or over against God?

## Defiance and False Knowing

Romans 1:18–23 indicates that while the true way of knowing is open to all, we all have all abrogated the true way of knowing and embraced the false way:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

We see that the true way of knowing is suppressed by the refusal of a thankful and dependent relationship with God as He really is, a deliberate perpetration of ungodly and wicked actions that are contrary to God's nature and law, resulting in false knowing and an inability to know what is true. Paul goes on to say that it is only the salvation of God that comes to us in the gospel that can rescue us from this benighted malaise.

*What is the mindset that seeks the false way of knowing?*

*What mindset or attitude of heart would we need to be in the true way of knowing?*

## Trinitarian Knowing

When Jesus made the statement in John 6:45:

It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God',

he was not talking just about the imparting of information. Here is the full context:

No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life (John 6:44–48).

The knowledge imparted by the Father is relational. The Father brings us to know and relate to the Son as he really is, that we might live—eternally—and not die. To believe in Jesus, to feed on his flesh and blood—given on the cross for the life of the world—is to have eternal life (John 6:47, 54, and context). Again Jesus said, referring back to John 6:45, in relation to those who believe and those who do not:

For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father (John 6:65).

Related with this is what Jesus said to Peter, following Peter's confession of Jesus as 'the Messiah, the Son of the living God':

Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven (Matt. 16:16–17).

The same thing works the other way: just as it is only by the Father that we can truly know the Son, so it is only through the Son that we can really know the Father:

All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him (Matt. 11:27).

So Jesus said to Philip:

No one comes to the Father except through me (John 14:6).

Similarly, it is the Spirit who brings to us all the truth of Jesus as the Son, and all the truth of the Father in the Son:

But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you . . . When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf . . . He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:14–15)

Thus Paul avers that ‘no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit’ (1 Cor. 12:3), and that it is by the Spirit that we cry ‘Abba! Father!’ (Rom. 8:15–16; Gal. 4:6).

All of this is what it means to be ‘taught by God’. It is to this that Jesus brings us back, and it is to this that he takes us on, in the gospel.

### **The True Way of Knowing**

We saw that Paul says in Romans 1:18–23 that the false way of knowing comes ‘by the refusal of a thankful and dependent relationship with God as He really is, a deliberate perpetration of ungodly and wicked actions that are contrary to God’s nature and law, resulting in false knowing and an inability to know what is true’. We may infer by contrast that the true way of knowing is relational, moral, and true.

These three concerns are reflected by the apostle John when he warns against false teachers in his First Letter.

### ***Relational***

Those who are in the true way of knowing are in abiding relationship with the Father, the Son and the Spirit:

truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ (1 John 1:3).

And now, little children, abide in him (1 John 2:28).

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit (1 John 4:13).

This relationship in God is mirrored in a relationship of love with other believers:

if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:7)

if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us (1 John 4:12).

It is this love that the false teachers do not know, and cannot abide:

Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars (1 John 4:20)

They went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But by going out they made it plain that none of them belongs to us (1 John 2:19).

### ***Moral***

Those who are in the true way of knowing walk in the moral way of God's law:

For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments (1 John 5:3).

If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who does right has been born of him (1 John 2:29).

This is the way of living that is denied in practice by the false teachers:

Whoever says, 'I have come to know him,' but does not obey his commandments, is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist (1 John 2:4).

### ***True***

Those who are thus in the true way of knowing know the truth at it really is:

And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us (1 John 4:14-16).

This is the truth that the false teachers cannot acknowledge or participate in:

By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God (1 John 4:2-3).

Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father; everyone who confesses the Son has the Father also (1 John 2:22-23).

By contrast, inward recognition of truth is almost instinctive to those who ate in the relational, moral and true way of knowing and living:

And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life (1 John 5:20).

But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and all of you have knowledge [*Other ancient authorities read you know all things*]. I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and you know that no lie comes from the truth (1 John 2:20-21).

As for you, the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and so you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, abide in him (1 John 2:27).

### Coming into the True Way of Knowing

Thus Paul the apostle in Galatians 1 told how he came to be 'taught by God' in the way we have been outlining:

For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ . . . when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, [Gk in me] so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus . . . they only heard it said, 'The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy' (Gal. 1:11-12, 15-17, 23).

For Paul the sinner, the truth came to him, not by any human intermediary, but directly from God, in a saving revelation that brought him into an intimate relationship with the Father and the Son, in a way that transformed his actions, and issued in the proclamation of that saving gospel to others.

### The Trembling Proclaimers

What are the implications of this for our preaching and teaching, and for how it is to be received?

If this is how God has always purposed to operate with the human race, and if this is how God does operate in the gospel, then clearly we need to have an expectation that this is how God will act every time we come together for any speaking of the word of God. It is not to be regarded as impossible or unusual, but rather as what we would normally expect.

These occasions, then, are not to be approached in a casual or lack-lustre way, but rather with awe and wonder—they are encounters with the living God! Nor are we able to come to them with any proud sense of our own competence, but rather in healthy fear and trembling, in the spirit of Isaiah 66:2:

All these things my hand has made,  
and so all these things are mine,  
says the LORD.  
But this is the one to whom I will look,  
to the humble and contrite in spirit,  
who trembles at my word.

All this, in the confidence that God will do what He says, in the lives of all who hear:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,  
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,  
making it bring forth and sprout,  
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,  
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;  
it shall not return to me empty,  
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,  
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it (Isa. 55:10-11).

Note:

The Scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission. All rights reserved.'