**“Knowing Him” in I John**

By Michael Eaton

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“’Knowing God’ is the major theme of I John. It was the main matter in dispute between John and the cult that was trying to entice away his ‘little children’.

“The Greek word *ginosko* (‘to know’) occurs 25 times: 2:3, 4, 5, 13, 14, 18, 29; 3:1, 6, 16, 19, 20, 24; 4:2, 6, 7, 8, 13, 16; 5:2, 20). The verb *oida* (another verb for ‘to know’) occurs 15 times: 2:11, 20, 21, 29; 3:2, 5, 14, 15; 5:13, 15, 18, 19, 20).

In Classical Greek the first verb meant ‘know by experience’ and the second meant ‘know directly’. However, in the Hellenistic Greek of the New Testament, the distinction between the two verbs is not a sharp one. They overlap in connotation, and both have a wide range of meanings. When, for example, in I John 2:29 John switches from *oida* to *ginosko* very easily, it is not likely that there is any great change in meaning. As often in the Johannine writings, the nuances of meaning are so varied as to give rise to difficulties in interpretation.

The ancient ‘gnostics’ had their ideas about ‘knowing God’ and it is a crucial matter among modern Christians also. As one looks at the church today, there seems to be one half who are having rich experiences of God, but mixed in with it is a lot of falsity, incredible weakness with regard to God’s Word, and sometimes ingredients that are more in keeping with a cult than the Christian Church. Yet on the other side there is a cold interest in doctrine and the teaching of “the Word’ that seem powerless. On all sides the need of the hour, as it is the need of every age of the church, is of a true and authentic knowledge of God. It is here that John helps us.

I doubt whether there are any occasions in I John where John’s idea of ‘knowing’ is concerned with ‘deduction by sheer reason’. Yet John’s word ‘know’ is often taken to be virtually synonymous with ‘deduce’ and to refer to a deductive kind of knowledge. ‘There is a form of assurance which is derived by deduction from the Scriptures’ says one writer, who then proceeds a few lines later to mention I John 3:14. The early John Cotton held the same view. I John 3:14 enables us (thought Cotton) ‘to try our own states, whether we are in death or life’. (There is reason to think Cotton later changed his mind.) ‘Here is the proof that . . .’, says the New English Bible, translating I John 4:13.

However, it is not likely that John is ever referring to logical deduction. It is far more likely that the force of the verb *(oidamen)* is ‘we experience’. The word *oida* (used in I John 3:14) may have this nuance. Ignatius asks his readers at Rome to ‘sympathize with me’ (*sumpatheito moi*) as those who are ‘experiencing the things that constrain me (*eidos ta sunechonta me*). Also the phrase contrasts with ‘abiding in death’. The opposite of abiding in death is surely experiencing life. This thought coheres with John’s teaching elsewhere. He is concerned that those who are Christians may experience fellowship. His point in I John 3:14 is, I believe, that the pathway of love is the key to *experiencing* the fact that the Christian has passed from death to life. To ‘know’ is to ‘experience’.

The closest John comes to using a word meaning ‘deduce’ is in I John 2:18, which could refer to the Christian’s deduction from the presence of antichrists that it is the last hour. Yet even there it is not simply a matter of rationalistically drawing a conclusion. It is rather that the believers’ experience of God leads them on to reflect upon their faith at a deeper level. There is still an experiential note in his ‘deduction’.

Both *ginosko* and *oida* may mean ‘know by reflection and meditation’. When John says ‘If we know that He hears us . . .’, that knowledge in itself is something experiential and given by the Spirit. The conclusion that John draws (‘Then we know . . .’) is not simply a rationalistic deduction. It is rather a reflection upon our experience of God in such a way that the Christian discerns more than he had done at first. This means then that oftentimes the knowledge John refers to is not sheer deduction but the *knowledge that comes from deeper after-the-event reflection.* When John says ‘we know that we have known Him’ (I John 2:3), the second verb refers (I am suggesting) to fellowship with God, and the first verb therefore refers to a present reflection and meditation.

Sometimes the knowledge John refers to is closely related to, if not identical with.‘fellowship’ with God. In such cases John uses the direct object and says ‘we have known Him’ (*egnokamen auton*) or some similar phrase (I John 2:3, 4, 13, 14; 3:6; 4:6, 7, 8; 5:20). The claim of the heretics, ‘I know Him’ (2:4), was a claim to fellowship, although it is a claim that John denies.

Sometimes the nuance that is found in these verbs is that of *direct experiential knowledge* and the verb could be translated ‘we experience’. In John 2:5 ‘By this we know that we are in Him’, John is probably not inviting us to decide whether we are in fellowship by our obedience (despite many interpretations along those lines). What degree of obedience would be needed? If it is to be obedient most of the time, who decides what is most of the time? Who can ever pass the test? It is more likely that ‘know that’ means ‘experience that’. It is obedience to the Word of God that leads to our being ‘in’ Jesus, that is to say, in conscious fellowship with Him.

Although precise points at which this nuance is to be seen is debateable, it is likely that it is found in I John 2:5; 3:14, 19, 24; 4:13, 16. I shall try to show how such an interpretation fits into the overall thrust of John’s meditations. In I John 5:15 we have reference to a gripping conviction that God has heard the Christian (‘if we know . . .’) followed by a further conviction that follows from it (‘. . . then we know’).

In I John 2:11 *oida* refers to general understanding or comprehension; ‘knowledge’ is the opposite of confusion. I John 5:20, without using a verb for ‘know’, refers to being ‘given understanding’ (*dinoia*). The Christian living in animosity is confused and ‘does not understand’ (*ouk oiden*) his direction in life. In I John 2:20 ‘knowledge’ is discernment given by the Holy Spirit. Whereas John’s enemies may claim that only an elite have understanding, John maintains that all of his disciples have understanding. The verb is used absolutely, without an object, but immediately afterwards John speaks of ‘knowing the truth’ (I John 2:21). It is this ‘discernment’ that the world does not have, and accordingly the world does not discern the nature of the Christians (I John 3:1).

Both *oida* and *ginosko* are used of apprehension of particular matters concerning Jesus (I John 2:29; 3:1) and concerning spiritual truths that are the outworking of their knowledge of Jesus (I John 2:29). When John says ‘we know that . . . we shall be like Him’, it is inner conviction and apprehension that is in view (I John 3:20. Likewise the Christian ‘knows’ the purpose of the appearing of Jesus (I John 3:5). The Christian ‘knows’ that the spirit of murder does not stem from eternal life (I John 3:15). I John 3:16 refers to the Christian’s seeing, in his understanding of the death of Jesus, what love is. I John 4:2, 6 (second occurrence) and 5:2, 13, 18, 19 may refer to perceiving what is authentically of the Holy Spirit. According to I John 5:15, the Christian is sometimes able to attain certainty that his prayer has been heard by God.

This is John’s idea of ‘knowledge’. It is identical to fellowship. It is rich experience of the living God. It is knowledge that comes by reflecting prayerfully on what God has done in our lives. It flows out in love towards people. According to John, knowledge that does not flow out in love towards fellow Christians is entirely fake. The true knowledge is knowledge of God, to be found when we persist in faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God come in the flesh.”