

Cultivating Shalom: A Response to John Stackhouse's Epistemology

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Introduction

John Stackhouse's new book, *Need to Know*, takes up the complexity of the Christian pursuit of knowing and serving God in the fullest sense of those terms by attending to the Creation Mandate and the call to love God and one's neighbor. He sees the problem as Christians either compartmentalizing or capitulating to culture in their thinking. The traditional Wesleyan Quadrilateral (Stackhouse calls it the *Christian Quadrilateral*) needs an upgrade, which Stackhouse seeks to provide. This involves an overview of current understandings of epistemology, including cognitive pluralism, and an engagement with intellectual resources (the *pentalectic*) through modes of apprehension. His most provocative conclusion, and a convincing one to me, is that now we know only in part, *and* God seems content with this state of affairs (17).

The strengths of this book are many, including the following three items. First, Stackhouse demonstrates unwavering commitment to wrestle with the paradox of seeking to know that which in the end is perhaps beyond human understanding. Second, he makes a passionate plea for Christians to act boldly on what they have been given to know. Third, he integrates current concerns of our postmodern culture with the Christian vision for human and creation flourishing by offering an epistemology that is both responsive and responsible (18). He hopes his efforts will build community as all humans "seek the common good in global flourishing" (90). At first read, a weakness in his effort is the book's organization, for in addressing the several components of vocation, epistemology and Christian calling, Stackhouse pursues several side issues or offers lengthy digressions that interrupt the argument's march forward. Yet perhaps the very configuration of the book exhibits the spiral nature of knowing, for events inform beliefs, and new events and experiences further impact those beliefs, and subsequent actions and responses call for adjustments in our knowing and doing. Stackhouse moves the reader along, anticipating possible objections and encouraging new vistas as he pursues his "outline of just how Christians ought to think about whatever they are called to think about" (18).

Argument Summary

Stackhouse starts, not with examining human capacities and shortcomings, but with God's purpose in creating the world and humanity. Because God commanded

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humans to cultivate the earth, therefore God has equipped humans to carry out that mandate. Additionally, Christians are called to love God and neighbor. In so doing, the Christian pursues God's calling, the *vocation* established by God for all humanity. "Vocation is the divine calling *to be a Christian* in every mode of life, whether public as well as private, religious as well as secular, adult as well as juvenile, corporate as well as individual, female as well as male" (68). The Christian's two-fold vocation is to cooperate with God's mission of redeeming the world and, alongside non-Christians, to cultivate *shalom* (93). Using intuition, imagination, and reason the Christian draws on the resources of experience, tradition, scholarship, art, and Scripture in making decisions. The goal is not to make the "right" decision, but given our provisional knowledge, to make the best decision that furthers love of God and neighbor. Stackhouse's insight is to show that human flourishing is not rooted in propositional certainty, but in humble action based on incomplete but sufficient knowledge of the specific event or problem faced.

Stackhouse proposes that Christians and non-Christians are equally capable of following the Creation Mandate (cultivate the earth), to which he adds love of God and love of neighbor. For God has given to humanity the gift of reason so as to cultivate wisely, to love well, and to flourish in community. Thus knowledge is not pursued for its own sake, but to reach *shalom*, a state of flourishing, for "God will be (epistemically) faithful so that we can be (vocationally) faithful" (21). Stackhouse's optimistic tone is rooted in God's work, not human potential, and the book's expansive inclusiveness reflects Stackhouse's conviction that God accomplishes his purposes for all humanity, both Christian and non-Christian. Indeed, a refreshing aspect of this book is its insistence on drawing together all humanity in its ability to know because of God's (common) grace to all his human creatures.

Evaluation of Argument

Stackhouse rightly argues that God equips humans with rational thought, allowing his creatures to interpret their environment and shape or cultivate it. Christians have the advantage of recognizing the meta-narrative of creation and redemption. Knowing how the story ends, so to speak, allows Christians to value non-Christian contributions to human flourishing and give God the honor due his great design.

A. Living Liturgically

Stackhouse's emphasis on knowing through intuition and imagination, as well as his brief reflection on art as one of the ways of knowing (109-111) opens possibilities to think broadly about ritual and doctrine. Gregory of Nyssa reports his sister Macrina's words, "by the very operation of our senses, we are led to conceive of that reality and intelligence which surpasses the senses" (2002, 34). Sarah Coakley observes that Gregory "makes explicit the possibility of *training* the gross physical

senses so that they may come to anticipate something of the capacities of the resurrection body" (2013, 143). Coakley pursues this insight by showing how "liturgy 'is true' (i.e. it irreducibly conveys, announces, and even 'justifies' certain theological truths *along with, and in the light of*, a primary relational access to intimacy with God-in-Christ)" (140, emphasis original). Such understanding leads to transformation, to deeper integration of the self, as the Christian's body and mind together experience God. Knowledge is embodied, and its 'truth' is located in the God who acts within and through the repeated liturgical events. Indeed, a focus on art might lead the reader back to the Genesis story of God creating humanity in his image, and forward to Paul's reminder that Christians are God's *poiēma*, his poem or workmanship, a special creation made—not to *know* the right stuff—but to *do* his good works (Eph. 2:10).

B. Reading and Doing Christianly

Yet in reading *Need to Know*, I found myself asking at times, "What advantage, then, is there in being a Christian?" At issue is Stackhouse's conjoining of the Creation Mandate with the *Shema*, the command to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength (Deut. 6:5, see also Lev. 19:18). Stackhouse states that the commandments to love God and neighbor are given to all humanity, but I argue that these latter commandments happen within and for the believing community (for example, ancient Israel, Second Temple Jews, and the earliest Christians). I am not arguing that only believers can love, for all humans have the capacity to love and do acts of kindness, and Christians should rejoice in this, as Stackhouse encourages. But loving God involves loving the One God; for Christians, the Triune God. Stackhouse states, "our fundamental problem is not what we think: it is what and whom we love," (73). And he adds that Christians are to be agents of change, to change people's *loves* (79). I agree, and would conclude from these insights that while the Creation Mandate to cultivate and be fruitful stands for all humans, the call to love God and neighbor requires the person to become a member of God's people. For God did not command that humans love creation, but that they cultivate it. And God commanded Israel to love their God (alone) and their neighbor (as they love themselves).

Stackhouse argues that the Creation Commandments will continue to be in effect in the new, redeemed earth, while the Salvation Commandments (God's redemption plan in Christ) are temporary because all who enjoy the new heavens and new earth will have been saved (79). Yet the Creation Commandments include being fruitful, and reproduction will not factor in the life of the redeemed community. Moreover, salvation is not only about proclaiming, "Jesus is Lord," but also about transformation, which Stackhouse notes only once in passing (76). Intrinsic to the Salvation Commandments is participating in Christ's life, being transformed into the image of the Son. Christ eternally intercedes on our behalf, thus our cultivation of the new earth in our immortal, resurrected bodies will necessitate Christ's intercession and life-giving salvation.

C. Making and Doing Shalom

Stackhouse stresses the term *shalom* as the goal of the Creation Mandate, which includes creation care, social reform, and charity (77). He argues that Christians and non-Christians together are engaged in the “work of making shalom” (223). *Shalom* contains the important eschatological element that Stackhouse rightly want to emphasize as Christians work for human flourishing with an eye to the world to come. The topic of *shalom*, or peace (Greek: *eirēnē*) is receiving renewed interest today in my research field of New Testament studies. However, its meaning within the New Testament varies significantly from the definition used by Stackhouse and others in the current discussion about vocation and human flourishing. Put simply, peace in the New Testament comes only from God in Christ. It is not connected with a creation mandate or human flourishing in an inclusive sense. Quite the opposite, it is serves to distinguish the wider culture’s view of human flourishing (e.g., the Roman imperial vision for culture) from that of the Christ-confessing community.

The term “peace” did a lot of heavy lifting in Roman imperial propaganda. For example, in the Priene Inscription, Augustus is lauded with bringing the cessation of war, and thus ushering in peace. Coins minted by the emperors promoted the peace that came to Rome through military victories. In an interesting visual, one of Nero’s coins shows the closed doors of the Janus temple, which was located in the Roman forum. The Romans believed the temple’s closed doors signified that Rome was at peace. The *Res Gestae* notes that three times in Augustus’s reign, the doors of the Janus temple were closed. This contrasts with the doors being closed only twice before in Rome’s entire history, or so Augustus claims (Weima 2012, 349). Under the guise of *shalom*, one might give a pass to the use of force that serves only to impose the status quo. As Tacitus so adroitly perceived about Rome, expressed on the lips of conquered Caledonian chieftain, Calgacus, “they make a desert, and call it peace” (*Agricola* 30). Paul recalls the Roman slogan, “peace and security” (1 Thess. 5:3) only to rebut it with the Gospel’s message of true peace with God and with neighbor.

It may be, however, that *Need to Know* provides an important entry point for the New Testament discussions about peace. Stackhouse’s emphasis on vocation maintains that, “God expects of each of us what each of us can do in order to accomplish what God has called each of us to accomplish” (237). Michael Gorman highlights that *shalom* in the Old Testament is “relational and specifically covenantal, a situation in which humans are in proper relation to one another, God and the whole creation” (2015, 147). The covenant aspect continues into the New Testament as Jesus fulfills the messianic promises and reconciles the world to God. Peace now includes love of neighbor, and of enemy. The latter category “enemy” establishes God’s understanding of peace, and by extension love, over against human definitions. Gorman notes, “for Paul, this gift of peace and reconciliation is not an addendum to something else, such as salvation: it *is* salvation, it *is* the mission of God, the *missio Dei*” (153). Our specific mission from God, Stackhouse argues, is facilitated well by “the intellectual means of grace, . . . which help us fulfill our vocations by reliably negotiating reality” (236).

Conclusion^[AN1]

Stackhouse addresses several related issues in his proposal to view Christian epistemology through the lens of vocation. He tackles epistemology's perennial questions by (1) declaring that we can know sufficiently because the Creator God gave us orders to care for the creation, therefore by implication gave us the tools by which to cultivate it and by (2) pointing to the purpose of knowing, which is to do God's will. His argument refutes the belief that knowledge's goal is to be right or true. Instead, he encourages Christians to think about *extending* Christ's work, not specifically imitating it, so as to emphasize the importance of vocation, of acting faithfully and thinking faithfully with the goal of fulfilling the Creation Mandate (62). This emphasis on extending Christ's work captures an oft-neglected theme within the New Testament: that of working out your salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12). Stackhouse might have expanded his definition of God's redemptive work to include Christ's eternal intercession on behalf of believers, and stressed the peace of Christ that should shape all other understandings of *shalom*. Yet Stackhouse emphasizes correctly and helpfully that right thinking flows from the right love. He argues convincingly that humanity's problem is not lack of knowledge, but failure to love well and love the good (73).

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