

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Christian and Hopeful First Encounter Ignorance

A. The Pedigree of Ignorance and his Entrance.

AND I slept and dreamed again, and saw the same two pilgrims going down the *Mountains* along the highway toward the *Celestial City*. Now a little below these *Mountains* on the left-hand side lies the country of *Conceit*,¹ and from it originates a little crooked lane along which pilgrims walk since it enters into the straight way.² Therefore here they met a very brisk lad [*lively young man*] named *Ignorance*.

We now encounter a principal character whom modern critics tend to regard as an enigma, though more of this when the pilgrims have a second and more prolonged meeting with Ignorance. To him, Kelman remarks,

an apparently disproportionate amount of *The Pilgrim's Progress* is devoted. There was a chapter in *The Plain Man's Pathway To Heaven* [by Arthur Dent] which had evidently been very familiar to our author [Bunyan]. Its title is "The Sin and Danger of Ignorance." We shall find so many traces of that passage here, that we may fairly conjecture, as one of the reasons for this somewhat [sic] excessive treatment, the unusual impression which the chapter referred to had made. And, indeed, it is the liveliest part of the book, and full of sparkling wit which must have delighted Bunyan. But the great emphasis laid upon this encounter indicates a deep fact. The Puritan theology gave a place of the greatest importance to knowledge.³

However, as we shall see, it is more likely that Edward Fowler is the chief personification here.

1. He comes from the Country of Conceit.

The citizenship of this self-appointed pilgrim indicates, as his mouth shall soon prove, not a general ignorance, but a particular lack of understanding with regard to the God-appointed way to heaven. Ignorance is very confident concerning his "gospel."

2. He enters from a crooked lane.

Whereas Formalist and Hypocrisy appear to have known that their tumbling over the Wall of Salvation was, as a short cut, illegal, here this more established lane suggests a stronger conviction, on the part of Ignorance, of its legitimacy. However, its crookedness indicates the bankruptcy of man's best religious enterprises (Ps. 125:5).

¹ *Prov. 26:12; Rom. 11:25; 12:16.*

² *Ps. 125:5.*

³ John Kelman, *The Road*, II, pp. 79-80; cf. J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, pp. 69-73.

3. He walks with a lively strut.

There is no hesitancy here, rather a lively, cocksure “very brisk lad,” especially in the area of religion, who does not feel the need to ask for direction. Bunyan likewise describes his youthful religious zeal as follows:

I thought I kept this or that commandment, or did, by word or deed, anything that I thought was good, [and] I had great peace in my conscience; and should think with myself, God cannot choose but be now pleased with me; yea, to relate it in mine own way, I thought no man in England could please God better than I. But poor wretch as I was, I was all this while ignorant of Jesus Christ.”⁴

Then he describes drawing near to four godly women in conversation since he was “a brisk talker,”⁵ just like Ignorance.



Ignorance

⁴ Bunyan, *Works*, I, §§ 35-36, p. 10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, § 37.

B. The Testimony of Ignorance Concerning his Pilgrimage.

So *Christian* asked him, "From where have you come? And where are you going?"

IGNORANCE: Sir, I was born in the country that lies on our left-hand side, and I am going to the *Celestial City*.

CHRISTIAN: But how do you imagine that you shall gain entrance at the gate? Will you not encounter some difficulty there?

IGNORANCE: Just as other good people have gained entrance there, so will I.

CHRISTIAN: But what acceptable qualification can you show at the gate so that it will be opened for you to enter?

IGNORANCE: I know my *Lord's* will and I have lived a good life; I have repaid every man to whom I was in debt; I frequently pray, fast, pay tithes [*tenth*s] and give alms to the poor, and have forsaken the land of my birth so that I might arrive as a pilgrim.⁶

CHRISTIAN: But you did not enter in at the *Wicket-gate*, that is at the commencement of this straight way. Rather you came in here by means of that crooked lane, and therefore I fear, whatever you may think about yourself, that when the day of final reckoning [*judgment*] comes, you will be accused of being a thief and a robber instead of qualifying as a legitimate entrant for the *City*.⁷

IGNORANCE: Gentlemen, you are utter strangers to me; I do not know you, so be content to follow your religion and I will be content to follow mine.⁸ I do hope that all will be well. And as for the gate that you talk about, all the world knows that it is a great distance away from our country. I cannot imagine that any man in our regions knows anything about the way to it. Furthermore, there is no need for them to be concerned about it since we have, as you can plainly see, a fine, pleasant, green lane that leads from our country down into the way right here.

He seems unashamed of his homeland, though strangely forgetful of its name. However, there is a relationship between the breeding and character of this young man, "for conceit and ignorance [especially in religion] go as inevitably together as humility and wisdom."⁹ Note that Ignorance is not so much fleeing from the Country of Conceit as Christian did from the City of Destruction.

1. He has left Conceit Country for the Celestial City.

Most people want to go to heaven because it is certainly more comfortable there! Further, Ignorance accepts the inevitability of death, and the fact of a moral universe that incorporates responsibility and consequences. But he does not appear here as heavily burdened.

⁶ *Isa. 64:6; Luke 18:9-14.*

⁷ *John 10:1; 14:6.*

⁸ Ignorance makes it clear to everyone that he is a fool.

⁹ Kelman, *The Road*, II, p. 81.

2. He hopes to gain entrance for several reasons.

Christian quickly assesses this pilgrim as a religious intruder and unqualified to travel. Thus he provokes Ignorance to give reasons for his hope of final acceptance by the Great King.

- a. Intrinsic personal goodness.

He is one of a multitude who merits divine favor being socially upstanding, financially reputable, and dutiful to his family and relatives (Matt. 19:16-22). This is his ground of acceptance with God, his hope for justification before God, his means of access to God, his offering for blessing from God, which in fact is an insult in the presence of God (Job 15:14-16; 25:4; Isa. 64:6).

- b. Evident religious devotion.

He has a good knowledge of the Word of God; he prays, fasts, pays tithes, gives to the poor, and like the Pharisee, has a perverted sense of enabling grace. For he hypocritically confesses: “God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers” (Matt. 18:11). Ignorance is very religious and very blind to the truth of the gospel.

3. He is unattracted to the gospel of Christ.

Here is the essence of the character of Ignorance, namely ignorance concerning the only true gospel which has an exclusive requirement, that is entrance only through the Wicket-gate, or Jesus Christ, according to God's terms. His loyalty is not to the pursuit of truth, but rather to vain and crooked tradition that is according to man's devising.

- a. His society sees no need of the Wicket-gate.

Religion in Conceit Country is traditional, ethnic, utilitarian, moralistic, formal, man-centered, broad, moderate, ecumenical.

- b. His society establishes its own gospel.

According to Christian, this side entrance is a “crooked” lane, while for Ignorance it is a “fine, pleasant, green” lane. Worldly religion is always self-congratulatory with regard to its engineered course, while biblical Christianity is Christ-congratulatory concerning the way that Christ has engineered.

4. He spurns the serious concern of Christian.

The comment of Ignorance, “all the world knows that that that [the Wicket-gate] is a great way off of our country,”¹⁰ is a revealing response. Apparently he and his countrymen have heard about such a distant entrance, but they have no idea of the

¹⁰ Bunyan, *Works*, III, p. 146.

route that will take them to it; nor do they have any desire for such instruction. Thus Ignorance brushes off the concerns of Christian.

- a. His lack of any proper token for entrance.

However, such an idea is a narrow fundamentalist concept that fails to have a broader vision, a larger hope. Ignorance believes that many such side entrance lanes will yet all lead to acceptance at heaven's gate.

- b. His prospect of judgement as a thief and a robber.

However, the fact that God's objectively revealed entrance requirement will prevail over the mere whim and tradition of Ignorance (John 10:1; 14:6), is of no consequence; he will not veer from his lemming theology!

C. The Estimation of Ignorance by the Pilgrims.

When *Christian* understood that this man was wise in his own conceit, he whispered to *Hopeful*, "There is more hope for a fool than him."¹¹ He further added, "When he who is a fool walks along the way, wisdom is lacking in him, and so he demonstrates to everyone that he is a fool."¹² So shall we talk any more with him? Or shall we walk ahead of him for the present and give him time to think about what he has already heard? And then shall we wait for him further on and see if a gradual approach can more effectually benefit him?" Then *Hopeful* responded:

Let *Ignorance* a little while now muse
On what is said, and let him not refuse
Good counsel to embrace, lest he remains
Still ignorant of what's the chiefest gain.
God says, Those that no understanding have,
(Although he made them) them he will not save.

HOPEFUL: I do not think that it is wise to tell him everything at once. Rather, if you agree, let us leave him for a while and then talk to him later, that is when he is better prepared to receive it.¹³

This aside conversation is designated by Bunyan in a marginal comment as, "How to carry it to a fool," that is, how to deal with a fool in such a situation. Christian seems to be exasperated and frustrated, but Hopeful is more prudent in his suggestion as to how such a person should be handled.

¹¹ Prov. 26:5, 12; Matt. 6:23; John 9:39-41.

¹² Eccles. 10:3.

¹³ How to deal with a fool. Prov. 14:7.

1. Christian has more hope for a fool than he.

He is of two minds, whether to utterly abandon Ignorance, and this seems to be his preference (Prov. 14:7), or part from him temporarily hoping that time will bring about some awakening to the truth.

a. Ignorance is wise in his own conceit.

That is, his professed perception of light is in reality bondage to darkness (Matt. 6:23). Being in fact blind, yet he claims to see (John 9:39-41). This wisdom is the greatest foolishness (Prov. 26:12).

b. Ignorance is blind to his foolishness.

When a man discovers that he is a fool, a fool he still remains, except that it is possible he will repent and seek wisdom from God (Jas. 1:5-6). But the condition of Ignorance is far worse for he is unaware that he is an ignorant fool (Eccles. 10:3).

2. Application.

Who is a greater fool than he who trusts in self-righteousness and human works for the purpose of gaining acceptance with God? Such a person believes it to be so reasonable, so commonly believed, so obviously taught by the essential teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. Yet how diametrically opposed is this belief to the truth of the gospel of the sovereign grace of God. This gospel of Ignorance is not simply a shade removed from the truth; it is antithetical to it in the most absolute sense. Christian, Hopeful, and Ignorance may continue along the same present course, and many will see little distinction between them. In fact, Ignorance will perform well in terms of outward appearances, yet his hope in God is humanly devised, and as such, will not prove to be acceptable when the day of reckoning arrives. The shock that such a rejection will generate is surely the supreme horror of that day, even transcending the remorse and despair of the openly godless (Matt. 7:21-23; Luke 13:24-28).

3. Hopeful suggests a temporary rest from his presence.

True to his name, there is a positive hope here on Hopeful's part. He desires that Ignorance should awaken to the truth; he is not quick to anathematize this new companion. Even Christ did not overburden his own new disciples, that is until such a time as they were ready to bear it (John 16:12). On the other hand, should Ignorance not give evidence of the commencement of an awakening in his soul, then Christ also taught that his disciples were not to cast pearls of kingdom truth before intractable swine (Matt. 7:6). So Christian and hopeful take the initiative in temporarily distancing themselves from Ignorance, and most likely this citizen of Conceit Country was content with such a situation.