

Get Understanding

In these fearful times, God is calling us to stop and listen and build relationships with our neighbors. | HENRY GREENIDGE

Solomon, one of the wisest men to ever live, said this: “In all your getting, get understanding” (Proverbs 4:7, NKJV).

I went online to Thesaurus.com and found several synonyms that can help us get to a deeper meaning of the word *understand*, including: distinguish, sympathize, conjecture, apprehend, penetrate, recognize. All of these words help us move beyond the simplistic or superficial to an understanding.

I fear that many of us with a penchant for quickness and instant results are also victims of the quick or easy study. Our limited perspective could result in limited understanding, which in truth is no understanding.

I have been seeking for some time now to have a better understanding of Islam so I could find more ways to share my faith in God with my Muslim neighbors. After 9/11, however, my attitudes shifted dramatically. An experience I had at a drive-through window typifies this change.

I was taking a twelve-year-old friend of mine to McDonald’s for lunch. When I pulled up to the drive-through, I noticed that the young woman serving me was wearing a headscarf and other apparel that let me know she was Muslim.

When she took my order, I had an image of her throwing a Molotov cocktail into my car. I was shocked that I had that thought. Where did that come from?

I’ve been reflecting on the controversy around the proposed Islamic community center at the Ground Zero site in New York City. Many Americans, including much of the church, are operating out of fear and ignorance right now concerning our Muslim neighbors.

As a nation, we have a right to be concerned since our country was viciously attacked. And we have a right to protect ourselves. However, following Solomon’s injunction about getting an understanding, I believe we need thoughtful inquiry and civil debate that is based on Jesus’s

command in Matthew to “love your neighbor as yourself” (22:39).

When we engage people on the basis of respect and a desire to hear their stories, when we desire to build a bridge of communication rather than building a case to destroy and discredit, we create new avenues for discussion and discovery of common ground. I discovered this firsthand with my attitudes about New York’s finest.

From the time I was a teenager I had a terrible suspicion of all police. My negative feelings were the result of numerous negative interactions with the police. I was raised to be respectful toward authority, so these encounters always caught me by surprise. I developed a deep distrust toward “the man.” But then something happened to me.

My younger brother became a police officer. After hearing his stories and experiences, I began to change my views about police. In fact, I began to seek out other police officers to hear their stories. I began



to understand the fear that exists in every police officer—the reality that he or she may not return home from the next shift. My love and respect for my brother enabled me to develop new understandings.

The issues we face today are global and complex and deserve more than catchy sound bites and quick fixes. As a part of my own personal journey of inquiry I am reading firsthand accounts by non-Western writers as well as reflections from those who have studied current issues from a Western point of view in order to “get understanding.”

Recently there was an announcement that the peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians were in big trouble because the moratorium on building new settlements on the West Bank would expire in several weeks. Unless that moratorium was continued, the Palestinians would walk out of the peace talks. There are legitimate arguments on both sides.

What caught my attention, however, was a comment by a Palestin-

ian worker who helps build Jewish homes on the West Bank. “There is no work to support my family so I go to Jerusalem and work there,” he said. The correspondent asked him, “What about the peace talks continuing for the good of the Palestinian people?” The worker responded, “I hope the

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moratorium is lifted so I can start working again and feed my family.”

People all over the world want the same things—food, safety, shelter, provision for their families. These needs supersede politics, culture, and religion.

God has a way of showing up and delivering his word. It’s always in season and it’s always timely. The prophet Jeremiah was asked by the king of Judah, “Is there any word from the LORD?” (Jeremiah 37:17). That same question is valid today. Is there any word from the Lord?

I believe there is. I believe God is

telling us that *we need thoughtful inquiry and civil debate based on a foundation of loving our neighbor and pursuing relationship in the midst of dialogue.*

What I mean by “thoughtful inquiry” is moving to the heart of the matter. That happens when we take

time to listen to one another’s stories.

Civil debate occurs when we hear perspectives that may challenge our own, but we listen and suspend judgment. We do so dispassionately—coolly, calmly, and collectedly as opposed to being strident, overbearing, and loud.

We need this understanding in our politics, and we especially need it in our churches so we can be the salt and light we were intended to be. ➤

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God, who in times past spoke through the prophets, is speaking to us now. God is speaking to us through our Muslim neighbors, but our eyes are blinded and our hearts are seared through the pain of the past; because of that we lack understanding.

In our polarized society there are so many disconnections and misunderstandings. By and large, white America doesn't understand the burden that descendants of African slaves who were brutalized, raped, and treated like possessions carry today. I don't believe most white Americans understand the poisonous toxicity of the deeds that have never been fully acknowledged.

On the other hand, some black Americans are stuck reacting to the past, which prevents them from seizing opportunities that are available now. Too many have drunk the Kool-Aid of self-hatred and as a result continue to act out in horrific, self-destructive behavior.

Jesus tells us to love our neighbor as ourselves. The late evangelist Tom Skinner made this observation: "If you don't love yourself, your neighbor is in trouble."

Growing up we used to jokingly say, "If you're white you're all right, if you're brown you can hang around, if you're black get back." That humor reflects a tragic reality that growing up in a culture where you are hated, despised, mistrusted, and criticized solely because you're black produces social and relational chaos.

How do we work toward understanding?

The one place where understanding and common ground could be established is the church, and until recently it has totally reflected this cultural toxicity and the accompanying dysfunctional behavior of a culture bankrupted by self-indulgence and greed.

We have chosen being comfortable as opposed to being biblical. So although the planet is screaming for models of healing and reconciliation, by and large we have the black church, the white church, the Asian church, etc., because that's where we

feel comfortable and safe.

When we are exhorted by Solomon to "get understanding," we have already determined from whom the understanding will come. If you're European, you tend to think it will come from other Europeans.

So here is my challenge to us, to me: Seek understanding through a growing relationship with those of opposite viewpoints. Notice I didn't say "agree" with them, but "understand" them. Why not follow Solomon's advice, "in all your getting, get understanding"? We must repent and admit our willfulness and limited understanding.

We can begin by reading contemporary theologians and writers from Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the church in the Middle East. We can open up channels of communication with the Samaritans in our social circles. We can make an intentional decision to live in a community that reflects the multilayered society in which we now exist.

If your church is not multiethnic, ask your pastor, "Why not?" Develop opportunities to serve the marginalized and the least among us and establish new relationships. Join a multiracial community Bible study, and begin dialogues with ethnic churches in your area.

Rearrange your spending priorities. Go on a Sankofa journey or a Mosaic journey. (If you aren't not sure what that is, call the Covenant's Department of Compassion, Mercy, and Justice and get an understanding.)

This can be the church's finest hour if we seize the moment and get an understanding. ■