

How Do We Turn Our Own Blind Spots Into Understanding?

Most of us are familiar with the story of John Newton (1725-1807), author of the beloved hymn “Amazing Grace,” which told the story of his conversion in a very personal way. As he famously wrote, “Amazing grace how sweet the sound/ That saved a wretch like me.” Many of us can say, “That speaks of me as well!”

As a young man, Newton served as the captain of several slave ships, buying and selling more than 400 slaves. As an old man, he was a staunch abolitionist, testifying with vivid clarity about the horrors of the slave trade. What a wretch he had been!

But did you know that Newton had his initial conversion experience while still engaged in the slave trading business? That he continued to captain a slave ship for more than five years while growing in his faith? And that he initially got out of the monstrous slave trading business because of health reasons rather than Christian conviction?

Later in life, when fully committed to the abolitionist movement, he wrote, “It will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me, that I was, once, an active instrument, in a business at which my heart now shudders.” And he described both the slave trade and his own involvement in it as “abominable.”

Yet he wrote candidly about the years of his life spent as a slave-trading ship captain, explaining, “Disagreeable I had long found it; but I think I should have quitted it sooner, had I considered it, as I now do, to be unlawful and wrong. *But I never had a scruple upon this head at the time; nor was such a thought once suggested to me, by any friend.* What I

did, I did ignorantly; considering it as the line of life which Divine Providence had allotted me, and having no concern, in point of conscience, but to treat the Slaves, while under my care, with as much humanity as a regard to my own safety would admit" (my emphasis).

In sum, he wrote, "Custom, example and interest had blinded my eyes. I did it ignorantly."

Newton, just like us, was a child of his times.

Some of you will no doubt protest this, saying, "No way he could be that ignorant! A truly converted man would never accept such a thing, not even for one minute."

To be sure, Newton later reflected many years later that, during those early years in the Lord, he was not "a believer in the full sense of the word."

Yet he certainly thought he was a believer, and he was definitely walking in the light that he had at the time.

And so, my response to you who would condemn Newton comes straight from the words of Paul: "You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things" (Rom. 2:1, NIV).

Could it be that we, too, have some serious blind spots? Could it be that we, too, are grossly ignorant in some ways? Could it be that we, too, have failed to stand for certain issues today, issues for which future generations will condemn us?

That, after all, is the very nature of a blind spot. We don't know it's there until someone points it out to us or we discover it for ourselves, often painfully.

Think back to your first lessons driving a car. You thought you had checked the lane next to you, only to hear a blaring horn or, worse still, to come into contact with the car you

failed to see, precisely because it was in your blind spot.

As I have often said, we don't know what we don't know, and therefore we don't know that we don't know it.

For example, you can be sure you put all the ingredients into a recipe because you didn't know that other ingredients were required. Or you could be sure that you had read all the relevant literature on a subject because you didn't know there were scores of important books you had entirely overlooked. You didn't know that you didn't know precisely because you didn't know that you didn't know.

In that same spirit, a Black friend of mine (who is a real supporter and colleague) once said to me, "Mike, you don't have a racist bone in your body. But there's a lot that you don't know."

I took his comments to heart and often start with that presupposition. There's a lot that I don't know.

If you're still wondering how someone could be a true follower of Jesus and yet participate in something as wrong as slavery, even for a time as a new believer, consider what the apostle Paul had to say about his own past: "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that He considered me trustworthy, appointing me to His service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 1:12–14).

So, as a zealous, God-fearing Jewish leader, he violently persecuted other Jews who followed Jesus, even to the point of their death. Yet God had mercy on him because he did it ignorantly. Once confronted with the truth about Jesus, he repented deeply.

Does that mean that we should never be dogmatic or have deep

convictions? Not at all. There are definitely hills on which we should die and truths from which we cannot be moved.

But we do well to walk in great humility, recognizing that none of us knows it all or has it all, understanding that, in ways that might surprise us, we fall short of God's standards because of our ignorance (and/or because of the spirit of the age in which we live).

That's why it is essential that we present ourselves before the Lord on a regular basis, asking Him to shine the light of His Spirit on our lives, examining ourselves by His Word.

That's why it is crucial that we are teachable and correctable, detesting stubbornness and pride.

That's why it is important that we are "quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry" (James 1:19b), doing our best to understand where others are coming from before making our final judgments.

When it comes to the contentious cultural issues of the day such as abortion and LGBTQ issues, I have no question at all that these are sinful in God's sight. At the same time, I recognize that I could be missing some of the reasons that professing Christians could defend such practices and lifestyles. Not all of them are raging sinners, full of blasphemy and guilt.

Some of them sincerely believe that they are standing for what is right and just, believing that they are acting in compassion and kindness out of love for God and people.

And so, rather than pass them like ships in the night, we should understand what makes them tick, searching our own hearts for blindness and ignorance as well. (For example, when it comes to abortion, is there any truth to the charge that some of us are more concerned with the life of the baby in the womb than with the well-being of the child outside the womb?

On other issues, could it be that our views are right but our attitudes are wrong?)

This is also why it's healthy to allow your own beliefs and convictions to be challenged. If you are on the right side of truth with a right spirit as well, you will only be confirmed. If you are wrong in fact or in attitude, you will do well to make the necessary adjustments.

We might have more blind spots than we care to admit.

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