

Seeking Truth

By

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We live in an age of great indifference about religious truth. This is evidenced by the fact that large congregations are best achieved in modern churches by avoiding strong doctrinal commitments. Hence, non-denominational or inter-denominational churches have generally grown more than those in traditional denominations. Even among the latter, not all attend their particular church because of what it believes. Indeed, they may not even know what it believes beyond its most superficial distinctions. Instead, they have chosen their particular church because of its convenience, or because of its programs, or because it is where family and friends attend, or perhaps because it is where they feel best motivated. These things have some degree of importance, but one must question the propriety of almost totally disregarding the creed of a church, or if it has no creed, to count this as a virtue rather than a vice. So exactly how important is it that we seek out the truth and make a commitment to it?

Nearly all people will claim to be truth-seekers, and all real Christians will claim to especially value the truth of the Bible, but of course the crucial question is whether God considers these claims to be true. Lest anyone be too hasty in answering this question for himself, consider what was spoken to Jeremiah in days when God was purposing to bring destruction on Jerusalem:

Run ye to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, and see now, and know, and seek in the broad places thereof, if ye can find a man, if there be any that executeth judgment, that seeketh the truth; and I will pardon it. – Jer 5:1

Since God did not afterward pardon Jerusalem, the implications of this text are very sobering. They are enough to give anyone pause. Three implications readily follow:

First, consider what it implies concerning the extent of God's forbearance. Had there been a single man in the city of Jerusalem that was sincerely seeking the truth, God would have spared the city on that account. Genesis 18 contains a similar story. This was where Abraham bargained with God for the preservation of Sodom. Abraham asked God if He would spare the city were there only 50 righteous in it. God replied that He would. Abraham then bargained to 45, then 30, then 20, then 10, and then, assuming there must surely be at least 10, Abraham bargained no more. Sad to say, Abraham overestimated the city. But God never showed indication that He was unwilling to bargain further. We have no reason to suppose He would have stopped even had Abraham bargained to one. In the Jeremiah text this is confirmed. Here it was not man offering terms to God; rather, God was offering the terms Himself, and He emphatically vowed that He would spare Jerusalem for the price of a single truth-seeking soul!

Second, the text impresses us with the enormous impact that truth-seekers can make upon their world. Had there been only one such person in Jerusalem, the city would have been saved. Neglect or rejection of God's truth has consequences upon our fellow man as well as upon ourselves. Malachi charged the priests of his times for dealing treacherously with their brethren because they had neglected and corrupted the truth (Mal 2:10). This was notwithstanding the

fact that the priests had actually spoken so as to please their brethren. We never do anyone a favor by compromising the truth. Oftentimes, there are those about us who would be appeased if we did. They would have us corroborate them and collaborate with them in their errors, but we do them disservice if we comply. Had there been a truth-seeker in Jerusalem in the days of Jeremiah, he would have been the object of contempt and ridicule, and would have been counted a menace to society. His critics would have been confident he was wrong because he stood alone, and equally confident they were right because they ran with the herd. But this was a herd in a maddened frenzy stampeding toward a cliff. Their doom could have been turned by what they certainly would have scorned – an earnest seeker of the truth. The value of truth is such that it should not be rejected or neglected to appease anyone, because faithful adherence to truth can bless the lives of many, even of those who object to it.

Third, the text demonstrates the potential rarity of a truth-seeker in the judgment of God. Who would have guessed that not a single truth-seeker would be found in a city so large? The text shows that when men are examined for their convictions concerning truth, they are more apt to be found in complacency than they would suppose. Where men consider themselves as being open-minded, amiable or ecumenical, God might well consider them apathetic, lethargic, willfully ignorant, willfully deluded and deserving of the ruin that befalls these vices. The fact they are doing what everyone else is doing will not mitigate their error. The entire city of Jerusalem was destroyed.

The teachings of Jesus Christ more powerfully show the importance of truth than anything ever written. He told the Samaritan woman, “*God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth,*” (Jn 4:24). Man was surely created for the purpose of serving God. Worship is man’s highest endeavor, but it cannot be done in any way man chooses. It must be done in truth. In light of this fact, it is strange indeed that of all fields of knowledge, scarcely none are given over to ecumenical indifference like the modern state of religion. Physicists, astronomers, economists, etc. are more particular and convicted about what they believe than many Christians. God surely does not approve this ambivalence. Solomon said, “*He that turneth away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be abomination,*” (Prov 28:9). Observe that Solomon here speaks of a praying man, and therefore of a religious man, but his prayer is counterproductive because he has little regard for the word of God. Similarly, Jesus said the payers of the Pharisees only brought damnation to themselves (Mk 12:40), and that their worship was vain because they had substituted human ideas for Divine doctrine (Mk 7:7). God must be worshipped in truth, and failure to do so is most consequential.

This condemnation of the Pharisees also shows what the basis of truth must be. It cannot be personal ideas and opinions. It must be the Bible. Seeking truth through introspection is sure to fail, as may be concluded from: “*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord,*” (Isa 55:8-9). Accordingly, any serious student of the Bible will profess that when he first began to study the book, he found many things he was not expecting. The God of the Bible is unique among all other gods in that He is not manmade, so neither He nor His truth will completely accord with a-priori human expectations. All Christians understand that biblical prohibitions against idolatry make it wrong to create gods with the hands, but they should also understand it is equally wrong to create gods with the mind. Both approaches are sure to miss the mark. The Bible must be the basis of truth, and we can be confident that it is

sufficient to that effect. Paul said the man of God is thoroughly furnished in it (2Tim 3:16), which is to say that the Bible is sufficient for all spiritual needs and obligations of man.

The words of Jesus to Pilate should lay to rest any doubts about the importance He attached to truth. He said, *“To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth,”* (Jn 18:37). To say that truth is unimportant is all the same as saying that the mission of Jesus was unimportant. No true Christian would ever consent to this. Nor can it be thought that Jesus came into the world for something having no definite meaning. By “truth” He surely intended a body of facts that is absolute, objective, definitive and important. He did not mean something that is nebulous, subjective and redefined by perception. His coming did not establish the right of every man to his own “truth.” Rather, it took that right away. Paul essentially affirmed this to the Athenians when he said concerning their idolatry:

And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent: Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead. – Acts 17:30-31

The importance of truth is further seen in the teachings of Jesus when He promised to reward faithful service by granting knowledge of the truth. It is an accepted rule of reason that a means cannot be higher than its end. Consider then these promises:

Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. – John 8:31-32

If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself. – John 7:17

So if any man agrees that continuance in the word and will of Christ are important, then he must also agree that knowledge of the truth is important, because the former are means to the latter. The second of these verses has alarming implications for a world containing hundreds of Christian denominations with a comparable number of doctrinal variations. This diversity of opinion clearly implies that a majority of Christians must be under some degree of false doctrine. Yet Christ said those who continue in His word and in the will of His Father shall know the truth of doctrine. What else is there to conclude but that a majority of Christians are not continuing in His word and not doing the will of His Father? The likely reason is that they, like the Jews in Jeremiah’s day, put too little importance upon the sure reward of these things – the knowledge of the truth.

Further, when Jesus claimed He came to bear witness to the “truth,” He did not merely intend broad principles that may be quickly and easily learned. Much less did He mean general principles upon which everyone can agree, though the ecumenical movement prefers to interpret Him so. His attitude toward truth can be inferred by observing His own analysis of scripture. Here we commonly find Him putting much weight on the depths and details of Old Testament verses. In Mt 22:32, His argument centered upon the tense of a verb. In the 43rd verse of the

same chapter, He staked his case on a single word. The same is true in Jn 10:34. And we find Him in other cases emphasizing aspects and implications of texts that had escaped the attention of others (e.g. Mt 21:16 & 42, Mk 2:25). The same may be said of His Apostles, as may first be seen in Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost, where the very foundation of his logic was taken from seldom-noticed details of the 16th and 110th Psalms. The same pattern is repeatedly observed in Paul, whose emphasis upon scriptural detail was such that He would base one crucial argument on a single letter of the Old Testament text (Gal 3:16).

The importance of truth is powerfully demonstrated in the book of Job. This entire book records an arduous struggle to obtain truth. Job realized there was no real solution to his sufferings apart from a better understanding of God. To see this, suppose all of his possessions were to be restored, yet he were left with no understanding as to why they had been taken away. It would then appear that God had taken them for no particular reason, but had acted toward Job in a totally arbitrary manner. If this were so, then restoration of his possessions would offer limited comfort seeing they could as easily be taken again. Further, if God indeed acts arbitrarily and capriciously, then it would be wishful thinking to suppose our eternal destinies are safe and secure in His hands. Job's problem had no solution without better understanding, and such is always the case when men are engaged in struggles of spirit.

The book of Job also shows how little value man can place on truth notwithstanding its real worth. This can be seen in the 28th chapter, whose opening verse states, "*Surely there is a vein for the silver, and a place for gold where they mine it.*" The meaning is that if one desires silver or gold, then there are places where these things can be mined. The next few verses speak of the great difficulties that will be encountered by such miners; however, these are difficulties that men readily accept. Practically nothing will stop them in their quest for silver and gold. They will dig to the depths of the earth, remove mountains, divert rivers, etc. to secure these metals. Now contrast this to how soon they become discouraged and distracted in their quest for spiritual gold – the knowledge of the truth of God! Job then raised the question: Where can a man mine for knowledge? Upon finding such a place, Job was prepared to dig to the utmost depths for it, realizing that no other treasure could fulfill his dire need.

These scriptural lessons are convincingly corroborated by nature. Observation of our world clearly teaches that God places great importance upon learning. Cultures that learn almost surely thrive. Cultures that are content with ignorance are left in poverty and misery. It is a rare thing for God to waver from these rules. Rather, He will enforce them even when the consequences are most severe. His intent that we learn is also evidenced by the fact that our planet seems to be designed and situated in a manner conducive to learning. The same may be said of our Universe and the laws regulating it. Then we see that He who designed us has also placed these values in our own psychology. When we rank the creatures of God by degree of complexity, the ultimate criterion will be their ability to learn. Now of all truths that can be learned from the Creation, none can be of greater importance than truths concerning the Creator Himself. Willful ignorance about the Creation has dire consequences that none will deny. Willful ignorance about the Creator must have the same.

Paul placed high honor on the church when he called it the "*pillar and ground of the truth,*" (1Tim 3:15). This text makes an important statement about Paul's view of the church. An

institution cannot possibly be the pillar and ground of the truth when it teaches little or nothing, but concerns itself with recreation, amusement and other such crowd-drawing activities. An institution that distinguishes itself by a vacuous creed cannot possibly be the pillar and ground of the truth. The pillar and ground of the truth cannot possibly be a place where differences of opinion about God and doctrine are laid aside so that men can be unified in indifference. Rather, it is a place where such differences are resolved, and where men are unified in conviction about the truth.

The Bible has a very positive message for those who sincerely seek the truth. James said, "*If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him,*" (James 1:5). So God always hears the prayer for wisdom. This promise is powerfully illustrated in the life of Solomon. God was so pleased that Solomon prayed for wisdom, and not for power and wealth, that He gave Solomon not only wisdom but power and wealth also (2Chon 1:11,12). Jesus said, "*Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you,*" (Mt 7:7). No doubt this promise is primarily, if not altogether, about the search for wisdom. All this shows that one of God's principal objectives for our life is that we learn the truth, and He stands ready to help and reward in this endeavor. This part is sure. The only uncertainty is in the simple question: Do we care?