



Discussions with My Friend: An Introduction to the Gospel of Jesus Christ By David Stewart

Chapter 02: Truth

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Does Truth Matter?

Pontius Pilate's question to Jesus, "what is truth?,"^[1] still resonates today. Joseph Smith stated, "if men do not comprehend the character of God, they do not understand themselves."^[2] Once we conclude that God exists, or even that he may exist, the thoughtful person inquires: Is it important for us to learn about God, His nature, and His expectations? Do divine truths matter? Many facts have no personal implications. It may be interesting to know what minerals are found on the surface of Mars, or how much of the Earth's water is in the Pacific Ocean, but there is nothing to do about it. Is the existence of God a matter of foundational importance, or merely interesting trivia? If God exists, and has created man, it follows that we are beings created not solely for our own ends, but for a greater purpose for which we will be held to account. If there is even a possibility that our eternal state will depend upon our mortal conduct, there is no more important life task than seeking to know and fulfill God's will. Mortality is brief, eternity is forever; only truth endures.

Evangelical researcher George Barna observed that U.S. missionary efforts are difficult because most Americans believe that their salvation is already secure, and therefore see little need to seek or live according to truth:

"Christians generally believe that non-Christians are interested in talking to us about eternal security. In truth, most non-Christians don't care to discuss this matter because they believe they already have their eternal security sown up. A majority of Americans believe that they are going to heaven after they die; most of the people who are not relying on Christ's atonement for their sins are relying instead on their own good deeds, their good character, or the generosity of God. Research indicates that the evangelistic efforts of Christians are viewed as insensitive and unnecessary."^[3]

"Many people believe that they can get to heaven by 'by relying on God's boundless and forgiving love... We can choose grace, works, or universalism, but we can rest assured with the false premise that all paths lead to heaven.'"^[4]

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Many mission outreaches have failed because of a dominant or exclusive focus on convincing, whether in the form of spiritual witness or logical understanding rather than practical application. If one believes that many paths lead to heaven, the choice is a matter of personal preference or convenience rather than revealed truth. If God's infinite love will redeem unrepentant sinners to the same degree as the faithful, there is no need to seek to know or follow God's will. If the judgment represents a binary sort between heaven and hell, and all but the vilest sinners will go to heaven, then there are no eternal consequences for daily choices.

Popular beliefs that individuals can achieve salvation without personal effort conflict with the words of Christ: "strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it."^[5] When we consider the duration of the of eternity, the irrationality of acknowledging God but failing to seek or follow his teachings is the same short-sightedness of those who were eating and drinking in the days of Noah, but did not heed the words of the holy man and did not enter the Ark before the deluge.^[6] Although modern medicine and technology have greatly improved the lot of mankind, we are still mortal creatures who remain dependent upon God for daily breath. When discussing the fate of those who had perished in contemporary tragedies, Christ warned his listeners: "except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish."^[7] Only as we seek to know and fulfill God's will and bring forth the fruits that our Creator requires do we fill the measure of our creation.^[8]

What is Truth?

Differences in tradition, upbringing, and perspective have often hampered the ability to find common ground on among diverse groups. Strongly-held but often contradictory beliefs have led some to claim that there is no absolute truth, and that good and evil are merely matters of perception or self-interest. Partisans on different sides of conflicts - social, political, religious, ethnic, and scholarly - often believe deeply in the causes they advocate, although they cannot simultaneously be right. That an individual may strongly believe in something does not make it true.

The existence of God necessarily implies the existence of ultimate truth. If goodness is the adherence to principles of truth, evil results from adherence to that which is not true. Yet individual strivings toward truth are often hampered by tradition and by conflict of interest. Cultural and family traditions often preserve positive values, but blind loyalty to clan and tradition can hinder introspection and pose stumbling-blocks to the perception of truth. A strong bias toward one's own interests often leads

individuals and societies to attribute the moral high ground to themselves while laying most or all of the culpability on others. A thoughtful and fair-minded analysis would typically reveal shortfalls on both sides, yet those with vested interests are rarely able to perceive any side beyond their own. The tendency to blame others while overlooking one's own deficiencies stunts growth and progress.

Personal belief, however strong, does not justify actions contrary to greater truth. There is no question that a suicide bomber deeply believes in his mission, or that the inner voices a delusional hears are real to him. Christ taught his disciples that "the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth god service."^[9] Professed sincerity does not remove personal accountability: "it must needs be that offences come, but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!"^[10] The suffering brought upon the world by ostensibly sincere but individuals acting contrary to principles of truth and goodness should cause thoughtful individuals to introspectively examining their own assumptions and beliefs, and to err toward caution and mercy in interactions with others.

Can Divine Truth be Found?

If divine truth is important, how can one find a connection to God, or is such a connection to be found at all? Justice does not always occur on the earth. Many wonder, why is there suffering in the world if there is a God who cares? Why do tragedies occur that could be avoided with acts of providence? The Apostle Paul observed that many people live "having no hope, and without God in the world."^[11] The French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote: "I pondered, therefore, on the sad fate of mortals, adrift on the sea of human opinions, without compass or rudder, and abandoned to their stormy passions with no guide but an inexperienced pilot who does not know whence he comes or whether he is going." Nearly three millennia ago, the Psalmist wrote: "For I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For there are no bands in their death: but their strength is firm. They are not in trouble as other men; neither are they plagued like other men."^[12] The prophet Jeremiah asked, "Wherefore doth the way of the wicked prosper? wherefore are all they happy that deal very treacherously?"^[13]

Some individuals, known as agnostics, do not necessarily deny the existence of God, but claim that it is impossible to know whether God exists or to know His will. For an agnostic, whether God exists is largely irrelevant, because he believes that there is no way to establish a connection to Him. In acknowledging the possibility that a God who has chosen not to manifest himself may exist in some distant galaxy, the agnostic is more rational and open-minded than the atheist who argues from ignorance that God cannot exist because He is beyond the scope of one's immediate senses or observation. Yet the agnostic overlooks considerable evidence of God's existence in the world around him, ascribing it all to random causes. The agnostic also entertains an idiosyncratic faith beyond the bounds of reason and experience in asserting not only that he does not know whether God exists, but in declaring that others also cannot know.

Deists claim that God is an "absentee landlord" who set the universe in motion through natural laws and then stepped back to observe His creations. Although some Deists believe that some influence of God can be seen in natural laws and even that there may be a judgment after death, they also believe that God does not directly intervene in human affairs through revelations or miracles. Prayer and other attempts to approach God are seen as pointless dead-ends, and scripture is viewed as unreliable. If one concludes that God is an "absentee landlord" who does not communicate with His children, it also follows that there is no reliable way to know truth with certainty. Some faiths may better approach divine principles than others, yet none are deemed to have the full truth, and even if one did, there would be no way to know. There would be little significance to such truth without a means for individuals to find and confirm the truth for themselves. The Deist argues that because he has not had personal experiences with the divine, others cannot have such experiences.

Deism, like agnosticism and atheism, is an overreaching argument from ignorance. That an individual has not found what he considers to be satisfactory evidence of God's communication with mankind does not mean that it has not happened. Even one positive event would make it so, whereas a string of negatives prove nothing. Just as it is beyond the means available to man to prove that there is no other intelligent life in the universe, no investigation or argument can prove that God does not exist, or that God does not communicate with man. One cannot reasonably conclude that diamonds do not exist because one has not encountered any while digging in one's own backyard.

We cannot demand that God manifest himself to us on our terms, any more than we can expect the wind and the seas to obey our will and bend to our arbitrary preconceptions. If we are to seek God out, we must seek Him on His terms. God's terms may not be our terms, and the tenets and assumptions of our society or faith of upbringing may not reflect His truth. What then are the principles upon which truth can be found? Such a question must be approached with sincerity and determined effort.

The Search for Truth

Although many religions share some common principles, their various and conflicting tenets cannot all be true. History records numerous wars and oppressions over seemingly minor religious differences. Tolerance is essential, yet it is unreasonable to claim that religious differences are inconsequential or irrelevant. If we agree that not all religious claims can be simultaneously true, it follows that some faiths have more truth than others. How then are we to discern divine revelation from the unauthorized interpolation of man? Is there any faith with God's full truth, or are the faiths distinguished merely by their proportion of truth and error? If full truth is to be found, is it also accompanied by divine direction and authority? Does truth even matter, or can we expect to receive salvation by following any path of convenience?

As a fourteen year old boy living in upstate New York in the early nineteenth century, Joseph Smith asked: "What is to be done? Who of all these [religious] parties are right; or, are they all wrong together? If any one of them be right, which is it, and how shall I know it?"^[14] Most people appear to never have earnestly asked this foundational question. The rationale for most individuals' religious affiliation reflects tradition, culture, convenience, or preference, but has little if anything to do with any concerted effort to find God's truth. That the vast majority of Swedes are (nominal) Lutheran, Russians are Russian Orthodox, Irish are Catholics, Turks are Muslims, and so forth, demonstrates that the force of society and tradition are, even in societies which ostensibly acknowledge religious freedom, much more significant determinants of religious affiliation than any individual attempt at seeking God's truth. Most individuals tend to seek god through the framework of their existing religious tradition while accepting its assumptions and tenets without questioning the ultimate veracity of the faith, even when they may disagree with

certain tenets or the interpretations of religious leaders. This tendency appears to reflect several factors, most notably the influence of tradition and habituation in formative years, the "bandwagon effect" in which social norms are established by group behavior rather than individual conscience and the belief that so many people (at least of one's own society) cannot be wrong, and a widespread assumption that God will accept a society's efforts to worship Him even if such attempts are man-made rather than divinely revealed.

Even in pluralistic societies, religious choices are often based upon personal preference for a pastor's teaching and philosophy, social or peer groups, and factors other than seeking or following God's will. Evangelical researcher George Barna documented that the modest rates of religious activity among young people are misleading as the motives for involvement are more relational than spiritual.^[15] Contemporary music, social activities, fellowshiping, and cultural adaptations may make religious messages more relevant and attractive, yet in some cases such activities can become a focal point which may displace ostensible theological purposes, or may lend undue credibility to groups with strong social programs but weak theological underpinning.

Once we recognize that God exists and that it is important for us to seek to know and follow his truth, we arrive at the task of identifying where God's truth can be found.

[1] John 18:38

[2] Joseph Smith, History of the Church, 6:303.

[3] Barna, George. Second Coming of the Church, p. 28.

[4] Barna, George. Boiling Point, p.195-196.

[5][Matthew 7:14](#)

[6][Matthew 24:38](#)

[7][Luke 13:1-5](#)

[8][Luke 13:6-9](#)

[9] John 16:2

[10] Matthew 18:7

[11][Ephesians 2:12](#)

[12][Psalm 73:3-5](#)

[13][Jeremiah 12:1](#)

[14][Joseph Smith - History 1:10](#)

[15] Barna, George. Real Teens: A Contemporary Snapshot of Youth Culture.