



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

## Chapter 13: Finding Truth through Prayer and the Holy Spirit



### Denominational Claims to Divine Truth

Historically, religious practices have more often been determined by interpretation than by primary scriptural sources. Christianity has been taught and understood very differently by the crusader, the medieval inquisitor, the reformer, the counter-reformationist, and the adherents of various modern sectarian denominations, yet none of them match the organization, practices, and teachings of the New Testament church.. The typical Christian church today is dramatically different from the Christianity of one hundred, five hundred, or a thousand years ago, although the Bible has not changed. One may believe that Jesus was the son of God, but this does not demonstrate that the Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, Methodist, or other Christian offshoots are His Church! It is therefore necessary for those who seek to follow Christ to seek spiritual confirmation not merely of the Bible as scripture, but of the specific organization to which they adhere or consider joining.

Increasing numbers of churches have dropped sectarian labels and have designated themselves as "non-denominational" or generic Christian churches, suggesting that belief in the inspiration of the Bible alone confirms their truth. In this manner, they attempt to circumvent parishioners from seeking divine confirmation of their own organizational structure and denominational teachings while avoiding consideration of nearly two thousand years of sectarian confusion since the death of the apostles. Yet all rely on post-Biblical creeds and interpretations. "Non-denominational" churches are merely the result of sectarian churches dropping denominational labels and making forms of worship more generic, and not a tabula rasa reconstitution of biblical Christianity derived from study of scripture alone. These Churches do not claim to be led by living apostles or other representatives of Christ, and therefore are directed by leaders without direct connection to Him. It is therefore just as necessary to seek divine confirmation of so-called "non-denominational" or generic "Christian" churches as any of the denominational faiths.

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It is instructive to consider the manner in which different religious faiths have sought to attract new adherents, and the grounds upon which they claim that others should accept their teachings and authority.

Many Christian denominations claim to be true because of their signature interpretation of specific doctrines. Seventh-Day Adventists focus on seventh day worship, Baptists emphasize the age and manner of baptism, Pentecostals are defined by their emphasis on gifts of the spirit, and so forth. Like the Greek gnostics, Jehovah's Witnesses claim special knowledge which they claim leads to eternal life, chiefly the importance of Jehovah as a title of God and other doctrinal interpretations.

Some faiths have restricted access to scripture. The Jehovah's Witness New World Translation of the Bible contains many

idiosyncratic renderings disputed by almost all independent scholars, and omits many entire verses which do not square with their interpretation of scripture. The Bible was once on the Catholic Church's list of banned books.<sup>[1]</sup> Students at many Catholic and some Protestant theological seminaries report being discouraged from independently reading the Bible; instructors emphasized sectarian curriculum which made sure that scripture was filtered through the lens of denominational interpretation, thus elevating sectarian philosophies to a higher level than scripture itself. All of these behaviors convey a certain fear that, were individuals to study and contemplate scripture for themselves without constant supervision and "correction," they might arrive at very different conclusions regarding the teachings of scripture than their denomination teaches.

Historically, some faiths, including Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity, Islam, and some others, have forced conversions without making any pretense of an individual's right to learn and choose without coercion. After involuntary conversion of ancestors, tradition is invoked to maintain the loyalty of descendants with claims that those who convert to other faiths are dishonoring patrimony, culture, and national heritage.

Adherents of Islam often claim that their faith is correct through because it holds Allah as supreme and without intermediary and because of the Quran, they claim, "does not contain contradictions."<sup>[2]</sup> The Quran calls for faith in Muhammad as Allah's prophet and castigates unbelievers, yet offers no direct means for individuals to obtain divine confirmation of its message: to fail to believe is considered a capital sin more serious than adultery. Muslims have little freedom to investigate different interpretations even within Islam, as demonstrated by recurrent sectarian violence between Sunnis and Shiites. The failure of Islamic law to offer its adherents the freedom to investigate different faiths and make their own uncoerced decisions based on study and prayer demonstrates fear that, were individuals offered greater freedom, Islamic teachings would not hold in a free marketplace of ideas, and that individuals turning to God may not be able to verify Islam's claims.

Some denominations have sponsored ministries to discredit other faiths. Such activities based on attacking others rather than demonstrating the positive fruits of their faith in life and the truthfulness of their denominational claims also demonstrates awareness of the weakness of their claims, built not on positive achievements of their own but on contention and fault-finding which often stoops to the level of misrepresentation and dishonesty.

For all the diverse ways in which various denominations have laid claim to the mantle of divine truth, it is striking how few have directed individuals to God to confirm the veracity of their denominational claims. Some ask listeners to pray for divine confirmation about Jesus or scripture, yet rarely if ever ask them to pray about the truthfulness of their sectarian denomination as opposed to that of the many competing denominations claiming the same scripture written thousands of years ago while interpreting it very differently. The failure of such faiths to encourage individuals to ask for divine confirmation not only of the Bible, but of the truth and divine authorization of their sectarian creed, suggests that their preachers are aware that their denominational creeds are interpretations of men rather than divinely-revealed truth. Such proselytism constitutes a bait and switch, attracting adherents by proclaiming the authority of Jesus and the apostles and then giving them something entirely different in unauthorized sectarian philosophies.

Asking God for divine witness through the Holy Spirit is the only way to confirm the truth of religious teachings. Any other way is not of God. Those who believe in the message of Jesus must take a step further and ask themselves if they have confirmed through study and prayer not only the truth of ancient scripture, but the divine authorization and specific denominational teachings of their faith. If not, it is time to go back and examine the teachings of scripture without denominational filters or preconceptions and seek the for guidance from the Holy Spirit in searching for Christ's authorized church and full gospel today.

### **Finding Truth through Prayer and the Holy Spirit**

We may know the difference between good and evil from conscience, and can understand much through observation and reason. Yet sometimes our knowledge and reasoning are inadequate to solve important problems. The Greek aphorism "know thyself" implies awareness of human limitations and dependence on the divine. The wisest humans are often distinguished not for their great erudition, but for their humble recognition of their limitations.

We may know through conscience that it is good and wrong to lie or steal, yet competing teachings of different religious denominations pose complex theological questions to which answers are not always intuitively obvious. Is man created in the image of God? Are God, Jesus Christ, and The Holy Ghost all different manifestations of the same being, or are they distinct personages united in purpose? Is truth found among the Methodists, the Catholics, the Baptists, the Pentecostals, or others? Where can we go for reliable guidance for complex decisions in our lives, or to find the right path of action for our unique personal circumstances ?

To find the truth, we must go to the source of all truth. The ultimate answers to life's great questions are not to be obtained from friends, relatives, and pastors. Others can sometimes serve as instruments in God's hands, yet the source of truth is God alone. Only the Lord knows "the end from the beginning,"<sup>[3]</sup> and only in Him can we find all of the necessary answers for our lives. As we humbly and sincerely turn to God for answers, we can ask God to convey the truth to us through the Holy Spirit, which can enlighten our minds and bear witness to our souls of truth.

As a fourteen year old boy, Joseph Smith understood that he must either ask of God or forever remain in ignorance:

"The Presbyterians were most decided against the Baptists and Methodists, and used all the powers of both reason and sophistry to prove their errors, or, at least, to make the people think they were in error. On the other hand, the Baptists and Methodists in their turn were equally zealous in endeavoring to establish their own tenets and disprove all others. In the midst of this war of words and tumult of opinions, I often said to myself: What is to be done? Who of all these 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? While I was laboring under the extreme difficulties caused by the contests of these parties of religionists, I was one day reading the Epistle of James, first chapter and fifth verse, which reads: 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. Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine. It seemed to enter with great force into every feeling of my

heart. I reflected on it again and again, knowing that if any person needed wisdom from God, I did; for how to act I did not know, and unless I could get more wisdom than I then had, I would never know; for the teachers of religion of the different sects understood the same passages of scripture so differently as to destroy all confidence in settling the question by an appeal to the Bible. At length I came to the conclusion that I must either remain in darkness and confusion, or else I must do as James directs, that is, ask of God. I at length came to the determination to "ask of God," concluding that if he gave wisdom to them that lacked wisdom, and would give liberally, and not upbraid, I might venture."[\[4\]](#)

Most individuals never achieve this foundational insight in the course of their lives. The fact that the vast majority of individuals worldwide remain lifelong in their denomination of birth attests that religious affiliation most frequently arises not from a dedicated search for truth through study and prayer, but from culture, tradition, upbringing, and convenience.

This spiritual witness is not lightly obtained through casual asking were idle curiosity. We must do certain things to qualify ourselves for God to answer us. Jesus taught his disciple: "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened." [\[5\]](#) This teaching was given in the context of personal purity after listeners were admonished to judge righteously, to first remove the beam from their own eye, and to respect that which is holy.[\[6\]](#) In the Gospel of John, Christ clarified that His promise to answer disciples' prayers is contingent upon three factors: their abiding in Him, His word abiding in them, and their obedience to His teachings. [\[7\]](#)

Purity is a prerequisite to understanding divine truths, as taught not only in the Bible, but by spiritual luminaries like Socrates and Confucius. An impure vessel cannot contain the pure but pollutes it; an unclean person cannot receive divine answers without distortion. It is useless and sometimes dangerous to seek divine answers without first living in harmony with truth. The abuses and excesses of religious delusionaries have arisen when individuals claim inspiration without first seeking personal purity, and are consequently deceived by the wrong source.

Effort and personal study are also required. The Book of Mormon teaches that God does not provide answers without initiative or effort, but requires us to use the means He has provided.[\[8\]](#) Only then will He do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. After we have studied and contemplated divine truths, and have made a good faith effort to live righteously to the best of our understanding, we can turn to God and He will answer us through the Holy Spirit. The prophet Moroni recorded the Lord's promise:

"Behold, I would exhort you that when ye shall read these things, if it be wisdom in God that ye should read them, that ye would remember how merciful the Lord hath been unto the children of men, from the creation of Adam even down until the time that ye shall receive these things, and ponder it in your hearts. And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost. And by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things."[\[9\]](#)

In another passage, the Lord promised the faithful: "Yea, behold, I will tell you in your mind and in your heart, by the Holy Ghost, which shall come upon you and which shall dwell in your heart."[\[10\]](#) He further observed:

"Wherefore, he that preacheth and he that receiveth, understand one another, and both are edified and rejoice together. And that which doth not edify is not of God, and is darkness. That which is of God is light; and he that receiveth light, and continueth in God, receiveth more light; and that light groweth brighter and brighter until the perfect day."[\[11\]](#)

[\[1\]](#) Webber, Jude. "Vatican Archives reveal Bible was once banned book." Reuters News, 22 January 1988.

[\[2\]](#) FAQs about Islam, <http://www.islamicfinder.org/faq/list.php#10>, accessed 25 March 2010

[\[3\]](#) Abraham 2:8

[\[4\]](#) [Joseph Smith - History 1:9-13](#).

[\[5\]](#) Matthew 7:7-8

[\[6\]](#) Matthew 7:1-6

[\[7\]](#) John 15:7,10

[\[8\]](#) 1 Nephi 17:9-10, Alma 60:21, Ether 2:23

[\[9\]](#) [Moroni 10:3-5](#)

[\[10\]](#) [Doctrine and Covenants 8:2](#)

[\[11\]](#) [Doctrine and Covenants 50:22-24](#)