

Jesting Pilate put that question but did not wait for an answer. In one sense he already knew the answer, for pointing to Jesus he exhorted the crowd to "Behold the man." Our Lord without pride or exaggeration could say, "I am the truth" (Jn 14:6). But is this apparent in the confessions of those who claim to be his followers today? What is the truth to you?

### Doing Right

The most important question facing every rational soul has to do with decision making. Two-thirds of life is conduct and what philosophers called "the terrible choice" confronts us every waking moment. As dependent judgment-bound beings the supreme issue is duty. What should I do, and how, and when? If, though justified by faith, I am to be judged by my works — what rule of thumb is to direct my works aright?

One of the greatest deceptions of the human mind, and certainly the chief religious subterfuge is to affirm that cerebral acceptance of technical truth constitutes righteousness. The ancient Jews never made that mistake until they buried the spirit of the Old Testament in ceremonies of human speculation and tradition. Those faithful to the Old Testament knew that true wisdom was "the fear of the Lord" and "to depart from evil." Similarly, the Old Testament conception of a fool was one who neglected his duty, not one with a poor IQ.

The true Jew was great on orthopraxy — right behavior — rather than giving a priority to orthodoxy — right doctrine. His primary creed was the Shema, so called from the first Hebrew word of Deuteronomy 6:3 and 6:4:

Hear therefore, O Israel, and be careful to do them [God's statutes and commandments]; that it may go well with you, and that you may multiply greatly....in a land flowing with milk and honey.

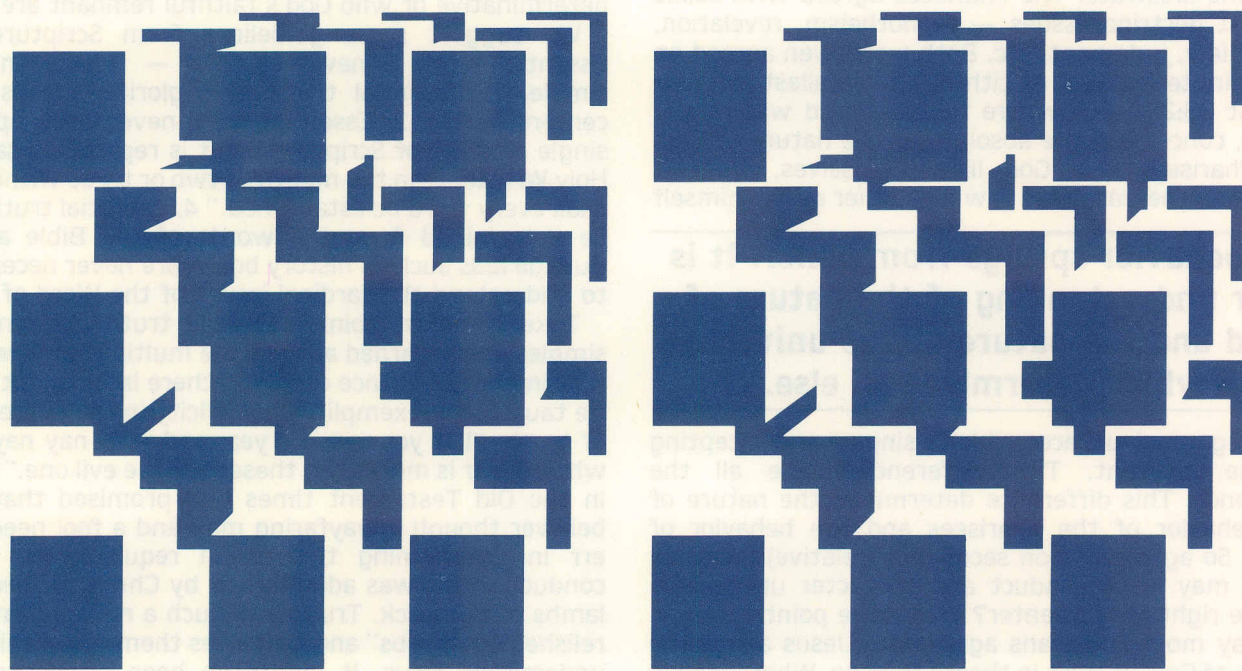
Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart.

The Greek mind was different. Wisdom to the Greeks was cerebral rather than a matter of the heart and practice. The greatest of the old Greeks found it quite consistent with his philosophy to visit a prostitute with his disciples and instruct her on how best to run her business. Socrates took for granted prostitution, homosexuality, and slavery. The Western world has subsequently followed more in the wake of Athens than Jerusalem and thus modern churches forget often their Master's new and final commandment to love all men as he had loved his disciples. Modern Christendom has continually warred over orthodoxy, rather than orthopraxy. Those days are not yet behind us and every professing Christian needs to do some clear thinking with reference to this issue.

Jesus said, "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (Jn 8:32). Let us enquire as to what that truth is, and also what our relationship should be to all creedal summaries of truth.

Observe the context of our Lord's statement:

Jesus answered them. "Truly, truly, I say to you, every one who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not continue in the house for ever; the Son continues for ever. So if the Son shall make you free, you will be free indeed. I know that you are descendants of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me, because my word finds no place in you....If God were your Father, you would love me....Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the



# WHAT IS TRUTH?

Desmond Ford



devil, and your will is to do your father's desires....he is a liar and the father of lies." (Jn 8:34-44)

If any man's will is to do his will, he shall know whether the teaching is from God. (Jn 7:17)

The implications are crystal clear. It matters not what religious tradition we claim to be ours (the Jews claimed Abraham as their father), it is our behavior of either love or hate which indelibly stamps us as a descendant of either God or the devil. Unless we love we will believe lies, or twist the truth in such a way that it becomes destructive. But if any man is willing to obey God he will be given assurance regarding what is saving truth.

### **Behavior and Central Truths**

Now truth is polygonal not linear. That is to say, truth has many facets which need to be held at once rather than pursuing in a straight line some single facet.

None of what we have said should be understood as denying the right place of doctrinal statements. The Bible is a metaphysical book, and Christianity a metaphysical religion. All behavior springs from belief. It is our understanding of the nature of God and the nature of the universe which determines all else. But here, as in other areas, the philosophical dictum is true which says: attend absolutely to absolute matters, but relatively to relative matters. God is absolute — the metaphysical truth about him determines all else. Link with the dictum just enunciated another law — the law of the closeness of relation. The nearer to the central truth all other truths are, the more they approach absoluteness; but similarly, the further from that center any religious truth is, the more relative it is.

Let me illustrate. The Pharisees agreed with Jesus on most doctrinal issues — monotheism, revelation, angels, law, judgment, etc. Both were even agreed on such minute matters as tithing the smallest increase (see Mt 23:23). But where they differed was at the center, concerning the absolute — the nature of God. The Pharisees saw God like themselves, austere, legalistic, whereas Jesus saw his Father as like himself

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— loving, gracious, accessible to sinners and accepting all the penitent. This difference made all the difference. This difference determined the nature of the behavior of the Pharisees and the behavior of Jesus. So agreement on secondary (relative) doctrinal issues may leave conduct and character untouched. Are we right at the center? That's the point.

Today most Christians agree with Jesus about the nature of God, at least in theory they do. Whether they do practically depends on what they define as essential truth. So let us enquire — how do we discover essential saving truth? What elements are to be emphasized in Christian work and in congregational formation and functioning?

Lest we be tempted to doubt the primacy of our questions, recall our Lord's searing woes on the

religious leaders of his day. He did not damn their theological beliefs but he condemned their behavior. And he did it primarily on the basis that they attended absolutely to relative things and relatively to absolute things. They paid tithe, he said, on garden herbs — mint, anise, and cummin, but omitted the weightier matters of the law — righteousness, mercy, and faith. They strained out gnats and swallowed camels. They were zealous missionaries crossing land and sea to make converts but did not lead those converts into faith, hope, and love (see Mt 23).

So it is clear that Jesus saw the essence of all false religion as a distorted sense of priorities. Such religion made a world of an atom and an atom of a world. It made the little big and the big little. It broke the first and great commandment by not putting God first, his nature, his will.

Man's great enemies are sin and death. Any religion which does not make primary God's solution to these — the cross of Christ and the Christ of the cross — is in danger of being a cult, a reincarnation of Pharisaism. Let us never forget that Christ was crucified by the most bigoted religionists of all history — not by atheists.

### **Four Guidelines**

How then do we determine essential truth? How do we test the shibboleths thrust upon us from all sides by cultists? Or, to put it more kindly, how do we avoid the errors of traditionalists who have never stopped to test their traditions? Are we forced to believe with some that Christ came to earth spiritually in 1914, or with others that we should believe in proxy baptism for departed loved ones, or that certain interpretations of apocalyptic symbolic prophecies are sacrosanct even determinative of who God's faithful remnant are?

We suggest some guidelines from Scripture: 1. Essential truth is never esoteric — it is plain and simple. 2. Essential truth ever glorifies Jesus and centers in him. 3. Essential truth never rests upon a single passage of Scripture for it is repeatedly said in Holy Writ that "in the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established." 4. Essential truth can be determined from the words of the Bible alone. Outside aids such as history books are never necessary to understand the cardinal issues of the Word of God.

Take the first point: essential truth is plain and simple. Jesus warned against the multiplying of words for "in the abundance of words there lacketh not sin." He taught and exemplified simplicity in the expression of truth. "Let your yea be yea, and your nay nay, for whatsoever is more than these is of the evil one." Even in the Old Testament times God promised that the believer though a wayfaring man and a fool need not err in determining that truth requisite for right conduct. Peter was admonished by Christ to feed the lambs of the flock. Truth is of such a nature that it is relished by "lambs" and nourishes them. Even children understood Jesus. It has often been drawn to our attention that it is not the things in the Bible which we cannot understand that trouble us, but the things we understand only too well, but fail to follow; for example, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.

Secondly, essential truth glorifies Jesus and centers in him. This is made clear in 2 Timothy 3:15 and John 20:31. Salvation is "through faith in Christ Jesus."



Concerning the Scripture Jesus said: "they are they which testify of me" (Jn 5:39). John tells us that the purpose of his Gospel is that "you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (Jn 20:31). Paul was determined "to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." "Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified...the power of God and the wisdom of God" (2 Cor 2:1;1:22-24).

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Our Lord himself admonished his disciples to look no further than himself for what they sought. "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man cometh to the Father but by me" (Jn 14:6).

Thus saving truth glories in the incarnation, sinless life, atoning death, and glorious resurrection and ascension of our Lord, as well as his priestly ministry, second advent, and final judgment of all men. All of these things are clear and explicit in the New Testament. None need doubt them, none need dispute them in their essence.

Thirdly, essential truth never rests upon a single verse. Some have said that the Trinity has little to support it in Scripture, but any who study the array of New Testament passages offered by such scholars as Bickersteth (**The Trinity**) will find this not to be the case. Every fundamental truth of Scripture is oft repeated. The God who multiplied dreams to Joseph and to Daniel, repeating to each in several ways the same truths, has ever behaved thus with his church. Thus we have four Gospels setting forth the life and atoning death of our Lord.

The fact that we are saved through faith in Christ's sacrifice, and that such faith always produces holy works is stated scores of times in the New Testament. Who that reads Scripture can doubt that faith, hope, and love characterize all true followers of the Lamb of God? Are not even the secondary duties of baptism and participation in the Lord's Supper clearly and repeatedly mentioned? No vital truth rests upon a single passage of Scripture. When some wish to take 1 Corinthians 15:29 to establish proxy baptism; or Daniel 8:14 to prove the theological significance of a date in our Western calendars invoking a multitude of assumptions as substitutes for other Scriptures; or the parabolic illustration of Luke 17:34 to prove the secret rapture, etc., we have every right to courteously differ.

Fourthly, saving essential truth is found in Scripture alone. Those who wish to turn a doctrine based on Daniel 8:14 or other isolated texts into a test of fellowship are forced to go beyond Scripture. They may invoke Ptolemy's canon, the Elephantine papyri, and other extrabiblical sources to bolster their case, but thereby they automatically destroy it. When did Christ or the apostles ever use anything other than Scripture to demonstrate an essential doctrinal position?

This is the weakness of any interpretation of prophecy that is purely of the historicist school. When one surveys the multitude of varying interpretations

of apocalyptic passages found in the writing of historicists one might well despair of finding truth. But the error lies in the method. While historicism did well to remind the church that prophecy is ever pertinent to the pilgrimage of the believers in every age, it strayed when it forgot that Scripture was initially addressed to the needs of its first recipients and applies to later ages by way of principle rather than in connection with dates and places. To try and interpret the book of Revelation by using the history of the unbeliever, Edward Gibbon, or the records of the French Revolution and other European upheavals, is to depart drastically from the method of Christ and the apostles.

#### **Discovering Truth**

Those who invoke these four canons to test all that professes to be testing truth will not err, unless they do so by lack of charity towards those who differ. But what can be said positively about the substance of a Christian's creed? Having observed the caveats against false interpretation, what is the doctrinal essence yielded by a true understanding of the Word?

The Christian creed should revolve about the centralities of the greatest verse in the Bible — John 3:16. It should major in the Christ event, particularly his atonement on the cross. It will stress salvation by faith alone, yet pointing out that true faith is never alone for though sanctification is distinct from justification, it is never separate.

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It will make central, not the minutia of "mint, anise, and cummin" but the weightier matters of the law, "righteousness, mercy, faith." When Paul said "now abide faith, hope, and love..." he was merely explicating John 3:16 which speaks of all three — God so loved, that whosoever believeth, may have everlasting life. Other truths implicit in the same key verse include the plurality of the Godhead (the Trinity of the God who gave, God the Son who died, and God the Spirit who creates faith through the Word he inspired), life only in Christ (for those who refuse to believe will perish — not live on in misery forever), judgment, the second advent and the new earth (when the eternal life now ours legally will be the believer's in reality).

Because Scripture and only Scripture gives the right view of all these things, the Christian creed will set forth the Bible as the only rule of faith and practice. Because of the "whosoever" in John 3:16 the priesthood of all believers must also be affirmed. And because the giving of God's only Son was the result of sin, moral absolutes (defining sin) as set forth in the Decalogue and its magnification in the gospel must be upheld, though not in detachment from the truth regarding the indwelling of that Spirit who alone can motivate obedience by pointing all to the Lamb of God. While Calvary will be shown as leading to Pentecost, the same creed will emphasize that Pentecost always leads back to Calvary. □