

## ***MYTH: Depth is Complicated • 2 Corinthians 4:1-4***

Former President Bill Clinton became the brunt of a wave of jokes over his answer in a legal deposition when he said, “It depends on what you mean by ‘is’.” Most of us don’t think the definition of “is” is all that complicated, but some people can make almost anything complicated.

Maybe you heard some of the overseas news analyses of a tsunami that swept across the Indian Ocean. One Asian news source said it was caused by an underwater nuclear explosion that was triggered by the United States’ government. Another news source said it was God’s judgment against European Christians who visit Asian beaches and resorts to fornicate at Christmas time. It is actually very difficult to argue against conspiracy theorists who find a hidden meaning that is most often rooted in one’s own personal agenda.

Unfortunately, some people apply similar complications and speculations to the Bible and Christianity. There are many variations on the theme, but they mostly center on the myth that depth is complicated. Here’s the way it is sometimes expressed:

\* “When you make the message simple you’re just watering down the gospel.”

\* “I like to go deeper into the Bible and chew on the real meat of the Word of God.”

\* “Some churches keep it too simple to satisfy seekers. I like the full truth.”

\* “I’ve discovered meaning in the Bible that no one else has ever found.”

Most of the time people who subscribe to the myth that depth is complicated are harmless although they risk distorting the purposes of God in the Bible. So today let’s list some of the false assumptions that give this myth seeming credibility.

Number one is the false assumption that God is playing hard to get. It’s as if God intentionally complicated his revelation. This couldn’t be farther from the truth! If God wanted to play hard-to-get he wouldn’t have revealed himself in the first place. In fact, the supernatural wonder of the Bible

is its implicity. It is absolutely astonishing that the eternal God has taken the mysteries of eternity and packaged them in a way that we humans can understand them.

As a college student in Chicago I took Journalism 101 at Northwestern University from a seasoned professor who did not espouse Christian faith or values. He began the first day of class by quoting Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Then he said, “You cannot say anything more profound, and you cannot say it more simply.” My journalism professor held up the opening line of the Bible as the very highest standard of writing.

God is not playing hard to get. In fact, God has gone to extraordinary lengths to make his profound truth accessible to us all. He expresses the most profound truth in the simplest terms.

A second false assumption is that knowing God is bottom-up. The mistaken notion is that we figure out God. The biblical truth is that none of us could ever be smart enough to figure out God. The only way

we can ever know God is that he reveals himself to us. Romans 3:10-11 says, “*There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God.*”

All we know about God is what God has chosen to reveal to us. Knowledge is top-down, not bottom-up. God is not trying

to make truth complicated or inaccessible. God is not so foolish as to send his only Son to earth to die on the cross and then make the way of salvation and divine truth too hard for us to understand.

A third false assumption is that smarter people are godlier. The idea here is that if you know more you are a better person. On the face of it that isn’t true. I have met deeply godly people who can’t read and write. And I have known people with Ph.D.s in biblical literature who are ungodly and unfaithful to Jesus Christ.

Gnosticism was a treacherous heresy in the first centuries of Christianity. It included many

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complicated false teachings. The name is connected to the Greek word for knowledge and taught that there are levels of knowledge. Lower levels were more sinful and higher levels were godlier. It was like climbing a ladder or moving to higher levels on a video game or making the upper ranks of a secret society.

The New Testament book of 1 John teaches against the rising heresy of Gnosticism with the repeated use of the word “know”—the point being that godliness doesn’t come as much from knowledge as it does behavior. “Knowing” or “going deeper” isn’t what makes someone godly. It is behaving like Jesus, or to quote from 1 John 2:3, “*We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands.*” So, godliness is primarily about behaving in a way that is like Jesus and is consistent with the knowledge we have; it’s not about knowing a lot more.

False assumption number four is that the Bible comes in codes. The idea is that the Bible is actually an enormous puzzle with secret messages available only to those who can decipher the text. The whole notion is contrary to the love of God and God’s desire to communicate his message. Decoding the Bible is contrary to everything God is trying to do.

One decoder used a translation of the Old Testament to prove that William Shakespeare wrote one of the Psalms because the word “shake” and the word “spear” both appeared in the text. This kind of silly approach can prove anything by anything. It is imagination. It is fantasy. The whole notion of the Bible being in code is contrary to God’s love and desire to communicate his message. It is contrary to everything God is trying to do. 2 Corinthians 4:2 says, “*Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God.*”

But let’s skip beyond the false assumptions to some biblical principles that are important for us as followers of Jesus to understand. The first purpose of the Bible is belief in Jesus. John wrote toward the end of his gospel John 20:31, “*But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*”

The Bible is a wonderful book. It has a vast array of teaching on a multitude of topics. It gives marvelous advice about creation, marriage, family, managing finances and morality. But it is mostly about Jesus.

Biblical depth is primarily about having a deeper and closer relationship with Jesus. Depth is not complexity. Depth is not current politics. Depth is not scientific discovery. Depth is Jesus. The Bible is about believing in Jesus. Christianity is about believing in Jesus.

A second principle, which is related to the first, is that depth is about faith, not about difficulty. Some people just like to make things hard and complicated. You may have seen the bumper sticker that says ESCHEW OBFUSCATION. The first time I saw that bumper sticker I had no idea what it meant so I looked it up; it means “avoid confusion.” So what we have here is someone who is says confusion ought to be avoided but does so in a confusing way.

Big words don’t make for bigger truth. Never think that Christian depth is to know more about the Bible or to confront some specific sin (not that these are not valuable). Christian depth is to trust Jesus more. Christian depth is all about greater faith.

When I was a seminary student I taught preschoolers in Children’s Church each Sunday morning. It was like multiple church services—teaching 4&5 year olds and then teaching 2&3 year olds. Each week I attempted to teach the children some of what I had studied that week in classes. At seminary we were dealing with the Hypostatic Union, Hebrew verb tenses and heresies like Docetism.

Sometimes I was also invited to preach the sermon in the Big Church. There I would use the terminology from my textbooks. There were people who liked the big words but many had absolutely no idea what I was talking about. I learned a great lesson—it’s easy to be complicated and hard to be simple. The challenge is to present great truths in understandable terms.

Charleen and I have known each other all our lives. I don’t ever remember a time when I didn’t know her. We have been married most of our lives. There is not much more information for us to get about each other. Every few years I pick up some little thing I didn’t know about something that happened in her third grade class, but beyond that there isn’t a lot left to learn. But what I discover is that

the longer we know each other and the longer we are married, the more I love her. So it is a depth of relationship, not an on-going increase in information.

That's what the Bible is calling us to. It's not that we learn every last detail but that the information that's there causes us to love God more.

Karl Barth was one of the leading European theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and a prolific writer. I wrote a dissertation on his theology in graduate school. There is a story that Karl Barth was once asked the most profound theological truth he had learned in his years of study. Barth thought for a moment and answered, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

Now, please don't misunderstand. I am not suggesting a dumbing-down of spiritual truth. This is not anti-intellectualism. To the contrary, it is the realization that the great truths of God must never be obscured or withheld under the guise of complexity, big words or alleged spiritual depth. Depth is about believing more and more in Jesus Christ and the truth of God.

A third principle is that Bible truths equip for good works. The practical test of spiritual depth is doing good works. Spiritual depth is the on-going conversion of Bible truth into good lives. It is relatively simple to find out whether a Christian has gone deeper in the Christian life by looking at that person's behavior. 2 Timothy 3:16 says, "*All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*"

The purpose every time we read or study the Bible is to change our behavior. Deep Christians are those who serve God and others well. It is not just that they have dipped into the well of God's truth but that they have taken the water to bless others.

There is a fourth interesting principle in 2 Timothy 4:1-5. It is a warning against having "itching ears." It is part of a letter St. Paul wrote to his colleague Timothy who was pastor of the church in Ephesus, which is in the modern country of Turkey. Paul told him to be diligent in teaching God's truth but to watch out for people who were more

interested in hearing what they wanted than in learning the sound teachings of Christian life and faith. "Itching ears" refers to those who want their outside ears satisfied but don't want God's truth to sink in. Paul told Timothy to stick it out against the itchy-ear people and keep teaching the good news of Jesus. Here's what he wrote:

*In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around*

*them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.*

So what does this have to do with depth? It is a reminder that we must diligently seek God's truth for our lives more than be driven by our own current itch or agenda.

A fifth principle is different from the others but it needs to be included on the list. It is that some teachings in the New Testament are extremely difficult to understand. Let me point you to an interesting line in 2 Peter 3:15-16. Peter was one of the premier leaders of the first century Christian church and one of the closest friends of Jesus. He writes, "*... our dear brother Paul's ... letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.*"

This line from Peter is such an encouragement to me. Sometimes I read things in the Bible that were written by Paul or others and I just don't get it. It's hard for me to understand! Then I read that St. Peter himself couldn't understand it either and I breathe a sigh of relief. This is not a compliment that Peter is giving Paul. It's something of a criticism. He's saying that he's written in a way that is hard to understand.

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Those teachings that are hard to understand are not deeper; they are more distant. Should we try to understand them? Sure. Just remember that there are ignorant and unstable people who take the hard-to-understand parts of the Bible and distort them under the pretense that they are more important when they are actually less important.

Let's pull all of this together. The point is to trust God. Let the Bible be your textbook and the Holy Spirit be your teacher. Don't be one of those people who always look for some deep secret that is hidden to everyone else. Seek the straight truth of God and believe in Jesus more deeply every day. Here is what St. Paul said in Philippians 1:9-11:

*And this is my prayer that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.*

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