

What's Truth For You Is Truth For You

Some people become Christians so easily. There seem to be so few questions, minimal doubts, no struggle. Others agonize over deep philosophical and practical questions. For those that agonize, it may sometimes seem as if there is no end to the inquiries. As soon as one issue is dealt with or one question is answered, several more seem to crop up.

There are those, on the one hand, who struggle over ageless questions like does God exist, and if God exists and he is a good God, then why does he allow suffering? Why is there pain within our world? Others are dealing with the problem of evil and where it came from and why it must be. But then there are some who simply get caught up in the tide of whatever is the cultural trend at the time. Often that is a far stronger current than the ancient questions.

Perhaps the objection that is most fitting to our present culture is what philosophers have called relativism. It is our way of saying that what is true for me is true for me but what is true for you is true for you. In some ways it is as modern as today's date and in other ways it is as ancient as the Bible. You may recall that when Jesus was on trial before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, he was asked, "What is truth?"

Relativism is probably the strongest today that it has ever been. Some claim that is due in part to the popularity in this century and the last of the theory of evolution which teaches that everything is always changing. If everything is always changing, then what was true once may not be true today and what we think to be true today may, in fact, be disproven tomorrow. So the bottom line in relativism is that there is no absolute truth that is timeless — that never changes.

Others would say that it is the influence of physics and particularly the theory of relativity that says that the movement of objects in space is to be measured only by other objects in space that are also moving. If everything is moving and there are no fixed points in space, it is easy to generalize that

notion into philosophy and religion and the choices of everyday life.

Another explanation which is a powerful one is that we live in a most unusual time of modern communication. There is a constant transfer of ideas going on through the media. For example, on CNN Headline News there was a special report on television in India that promotes traditional Hindu beliefs by telling the stories and mythology of various Hindu gods. The commentator said that with several hundred Hindu gods to choose from that they're not going to run out of material anytime soon! But is it that we have exposure to different ideas, in a way that people in other generations did not that makes it seem as if all beliefs have equal value?

Most people don't sit around and talk about such philosophical issues. They don't talk about modernism or post modernism. Most people just go with the flow, with whatever is current and popular within our culture. We hear people today saying things like, "Hey, listen, everybody should respect the beliefs of other people. What right do I have to tell a person who is a Buddhist or a Muslim or Hindu that that person is wrong? That person has every right to his or her beliefs as much as I do." It is an approach of very great tolerance. Someone else will interject, "The issue is practicality — if something works, then that's what counts. If a religion makes

you feel happy, if an alternative medicine makes you feel better, if a lifestyle works for you, well, then that's good, isn't it? You ought to go with it!

Just about everything is dependent on the assumption that there are some fixed points within our world by which we can measure and to which we can relate.

Besides, who am I to judge? None of us can step back away from all of the claims of truth that are around us and objectively evaluate one against the other because we're caught up in it. We have our own beliefs; we're part of our own culture. We simply have no basis for judging one belief against the next." In fact, many would say, "Think of it. What absolutes are there? What absolute certainty can you think of? After all, everyone sees things his or her own way."

These types of conversations lead us into practical conclusions that all truth is personal and private—that no one has the right to impose his or her truth upon someone else. You may believe that the Bible is the supernatural word of God and that you should become a Christian, but somebody else thinks that the Bible is just another piece of ancient literature (and not always very good literature) and becoming a Christian is not a good choice to make.

I may have my beliefs that are very different from what the Bible proposes is the right way but it's good for me and therefore it's right, so just leave me alone. It is a set of objections that seriously stands in the way of many people considering becoming Christians and choosing the Christian faith. One way or another they're saying, "What's true for you is true for you, but what's true for me is different and that's true for me."

As a Christian my first response is to ask a couple of questions. The first question is, "What's wrong with this picture?" There are some serious philosophic and practical issues that are automatically raised. Let's start out with the theoretical side of the problem. Those who say that all truth is relative insist that there are no absolutes. The difficulty with that position philosophically is that the statement, "There are no absolutes," is being accepted as an absolute. There can be no exceptions to the statement, "There are no absolutes." If that's the case, then it becomes a kind of circular reasoning and risks being nonsense. If you were to apply that statement to itself then you would at least have to allow for the possibility that it is wrong and that there may be absolutes. Then the search is on for what are the absolute truths in our world.

One of the things that's very interesting in all of this is that much of the popularity of relativism has grown out of the great influence of science on our generation. Yet the amazing thing is that many who have bought into relativism have somewhat turned against science. They say, "You can't always assume that scientific studies are correct. You can't always assume that the evidence is there. The real practical issues show up in the case studies and that's where we take a closer look at the picture to see if it's right."

Suppose, for example, that we could all go to visit some isolated tribe that firmly believes in child sacrifice. These are people with generations of tradition that say that if you take a young child and

burn that child on a fiery altar that your sins will be forgiven. The demons will be chased away; you will have good luck in harvest and in hunting through the next year. Now how do you respond to something like that? Is that right? Is that true? Is that good? Apparently for those who do it, it is. They assume that this is the way it's supposed to be. They would say it is the right thing to do and that those who don't participate are foolish and they miss out on all of the benefits that a child sacrifice can bring to them. Are we willing to say, "If it seems good to them, it's okay for them?"

More personally, suppose you're walking down the street and you are accosted by a man who wants to rob you. He not only takes all your money and your credit cards but in the process beats you up. He is caught, arrested and you are a primary witness in his trial for both robbery and for assault. His defense goes like this: He has a family to support and his family was hungry. They have medical bills and all of their resources had already long been spent. He couldn't get a job, there were no government programs to help in his particular circumstances and so he did what he had to do. He did it because he loves his children, because he cares about his family. You had the resources that he needed and when you resisted, he did what he had to do, that is, he beat you up. You say, "Well, I don't see it that way so he's got to go to jail!" He says, "That's not fair; I shouldn't have to go to jail. Why should I be punished for doing what I really believe is right and true? Who are you to say that I am wrong?" Do we step back and say, "Okay, what's true for him is true for him?"

Suppose that an admitted racist insists that all persons of any other race than his own should not be in this country. By the year 2000 he wants them all deported to some other place, he doesn't care where; and in talking about it he not only has great passion but every other sentence has some type of racial slur. He goes so far as to say, "If it isn't politically feasible to export everyone who isn't like me then what we should do is round up people and put them in some type of restricted area or reservation, insist that they cannot have children and then let them die of old age so that the entire country can be just as I am." Do we say, "Well, if that's true for you, then I guess that's true?"

Imagine that a member of the Flat Earth Society insists that the world is not round. He gives you

literature to help you see that it is all a conspiracy — this whole round earth idea — concocted by some people for their own benefit and they are attempting to impose their beliefs on all of the people of the world. He says, “The earth is clearly flat. All you need to do is go outside and look at it. It looks flat so that is the greatest and best evidence of all!” And you say, “Come on, you don’t really believe that? But then again, I guess if you do, what’s true for you is true for you.”

There’s something wrong with a picture that insists that all truth is relative. Proposing that we live in a world where there are no absolutes becomes frightening because it begins to jeopardize our government, our courts, our science, our medicine, our interpersonal relationships with each other. Just about everything is dependent on the assumption that there are some fixed points within our world by which we can measure and to which we can relate. We begin to discover that not only is there a theoretical need for that but there’s a practical need just so that we can live out our lives.

It probably would be better to say that there are differences of taste rather than differences of truth. For example, you might prefer the taste of Diet Pepsi and I prefer the taste of Diet Coke. Actually this past week I was in a discussion where someone said that there really isn’t any difference in taste between Diet Pepsi and Deit Coke; it’s just a marketing difference. I’ve never seen a group of people get quite so upset about something quite so minor! We all unanimously turned against this person and said, “You just don’t know! Diet Pepsi and Diet Coke are really different!” But that’s a difference of taste, a difference of preference.

But suppose you say that two plus two equals four and I insist that two plus two equals seven. That is absurd. You’re right; I’m wrong. There’s a difference here of truth. Personal preference doesn’t make any difference at all. If I prefer two plus two to be seven — if that tastes better to me — so what, it’s wrong. Two plus two does equal four.

Now look at a picture where someone says that there is no God, while someone else says that there is a God. Is that not a difference of truth rather than a difference of taste? The same principle applies to the accuracy of the Bible and legitimacy of Chris-

tianity. The Christian says that you must accept Jesus Christ as Savior in order to go to heaven and the unbeliever says that it doesn’t make any difference at all — if there is a heaven then everybody gets to go there. Is not one right and the other wrong? Is it not the case that both cannot be equally true when they so fully disagree? But the unbeliever says, “It feels good to me and therefore it must be true.” I do think that that’s a significant part of how we make our decision.

We all know of cases where people say that they felt something that turned out to be completely different. I do not want to minimize the pain of those who struggle with terminal illnesses, but I have talked with people who have insisted to me that they are cured of a terminal illness. They have insisted on that right through the final days and hours of their lives, up to the point of death itself. They insist that they feel that they are cured and will not die. And then they have died. So it’s possible to have feelings that are terribly, terribly misguided. And yet feelings are very important.

It is often through our emotions that we make the most important decisions of life —including decisions of faith. If we like someone we are prone to agree with that person. Probably there are a lot of us who, through the influence of parents or someone else whom we admired, came to many of the beliefs that we have. One study indicates that eighty percent of adults who come to Christian faith do so through the influence of a friend. It’s okay to say that emotion and feeling are an important part of the process by which we make our discovery of truth and make the decisions that we make. But it cannot

be everything. Reason cannot be completely controlled by feeling any more than it should be the other way around. Both are important, but feelings cannot be all important. We must never abandon reason to emotion.

If we can agree that there is objective truth — that truth is true whether we agree with it or not — that really is the issue. Truth is out there and I may vehemently disagree with it, but it’s still true whether I agree with it or not. Two plus two equals four even if I insist that’s wrong and what I insist does not make the difference. Now if we can grant that, then what if Christianity is true? In other words,

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what if the existence of God, the personhood of Jesus Christ, heaven and hell and eternal life, the Bible — what if all of that fits into the same category of the two plus two equals four? What if there is absolute truth that determines a person's eternal destiny?

If Christianity is true then other religions that disagree with Christianity must be wrong. If God exists, if Jesus Christ loves us, if commitment of life to him is the most important decision that we can possibly make, then we can't take Christianity lightly. It is the most important matter that could possibly be.

There's a danger in trying to boil something down to it's essence. But suppose we try to sum up the Christian message in just a few lines: God created all humans. We have all sinned and messed up our lives. God sent his Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus died to pay for human sin and rose again so that when we trust him as Savior and Lord our sins are forgiven and we have eternal life. That means that Christians will go to heaven rather than hell when we die.

If that's the essence of Christian teaching, listen with that as the background to the words of Jesus in John 8:31-32. "If you hold to my teaching. . . you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." Often on cornerstones or arches at universities or in the front of textbooks we'll see the statement, "the truth will set you free." But that's not the entirety of what Jesus said. He said, "If you hold to my teaching you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." Now if that's really true, if Jesus is really right and someone rejects that, then no greater mistake could possibly be made. Not only does the unbeliever lose out on what is the very best in this life but also misses out on heaven and God forever.

Blaise Pascal was a French philosopher and scientist who proposed what has been called Pascal's wager. Pascal said that if you become a Christian and Christianity is false, you haven't lost anything. However, if Christianity is true and you don't become a Christian, then you have lost all of eternity. Therefore, Pascal said, Christianity is the best bet. If it's wrong you really don't lose much. But if it's

right and you don't believe, you've lost everything.

I have personally concluded that truth does not depend upon what I think or what I believe. I'm not that smart. I'm not that powerful. Something is truth whether I believe it or not. I have become convinced that the best evidence points me to the conclusion that the Bible is true and that Jesus Christ is all that he claims to be. I've concluded that he's right and I've bet my life on it. I've bet my life and eternity on being a Christian to the point that when I die, if God asks me why he should let me into heaven, I've only got one answer — because of Jesus Christ. I'm counting on him. And I don't have a plan B. That's the only answer I've got!

You could say that if it's wrong, that was a bad choice, and I would say that I'm convinced that it's true on the basis of the evidence. I have no other choice.

So what about you? I would ask that you check

out the evidence; weigh all the arguments; see for yourself. I think that often of those who do check out the evidence and weigh it all for themselves and give Jesus Christ a fair consideration, many, but not

all, come to the conclusion that he was right when he said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Lord, see and hear the responses of our hearts. Chase our doubts away and grow our faith. We ask not to be centered upon ourselves but on you. We believe what you say, Jesus, that you are the way and the truth and the life but we seek to make that personal — that you become *our* way, *our* truth, *our* life. Amen.

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