

Eye-Opener Studies



Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law. (Ps. 119:18)

2: The Quest For Truth

I remember a sister in Liverpool whose funeral I conducted in July 1989. The congregation in which I grew up had had to close in December 1973 and most members then moved across the city to amalgamate with a sister congregation at the southern end. She was a member there and had been baptized before we joined them, so I did not fully know her religious background and how she came to find the church. I suspect it was through a correspondence course leafletting campaign, which was a common and reasonably successful way of contacting people in the 60s and 70s. She had once lived close to the building where they met but had subsequently moved, yet remained faithful to the end.

Her mother was a member of the Plymouth Brethren denomination and would discuss religion with her daughter, so she told me. I never met the lady but understood that she was bemused by her daughter taking up with the Church of Christ, and her devotion to it and its teaching. Though the Brethren do practice believers' baptism by immersion, they do it for different reasons and against a different backcloth of teachings and suppositions. Our sister once mentioned that during a discussion with her mum about baptism her mum said, 'I know that what you teach about baptism is right but my church doesn't believe that'. So here was a lady who knew that what 'her church' taught about such a fundamentally important subject as baptism was wrong yet was prepared to let what 'her church' taught trump the truth of the Bible. Whatever she was, she was not a genuine seeker after truth who would follow where the truth she discovered led. She preferred the comfort of what she had always believed and been taught. She was never going to leave 'her church' for those peculiar 'upstarts' who didn't sing with an organ and taught things she had

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only to those who
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whatever they
have been taught.

never considered, despite her understanding that they were correct, according to the Bible. She did not value truth but rather valued what 'her church' taught as being of greater importance. She's certainly not alone.

A common failing

I had a conversation once with a girl I knew at university in my early 20s. She was an avowed atheist but was asking me about the church I went to and what we believed. I don't recall what I told her but when I finished she said something like this: 'That sounds like really hard work. If I were to choose a religion, I'd be a Roman Catholic.' Flabbergasted, I asked her why, since she had not been raised as a Catholic and would be returning to her roots had she done so, and that denomination bore absolutely no resemblance to the church as found in the New Testament. 'Oh, that's easy,' she said. 'The Roman

Catholic faith comes as a neat package. You don't have to think. It's all done for you. All you have to do is go along, do as they tell you, and the system gets you to heaven without any effort from you.'

How many are like this and want heaven but without effort? This can be a very real danger for Christians who were raised in the church. Those who come in from outside, as it were, are far more likely to have thought things through for themselves before taking that step, but home-bred Christians can wear their faith like a comfortable old jacket. They don't care how many holes there are in it, it feels right. As the spiritual 'Give me that old time religion' says:

'It was good for dad and mother
It was good for dad and mother
It was good for dad and mother
And it's good enough for me.'

The problem with this is that they have a derived faith, not their own faith for they are just doing and believing what mum and dad believed. A Bible School teacher once told me that so often he found that when challenged by a doctrine or a practice, many students do not actually want to ask, 'What does the Bible teach on this?' but rather, 'What do we teach on this?' It can sometimes be easier to tell them, but that has to be resisted for they learn nothing, or very little, that way. The harder and riskier way is to point them to the relevant passages in the Bible and let them go and fathom it out for themselves just by using the Bible. That way they make it their own. It can be risky because they might do so and come up with a fanciful interpretation or understanding, depending on what is being questioned, but the other way leads to indoctrination and conditioning where we turn out

little 'Homepride Men' all looking and thinking alike. This negates the notion of personal autonomy in matters of faith.

A 'frightening' encounter

I was 19 when I went up to uni-

versity at Keele, near Stoke-on-Trent. I'd been raised in the church, had been baptized just before my thirteenth birthday, and was firmly committed to my faith. I sought out the Christian societies there, and though I had received advice that I would find a better 'home' in the Student Christian Movement (SCM) I discovered it in the Evangelical Christian Union (ECU, now just called the CU). My 'advisor', whom I'd never met personally, turned out to be a leading liberal amongst the churches, hence his advice, but I am naturally a religious conservative. The SCM is where liberal believers settle at university if they actually join a 'Christian' society there at all.

The degree courses at Keele in the early 1960s lasted for four years and in my year-group there was a lassie who was from the Salvation Army. Each Sunday she would don her uniform to attend the campus chapel services, which was very bold of her for she risked ridicule (though in reality I think she actually received mostly admiration). I found a congregation of our own off-campus and made my Sunday home there. We both attended CU Bible studies and their other gatherings during the week. Mixing with denominational believers of all sorts many views were expressed and exchanged thus forcing me, and the others too, to winkle out answers for themselves. By the end of four years my faith, which in all reality began by being closer to a derived faith, had become my own. I now did not just simply believe something, I *knew* why I believed it, or I knew how to go about finding answers for myself.

At one of the last Bible studies I attended the Salvationist lassie was also present and she came out with a word of thanks to us all saying, 'I want to thank you all for sharing and the studies we have done. When I came up four years ago I was a Salvationist. Now *I know* why I'm a Salvationist because I've had to study to find out for myself'. The problem with that was that if you swapped the word 'Salvationist' for 'Member of the Church of Christ', I could, and more-or-less did, say the same thing myself. Her search for truth had done nothing more than confirm her presuppositions that she was following the right religion in the right way. Mine had done exactly the same for me but we both had ended up with an entirely different view of what the same book, the Bible, had to say and teach about



Homepride Men

Christianity and Christian practice. If two genuine searchers for truth had come up with two different versions of truth, yet both used the same Bible, had either of us found it? Or was the truth that there is no absolute truth to find? Or, as seems equally possible, had both of us merely studied to confirm what we already believed was the truth and an open-minded searching for truth had absolutely nothing at all to do with what we had believed we were doing? Self-delusion is so very easy in these things. Consequently, as a result of that one encounter, I determined always to endeavour to be as careful and as open-minded as I possibly could be when handling the Scriptures and therefore to do my level best to handle the Word aright. Fifty years later that determination still lives with me - and I want to encourage it to live with you too. (The answer to my conundrum all those years ago was naturally that my searching was an open-minded quest to find the truth but hers was simply to confirm her prejudices and presuppositions! What else could it have been?)

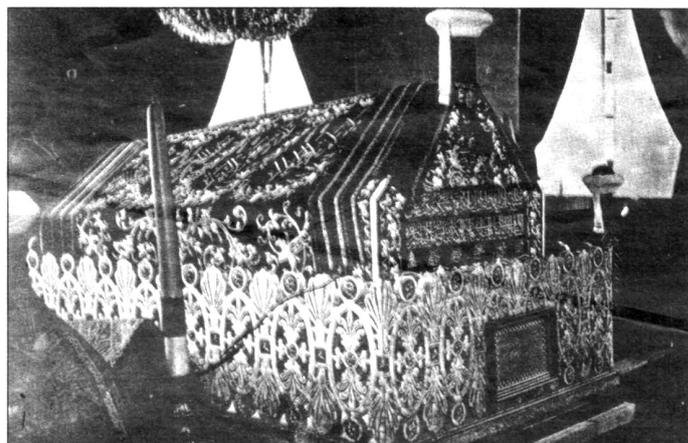
Scriptural injunctions

There is a good deal said in the New Testament about truth and the search for it. Jesus was very concerned about truth. There are at least 106 references to it in the Gospels, with over 50 appearing in John, the most philosophical and reflective of the four. Jesus said, *“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”* (Jn 14:6). Unlike many other religions, Christianity cannot compromise over truth. There is one Saviour, one ultimate truth, and therefore one way only to heaven, and that way is by Jesus. Earlier He had told His followers, *“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”* (Jn 8:31-32). Truth is what Jesus taught and what His teaching was all about for He actually claimed that all He said and did was directly from the Father and not from Himself. *“I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me,”* (Jn 8:28) was what He said just before He promised we would know the truth. Later Philip was to ask Him to show them, the disciples, the Father and the answer he got was a gentle admonition, *“Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on*

my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works.” (Jn 14:9-10 emphasis added). Listening to Jesus is listening to God. The true Christian spirit is one which is fearlessly searching for truth no matter where the search may lead, since once discovered the human spirit is set free.

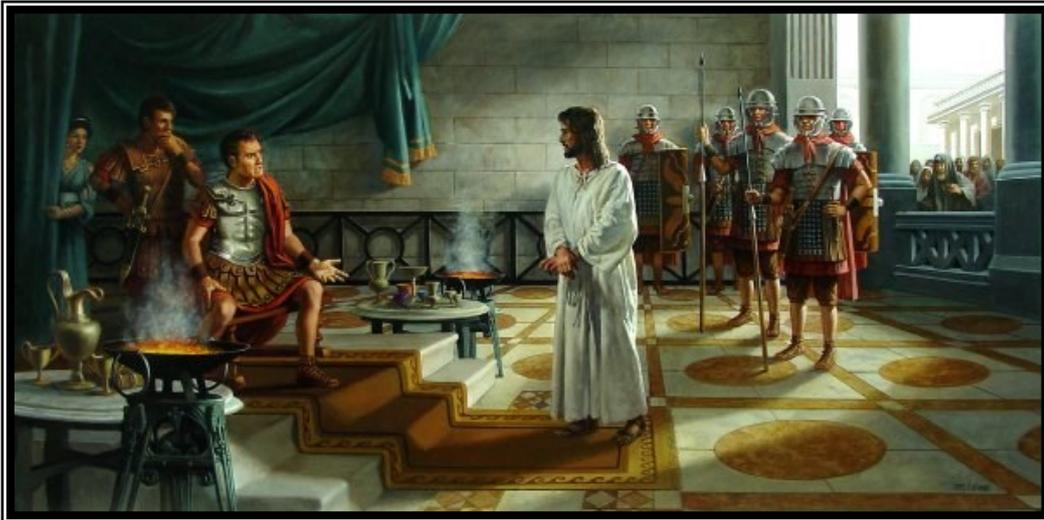
It is a prominent feature of Christianity that it both invites and positively welcomes a free and open investigation of its claims. Paul told the Philippians to *‘work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,’* (Php 2:12). Christian insistence on the historicity of the faith and its appeal to reason based on the reality of historical events, must place it in the position of being open to historical critical techniques. This is why the first study on The Resurrection is foundational to the faith and this course, for it is our rock which passes all tests for truth.

Muslims make similar truth claims for the Koran and their religion but its adherents are not al-



Muhammad's tomb in Medina: the only known photograph, taken clandestinely in the 19th century, goes on sale at Sotheby's next Wednesday. The estimate is £70-90,000. Photo Sotheby's

lowed to question and investigate their 'holy' book as Christians do, and they resist attempts by others to do so. Look up Google for details about the tomb of Mohammed and there are claims for it and rebuttals, maintaining that such claims are false - all by Muslims, of course. You see, though his tomb is in Medina they decided that he was not actually buried and his remains do not lie in a grave but he went straight to heaven. Well, if Roman Catholics can declare that Mary, Jesus's mother, also went straight to heaven, why can't they do exactly the same and expect people to believe it? When truth goes out of the window credibility for the belief system does, or should do, too. Unfortunately for the truth claims about Mohammed's tomb and grave, in the 19th century, at great personal risk, a



‘What is Truth?’ (by James Seward)

non-Muslim disguised himself and took a photograph of it, and that photograph was offered for sale at Sotheby’s a few years ago. Above is a copy of the photograph - I do not know how much it fetched or even if it was sold.

Commitment to truth

It is a fact that nobody can be committed to what they believe is false, or trivial, or bad. Belief, commitment and action go hand in hand with what each individual, at least, sees as truth. We believe what we believe because it seems true. If the truth can be challenged it might be necessary to alter our own beliefs. Thus it can be maintained that, whilst holding a religious conviction implies commitment, and this commitment is dependent on certain beliefs, it is always possible, and frequently necessary, to examine beliefs critically and, if they turn out to be false, then to alter our commitment and maybe our religion. The notion of conversion implies that this process has taken place.

A Christian cannot be neutral or negative about his commitment to his faith. He cannot soft-peddle on doctrine nor be a relativist or subjectivist on morality. As we have already said, the Christian cannot accept that ‘All roads lead to God’, but must hold that in Christianity lies the truth about God, man, and man’s response to the problems posed by God. The challenge to search for truth is a challenge which Christianity makes to the world. It is therefore incumbent on any who proclaim that they are speaking religious truth to examine their beliefs as rigorously as if they were proclaiming scientific truth.

The Christian is not afraid of a critical examination of his faith, though admittedly there are those both past and present within the general umbrella of Christendom, who do not welcome, and have not welcomed or encouraged it. He is committed to a search for truth and this in a spirit of open enquiry based on rational principles. The Christian

faith is not an irrational hope based on unsupported principles but is founded on the rock of historical evidence and solid truth.

What is Truth?

Truth is an elusive concept for it is an abstract notion. It’s a lot like love; we cannot easily define it accurately but we can recognize it when we see it. If truth is merely defined as ‘That which is true’, it can usually easily be established objectively. But if it is a matter of opinion, and perhaps an abstract concept to be judged subjectively, things can become complex.

When Pontius Pilate asked Jesus, “*What is truth?*” (John 18:38), several forms of truth emerge from John’s account. Pilate only asked it once and he had a motive behind the question - but what? That would depend on his tone of voice, body language and facial expression, none of which is conveyed on the pages of the gospel. Was it a genuine inquiry but more of a rhetorical type, not wanting a discussion yet demonstrating he knew it was a profound idea? Did he ask it hoping to engage Jesus for a short while at least in a discussion? Was it a sarcastic sneer at the very absurdity of Jesus declaring that He came “*to bear witness to the truth [and that] everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.*” (John 18:37-38)? I definitely do not feel it was the second option, that Pilate wanted some sort of a discussion about truth with Jesus; time was short and at a premium. But was he dismissing Jesus sarcastically as a sort of bumpkin or was he empathizing with Jesus with the unspoken undertone of ‘We both know that this is a profound topic and I’m just letting you know that I am capable of deep

thought too, if required.’ I’m of the opinion that he was not being sarcastic with Jesus. He was well aware that Jewish feasts were like time bombs waiting to detonate and he did not want trouble. He knew that Jesus was famous, and innocent, and was being set up politically. If he was irritable it was with the Jewish authorities but not with Jesus, and his subsequent actions and attitudes demonstrate this quite clearly. They had been discussing Jesus’s kingdom, whether He was a king, and what He was aiming for.

There was a truth which obviously Pilate could not verify at the moment of the trial: was Jesus actually the King of the Jews? I believe that He was, literally and not just spiritually. His ancestry was known and His lineage could be traced through the records - remember that Joseph took his pregnant wife to Bethlehem for the census because he was of David’s line and the people knew Jesus was a ‘Son of David’. Had the true earthly Jewish king sat on the literal and physical throne of Israel, Jesus would have been that king. That truth could be checked but not in the middle of the night. Jesus implied that He was indeed a king but He was no political threat for He was not attempting to set up an earthly kingdom. And Pilate believed both truths, hence the super-scription he placed on Jesus’s cross.

Types of truth

So there is factual truth which can be verified, yet even that may be debateable. Which is the highest mountain in the world? Well, here it is: Mount Everest in the Himalayas at 29,028ft - some say 29,029ft - (8,464m), everybody knows that. Yes,



but only if you measure from sea level, which is the most practical point to do so. But if you measure from the centre of the Earth, which is the furthest

point from that position and therefore nearer to the sun at its summit? The answer is Mount Chimborazo in Ecuador which is 1.35 miles closer to the sun at its summit, or further from the Earth’s centre if you prefer, though its summit above sea level is on-



ly 20,546ft (2,628m). How come? Simple; the Earth is not a perfect sphere. Geographers call it an ‘oblate spheroid’. Centrifugal force caused by its rotation means that it bulges at the Equator and is flattened at the Poles. Thus its equatorial diameter is 26 miles wider than its polar diameter. As Chimborazo virtually lies on the Equator (about 1° S), it benefits from this bulge. Though 1.6 miles lower than Everest at its summit, measured from sea level, it is still the furthest point from the centre by 1.35 miles, as we noted above. It’s a good quiz question but little use beyond that, yet it emphasizes that even a factual truth can have a variable answer depending on context. Truth seekers must be aware of such things.

The same goes for subjective truths. You can ask questions which depend on all sorts of variables before a consensus of truth can be established - but can we ever get universal agreement over its absolute? ‘Which is the world’s greatest painting?’ - not all will agree that it is the Mona Lisa. ‘Which is Shakespeare’s greatest play’. Some may think Hamlet yet others will favour King Lear; who is right? Does it matter? Was Cassius Clay (later known as Muhammed Ali) the greatest heavyweight boxer, as he claimed to be? Many think he was yet some favour Joe Louis, or Rocky Marciano (who never lost a fight). The debate rages. Don’t bother to go down the road of the greatest solo singers, or groups, or football teams. Maybe there is an absolute to all such enquiries but we’ll never ever know it, even if it mattered - which clearly, in these in-

stances, it doesn't. We can dream or argue contentedly that we can be as 'right' as the next person!

What 'Truth' was Jesus talking about?

Jesus obviously wasn't talking about truths like these during His ministry but about something much more important and profound. So what was it and what was going on when Pilate asked Him at His trial, 'What is truth?' What is the immediate context of the question? Pilate, as we have already noted, had understood that Jesus might well be being thought of as the King of the Jews. That could be a threat to Roman rule but Jesus very quickly dismisses that notion, and Pilate believes Him. Then there is a seemingly incomprehensible interchange of dialogue just before Pilate's 'truth' question. It seems like a complete non-sequitur, that is that it doesn't follow from what went immediately before it. Here it is: *'Then Pilate said to him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world— to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.'*' (Jn 18:37). What on earth was Jesus talking about when He deflected from *'You say that I am a king,'* to *'For this purpose I was born...'* etc.? We know Jesus knew that He had been born to die as a sacrifice for the sins of the world, and that standing there before Pilate was merely a piece, albeit a very important piece, in the jigsaw of His life and which was now coming to its awesome, gruesome, inevitable climax, but how did this statement of reality spring from *'You say that I am a king'?* Jesus did not say, *'For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world – **to die for the sins of many**'*, with the underlying implication that there is nothing you, Pilate, can do about it, so get on with it. No, He goes on about truth and that bearing 'witness to the truth' was what He came for, not to be a king, though He claimed that He was a king in a different realm, and that those who are of the truth listen to His voice. So what truth is He talking about here?

The most important question ever

Paring all questions down, what is the most important single question anybody can, or could ask, no matter who they are or were, and where or when they lived? Simple. **'Is there a God?'**, or if you prefer it: 'Does God exist?'. If the answer given is 'Yes, there is a God' a whole raft of supplementary

questions arise such as 'What is He like?', 'What does He expect from us?', 'How does He tell us to behave?', 'What fate does He have in mind for us if we do, or do not, live as He wants us to?', and so on. This question affects our lives at every point for it impacts on all our decisions, even for those who do not believe there is a God at all. They may not consciously make reference to that notion for they believe they control their own lives and destinies, nevertheless what we believe about God controls all that we say, think and do. I believe, therefore, that Jesus was implying that He came to demonstrate the immense and ultimate truth that there is a God. Later the Jews told Pilate that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God (Jn 19:7). Pilate tried to probe Jesus about this but Jesus would not answer. So Pilate, in frustration said: *"Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?" Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above."* (Jn 19:10-11). Here Jesus reaffirms the existence of ultimate authority and that it is this authority who controls Pilate and what is going on. In other words it is God who is in charge, not man, and you are merely a man, Pilate.

John began his great Gospel by affirming the truth that there is a God and an even more startling truth that Jesus was very much God because He was the Word of God. He created the universe; He gave it light and life, and the life He gave was the light of men (Jn 1:4). John the Baptist *'came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him.'* (Jn 1:7). *'The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world... [and] to all who ... received him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.'* (Jn 1:9-13). *'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us... full of grace and truth'*. (Jn 1:14). So the purpose Jesus came for was to help all to believe in God, which truth is the light *'which enlightens everybody'*, and that those who believe will become children of God in a special way. Thus before Pilate Jesus could say that *'everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice'*. In other words, those who truly believe the truth that there is a God and want to follow Him, listen to what Jesus has to say.

So the truth Jesus was speaking about to Pilate

was not to be part of a philosophical discourse about an abstract concept but a demonstration of ultimate truth: there **IS** a God; there **IS** a realm and existence beyond that of this world and that He is the king in that realm. He came to show us fully and finally just what the Father is like. All the talk of love and Divine attributes cannot hold a candle to the demonstration of who and what God is as we look at Jesus's life. We say that 'actions speak louder than words', and we know that this is true. Love is an abstract concept too, and telling somebody that you love them is important, but all the words in the world won't hold up if our actions do not match our words for they speak more eloquently than any words ever could. Jesus knew full well that He was about to prove finally, once and for all, the truth that there is a God and that He loves us, and that this knowledge of truth, and what



The Truth - there IS a God and He loves us

ultimate truth is and means, will set us free. His death was to prove that *'God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever be-*

lieves in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.' (Jn 3:16-18). And three days after He spoke to Pilate, His resurrection from the dead proved the truth about ultimate truth that there is a God and that Jesus is the way, and the truth and the life, and that no-one comes to the Father except through Him.

And that's the truth!

Tasks

- 1) Which biblical truth, or truths, give you the most difficulty and challenge your faith? Explain what they are and why you find they do so.
- 2) What do you think is the truth as to why Judas betrayed Jesus?