



Scriptures and Doctrine :: The Truth That We Believe - Zac Poonen

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We are commanded in the Scriptures to pay close attention to ourselves and to our teaching, for only thus can we ensure salvation for ourselves and for those we preach to (1 Tim.4:16).

Our life and our doctrine are like two legs that give stability to our Christian life. Both legs should be equally long, as in normal human beings. Generally speaking in Christendom, we find most believers over-emphasise one or other of these two 'legs'.

When it comes to doctrine, we are commanded to "handle the Word of truth accurately" (2 Tim.2:15). Many are careless in their study of the Scriptures and so are imbalanced in their understanding of doctrine.

The truth of God is like the human body. It is perfect only when every part is found in its correct size. Not all truths in Scripture are equally important. To give but one example: To speak in tongues is not as important as loving other believers. If any one doctrine is overemphasised at the cost of another, then the truth that we proclaim will be as ugly as a body with an oversized eye or ear!! Besides, such overemphasis will also lead us to become heretical in our beliefs. It is important therefore that we handle God's truth accurately.

It would have been simple if we could have just said that we believe the truth as it is found in God's Word (in the 66 books that comprise the Bible). That is the truth. But since the truth of God's Word has been twisted and corrupted by the cunning of Satan and men, it becomes necessary to amplify and explain what exactly the Bible teaches.

God's Word, unlike mathematics and science, cannot be understood by mere intellectual study, apart from the revelation of the Holy Spirit. This revelation, Jesus said, is given only to babes (the humble) and not to proud intellectuals (Matt. 11:25). This was why the Bible scholars of Jesus' day could not understand His teaching. Most of today's Bible scholars are also in the same boat - and for the same reason!

At the same time, we must use our minds too, for we are commanded to be "mature in our understanding" (1 Cor.14:20).

So it is only a mind that is totally submissive to the Holy Spirit that can understand God's Word aright.

God wants all His children to be totally free in every way. But many believers are in bondage to so many sinful habits and human traditions. One reason for this is that they read God's Word so carelessly.

The more diligent we are to understand God's Word, the more the truth will set us free in every area of our lives (See Jn. 8:32).

Most believers are very careful when it comes to investing their money. But they are very careless when it comes to studying the Scriptures. This shows that they value money more than God. Such believers will obviously go astray in their understanding of God's Word.

We are told clearly that all Scripture has been given in order to make us 'perfect' (2 Tim. 3:16,17 KJV). So, we could say that those who are not interested in Christian perfection will also not be able to understand God's word aright (see Jn. 7:17 also).

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; and God reveals His secrets only to those who fear Him (Psa. 25:14).

The Truth Concerning God

The Bible teaches that God is One and also that there are three Persons in this One God.

Since numbers belong to the material world, and since God is Spirit, our finite mind cannot grasp this truth fully, even as

a small cup cannot contain the water in an ocean.

A dog cannot understand multiplication - how three ones when multiplied can still be one: $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$. Neither can we understand how God can be Three Persons and yet One God. A dog can understand only another dog. He cannot understand a man fully. In the same way, a god that could be explained and understood by our human reason would only be another man just like ourselves. The very fact that the God of the Bible transcends our reason is the clearest evidence that this is indeed the truth.

The truth of the Trinity is clear from the first verse of the Bible, where the word for 'God' is plural in the Hebrew - 'Elohim'. We also see it in the use of the words 'Us' and 'Our' in Gen. 1:26. The light is focused more clearly at the baptism of Jesus, where the Father (voice from heaven), the Son (Jesus Christ) and the Holy Spirit (in the form of a dove) are all present (Matt. 3:16,17).

Those who say that Jesus Himself is Father, Son and Holy Spirit cannot explain how He could then have done His Father's will on earth, while denying His own will (Jn.6:38). Unitarians who believe that God is just One Person, and who therefore baptize in the Name of "Jesus only" are actually denying that Jesus came as a Man.

The Bible says that the one who has the right teaching, has both the Father and the Son, and that those who deny either the Father or the Son have the spirit of the Antichrist (2 Jn.9; 1 Jn.2:22).

In Christian baptism, Jesus commanded us specifically that we were to baptize in the threefold name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19), the Son being identified as the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38).

The Truth Concerning Christ

The Scriptures teach that Jesus Christ existed as God and was equal with God from all eternity (Jn.1:1) and that when He came to earth as a Man, He voluntarily chose NOT to exercise some of those powers that He had as God. This is what is meant by the expression, "He emptied Himself" (Phil. 2:6,7).

Consider a few examples that prove this: God cannot be tempted by evil (Jas. 1:13). But Jesus allowed Himself to be tempted (Matt. 4:1-10). God knows everything. But Jesus said when He was on earth that He did not know the date of His own second coming (Mt. 24:36). He also had to go near a fig tree in order to see if it had any fruit (Mt.21:19). If He had used His power as God He would have known that the tree had no fruit from afar! God's wisdom is unchanging and eternal. Yet, it is recorded twice about our Lord Jesus that "He grew in wisdom" (Lk.2:40,52).

All these verses indicate that Jesus had "emptied Himself" of many of the powers of God, when He came to earth.

But even though Jesus emptied Himself of these powers when He came to earth, yet in His Person He was still God. Obviously it is impossible for God to ever cease being God, even if He wanted to do so. A king can go and live in a slum giving up his rights as a king. But he would still be the king. So with Jesus.

The clearest proof of Jesus' Deity when He was on earth, is seen in the 7 recorded instances where He accepted worship from others (Matt. 8:2; 9:18; 14:33; 15:25; 20:20; Mk.5:6; Jn.9:38). Angels and God-fearing men do not accept worship (Acts 10:25,26; Rev. 22:8,9). But Jesus accepted it - because He was the Son of God. The Father revealed to Peter that Jesus was the Son of God even while on earth (Matt. 16:16,17).

Concerning Jesus' humanity, Hebrews 2:17 is very exact when it states that Jesus "was made like His brethren in all things". He was NOT made like the children of Adam, for then He would have had an 'old man' like the rest of humanity. ('Old man' is the Scriptural phrase for which many unfortunately use the unScriptural expression 'sinful nature').

Jesus did NOT have a sinful nature, for He did not have a human father. Jesus was born of the Holy Spirit, and was holy from conception (Lk. 1:35).

Jesus' spiritual brothers are those who do the will of God (Matt. 12:49,50) - who are born of the Spirit (Jn. 3:5) and who have put off the old man and put on the new (Eph. 4:22,24). But we, the brothers of Jesus, do have a will of our own and Jesus was made like us "in all things". He had a will of His own too, which He denied (Jn.6:38).

When we were born, as Adam's children, we were all born with an old man. The old man can be likened to an unfaithful

servant who opens the door of our heart to the desires of the flesh (that can be likened to a gang of robbers) that seek to enter it. When we are born again, this old man is killed by God (Rom. 6:6). But we still have the flesh through which we are tempted (Jas. 1:14,15). The old man is now replaced by a new man who resists the desires of the flesh and seeks to keep the door of the heart shut against this 'gang of robbers'.

Jesus was tempted in all points as we are, and overcame (Heb. 4:15). However He did not come in "sinful flesh" but only "in the likeness of sinful flesh" (Rom. 8:3). We have lived for many years in sin. The sinful habits that we have acquired through many years of sinning cause us to sin unconsciously even after we are born again.

For example, those who have used many swear words in the past may find such words coming out of their mouths unconsciously when they are under pressure; whereas those who never used swear-words in their unconverted days do not find themselves using such words even unconsciously. Similarly, those who have read much pornography find that they have a greater problem with dirty thoughts and dreams than others who did not indulge themselves to that extent.

Jesus never sinned and He did not have any unconscious sin in His Life either. If He had sinned even once unconsciously, He would have had to offer a sacrifice for that sin (as we read in Lev. 4:27,28). Then He could not have been a perfect sacrifice for our sins.

The doctrine of the Person of Jesus has been the point of controversy throughout church history and many a heresy has been proclaimed concerning it. Some have overemphasised His Deity, to the point where they cannot see Him as a Man who was tempted exactly like us. Others have overemphasised His humanity, to the point where they have cancelled out His Deity.

Our only safeguard to avoid either of these heresies is to stand with the whole revelation of God in the Scriptures and to stop where it stops, lest we "go too far" (2 Jn.7,9).

Jesus coming to earth as a Man is a mystery. It is foolish for us to try and analyze this truth, beyond what we are told in the Bible. To do so would be as foolish and irreverent an action as the Israelites curiously peeping inside the ark of God (a type of Christ) - an action for which God smote them down (1 Sam. 6:19).

Jesus said that He had come to earth in order to deny His own will and do His Father's will (Jn.6:38). This shows that Jesus had a human will that was opposed to His Father's, (Matt.26:39). Otherwise He would not have had to deny that will.

Jesus too was tempted in all points exactly like us (Heb. 4:15). But because He never consented in His mind to any of those temptations, He never sinned (Jas. 1:15). Every temptation that we can ever face, was faced and overcome by our Lord Jesus during His earthly life.

We all know how difficult it is to live without sinning for even a single day! So we could say that the greatest miracle Jesus ever did was to live without sinning for more than 33 years - even though He was tempted exactly like us at every point, daily. He resisted sin unto death, and He received grace from the Father because He sought for it with loud crying and tears (Heb. 5:7 and 12:3,4).

As our Forerunner, He now calls us to follow His example in taking up the cross - in putting our self-will to death (Lk. 9:23).

We fall into sin because we do not resist sin seriously enough, and because we do not ask the Father for grace to overcome. Today, we are not asked to follow Jesus in the external aspects of His life - being a carpenter or a bachelor - nor in His ministry - of walking on the water or raising the dead - but rather in being faithful as he was in overcoming sin.

The Holy Spirit inspires us to make two confessions concerning Jesus Christ - one, that He is Lord, and the other, that He came in the flesh (1 Cor. 12:3; 1 Jn. 4:2,3). Both confessions are equally important, but the latter even more so, because we are told that the identifying mark of the spirit of the Antichrist is that he does not confess that Jesus came in the flesh (2 Jn. 7).

Today, the Man Christ Jesus (1 Tim. 2:5) is the "first born among many brothers" (our Elder Brother), and His Father is our Father too (Rom. 8:29; Jn. 20:17; Eph. 1:3; Heb. 2:11).

Jesus did not cease to be God when He came to earth (Jn.10:33). He did not cease to be Man when He went back to heaven (1 Tim.2:5).

The Truth Concerning Salvation

The word of God speaks of "salvation" in three tenses - past (Eph. 2:8), present (Phil. 2:12) and future (Rom. 13:11) - or in other words, of justification, sanctification and glorification.

Salvation has a foundation and a superstructure. The foundation is forgiveness of sins and justification.

Justification is more than the forgiveness of our sins. It also means that we have been declared righteous in God's eyes, on the basis of Christ's death, resurrection and ascension. This is not on the basis of our works (Eph. 2:8,9), for even our righteous deeds are like filthy rags in God's sight (Isa. 64:6). We are clothed with the righteousness of Christ (Gal. 3:27). Repentance and faith are the conditions for being forgiven and justified (Acts 20:21).

True repentance must produce in us the fruit of restitution - returning money, things and taxes due, that are wrongfully in our possession (that belongs to others), and apologising to those we have wronged, as far as possible (Lk. 19:8,9). When God forgives us, He also requires that we forgive others in the same way. If we fail to do this, God withdraws His forgiveness (Matt. 18:23-35).

Repentance and faith must be followed by baptism by immersion in water, whereby we publicly testify to God, to men and to demons that our old man is indeed buried (Rom. 6:4,6).

We can then receive the baptism in the Holy Spirit, whereby we are endued with power to be witnesses for Christ by our life and our lips (Acts 1:8). The baptism in the Holy Spirit is a promise to be received by faith, by all of God's children (Matt. 3:11; Lk. 11:13).

It is the privilege of every disciple to have the witness of the Spirit that he is indeed a child of God (Rom. 8:16) and also to know for certain that he has indeed received the Holy Spirit (Acts 19:2).

Sanctification is the superstructure of the building. Sanctification (meaning 'being set apart' from sin and the world) is a process that begins with the new birth (1 Cor. 1:2) and that should continue throughout our earthly life (1 Thess. 5:23,24). This is a work that God initiates in us through the Holy Spirit, writing His laws upon our hearts and minds; but we have to do our part, working out our salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12,13). It is we who are to put to death the deeds of the body through the power that the Spirit offers us (Rom. 8:13). It is we who have to cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and the spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God (2 Cor. 7:1).

Where a disciple is radical and wholehearted in cooperating with the Holy Spirit in this work, the work of sanctification will progress rapidly in his life. The work will obviously be slow or stagnant in the life of one whose response to the Spirit's leadings is sluggish.

It is in times of temptation that our wholeheartedness in desiring sanctification is truly tested.

To be sanctified is to have the righteousness of the law fulfilled inside our hearts - and not just externally as under the old covenant (Rom. 8:4). This was what Jesus emphasised in Matt. 5:17-48.

The law's requirements were summed up by Jesus as loving God wholeheartedly and loving our neighbour as ourselves (Matt. 22:36-40).

It is this law of love that God now seeks to write in our hearts, for that is His own nature (Heb. 8:10; 2 Pet. 1:4). The outward manifestation of this will be a life of victory over all conscious sin and of obedience to all of Jesus' commandments (Jn. 14:15).

It is impossible to enter into this life without first fulfilling the conditions of discipleship that Jesus laid down (Lk. 14:26-33). These are basically to give the Lord the first place above all our relatives and our Self-life and to be detached from all of one's material wealth and possessions.

This is the narrow gate that we have to go through first. Then comes the narrow way of sanctification. Those who do not pursue after sanctification will never see the Lord (Heb. 12:14).

While it is possible to be perfect in our conscience here and now (Heb. 7:19;9:9,14), it is not possible to be sinlessly perfect until we have a glorified body at Jesus' return (1 Jn. 3:2). We can be LIKE Him only then. But we must seek to WALK as He walked, even now (1 Jn. 2:6).

As long as we have this corruptible body, unconscious sin will be found in it, however much we may be sanctified (1 Jn. 1:8). But we can be perfect in our conscience (Acts 24:16) and be free from conscious sin (1 Jn.2:1a), even now, if we are wholehearted (1 Cor. 4:4).

Thus we wait for the second coming of Christ and for our glorification - the final part of our salvation, when we will become sinlessly perfect (Rom. 8:23; Phil. 3:21).

The Truth Concerning The Church

The church is the body of Christ. It has only one Head - Christ; and it has only one headquarters - the third heaven. In the body of Christ, every member has a function (Eph. 4:16). While some members may have a more important or visible ministry than others, every member has something valuable to contribute.

Christ has given to His church apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers to build His body (Eph. 4:11). These are ministries and not titles. Apostles are those called and sent by God to plant local churches. They have the first place in the church (1 Cor. 12:28) and are thus elders to the elders of the churches within their sphere (2 Cor.10:13). Prophets are those who uncover and minister to the hidden needs of God's people. Evangelists are those who are gifted to bring the heathen to Christ. They must then bring these converts into the local church, which is Christ's body. (Here is where a lot of modern evangelism fails). Shepherds are those who care for and guide the young lambs and sheep. Teachers are those who can explain the Scriptures and its doctrines. These five gifts are for the church worldwide; and from among them, shepherds are the mainstay of every local church. The other gifts can be itinerant (from other localities).

The leadership of the local church should be in the hands of elders. The New Testament clearly teaches this (Tit. 1:5; Acts 14:23). 'Elders', being plural, implies that there must be at least two in every church. A plurality of elders is necessary for a balance in the leadership of the local church and also for binding the activities of Satan through the power of the Lord's presence (as we read in Mt. 18:18-20).

One-man leadership of a church is contrary to the teaching of the New Testament. One among the elders may however be the 'messenger of the church' (Rev.2:1), if he is gifted with the Word.

Jesus forbade His disciples from having titles (Matt. 23:7-12). It is against the word of God therefore, to be called Rabbi, Father, Pastor, Reverend, or Leader. The title of 'Reverend', in fact, is used only for God in the Bible (Psa. 111:9 KJV); and one who uses it can be guilty like Lucifer, of wanting to be like God (Isa. 14:14). Everyone in the church, great or small, is to be just a brother and a servant.

The meetings of the local church must be open for all disciples to prophesy in (1 Cor. 14:26-40), unless it be a meeting for teaching (Acts 20:9,11) or prayer (Acts 12:5,12), or evangelism (Acts 2:14-40). The gift of prophesy must be desired by all who want to exercise it in the meetings (1 Cor. 14:1,39). The gift of tongues, although primarily meant for personal edification (1 Cor. 14:4,18,19), can also be exercised in the meetings of the church, but should always be followed by an interpretation (1 Cor. 14:27). The interpretation of a tongue can be a revelation, a word of knowledge, a prophecy, a teaching, or a prayer to God (1 Cor.14:2-6). All the gifts mentioned in 1 Cor. 12:8-10,28 and Rom. 12:6-8 are needed for the building up of the body of Christ. A church that despises or ignores the gifts of the Holy Spirit will never have them.

Women are permitted to pray and prophesy with their heads covered in the meetings, but they are not permitted to exercise authority or teach men (1Cor.11:5; 1Tim.2:12).

The church also has a responsibility to preach the good news by all means possible, to all whom it can reach, with the aim of making disciples of Christ in all nations (Mk. 16:15 with Matt. 28:19). Evangelism without disciple-making, however, is a hindrance to the testimony of Christ on earth.

Every local church must also proclaim the Lord's death through the 'breaking of bread' (1 Cor. 11:22-34). The frequency of this testimony is a matter on which the Word of God gives freedom to each church. But it must never be allowed to degenerate into an empty ritual.

Regarding offerings, God's Word is clear that it is wrong to receive money from unbelievers for God's work (3 Jn.7). Offerings must therefore not be taken in meetings where unbelievers are present. All giving by believers must also be voluntary and secret (2 Cor.9:7). It is wrong to send reports of the work to others, with the intention of obtaining money from them (even if such reports are called 'prayer letters').

The church can be unshakable only as it leads the disciples to the obedience of faith - to obedience to all of Jesus' commandments, particularly the ones listed in Matt. 5-7. The smallest commandments in the New Testament must also be obeyed and proclaimed with zeal. This is what makes a person great in God's eyes (Matt. 5:19).

There are many matters on which the New Testament is silent. In such matters we are not to be dogmatic but must give freedom to other disciples to hold their own convictions, while holding our own convictions firmly ourselves (Rom. 14:5).

It is easy to love those who see eye-to-eye with us in all matters. Our love is however tested by our attitude to those who disagree with us. God has not intended that all His children hold the same view on every minor point. Neither has He intended that every local church have the same external form in non-Scriptural matters. The glory of God is meant to be seen in a unity in the midst of diversity. Uniformity is man-made and brings spiritual death. God does not desire uniformity but unity.

Finally we must remember that the clearest mark of the disciples of Jesus is their love for one another (Jn. 13:35). Thus the church must seek to be one as the Father and the Son are one (Jn. 17:21).

All this, in a nutshell, is the truth that we must be firmly founded on.

We know that this is the truth, for it has liberated all those who have accepted it wholeheartedly (Jn.8:32)