

How to gain the truth

The truth is single. There is one source of absolute truth and that is the word of God, the Bible. There is one revealer of this source of truth and that is the Holy Spirit who leads the elect into the truth. There is one doctrine, and that is Biblical theology because the doctrines of the Bible are the reflection of the one true God. Since God cannot change or contradict himself, his revelation of truth is single; there are not multiple interpretations of what the Bible says, there is only one—that is, God's interpretation.

Since all this is undeniable, why is it then that the Christian church is so fragmented? Why do even good men differ on so much? Why are even cardinal doctrines disputed by various church factions?

The answer must be that there is more to gaining the truth than having a Bible and trusting God. Heretics claim to do this and still end up being deceived by demonic doctrines. Even theologians within the same denomination, who all trust God and believe in the authority of Scripture, argue over fine points of doctrine, sometimes with great vehemence.

Paul could tell his churches to all be of the same mind and to think the same thing, so unanimity of doctrine is possible—but modern people struggle to even consider that this could be the case.

There certainly seems to be something lacking in modern teachers that is hindering finding the truth according to God. What could these things be? This paper will try to find out.

A teacher must be a dependent man

A man's pride will bring him low, but the humble in spirit will retain honour.

[Prov 29:23](#)

Many of the hindrances to a person growing in knowledge of the truth stem from various factors originating in pride. A proud man will learn nothing. An aspect of pride is self-sufficiency; needing no one else. On the contrary, the growing theologian will be a totally dependent man; a person who feels that he desperately needs the Lord's help at all times in order to understand the truth. His continual prayer is for God to lead him into truth and he cannot read Scripture without asking for God to show him what it means. Even after many years of study and despite a reputation for wisdom, the dependant man is continually aware of his need for God to enlighten him.

The proud man, however, is satisfied in his own achievements. His knowledge is second-hand, resting on what he has read from others, and it is not the work of his own labour. Deep down in his heart there is no restless desire for the truth; no urgency to know God's attributes better. He only studies, as much as he has to, in order to further his position in the church; he is not like a miner searching for gold but like a merchant who purchases cheap gold trinkets in a shop. Such a man will never progress in the knowledge of God and will never be useful in the church. Sadly, there are many such men in the modern church.

A teacher must be a broken man

The LORD *is* near to those who have a broken heart.

[Ps 34:18](#)

The sacrifices of God *are* a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart -- these, O God, you will not despise.

[Ps 51:17](#)

A broken man has no problems with criticism. His chief aim is to find the truth and so any criticism that may point to a weakness is to be encouraged. Because he is broken and crucified he feels no threat in being criticised but rejoices that it may be an opportunity to progress in understanding. A broken man finds real joy when a friend points out an error in his thinking and he is able to modify his views and develop in knowledge. This may even involve a significant change of position that may require repentance and confession.

Proverbs tells us that iron sharpens iron and the development of knowledge through fellowship is an important feature in personal development.

However, an unbroken, un-crucified man does not behave like this. An unbroken man resists criticism and sets up psychological defences to prevent him having to change. Based on insecurity and weakness of character, this man cannot progress further in understanding because he will not allow himself to be wrong.

Thus we see that a broken spirit is necessary in order for further revelation (enlightenment) to take place. If a man is not crucified to himself, he will never understand theology properly.

Martin Luther once stated that his many sufferings were more important to him in understanding God than anything else. Broken men know this to be true. If one looks at the lives of the greatest men who brought truth to the church in hard times, one observes that the vast majority were those who knew deep sufferings in their lives; indeed most ministered in weakness and sickness. Some of the greatest servants were dead by the age of thirty and men like Calvin, Luther and Spurgeon were dead before their 60th birthday.

Broken men care nothing for themselves, not even for their reputation (which will be slandered if you are following the truth; this is certain); instead they work like a dying man to dying men. The ministry of God's word is the pivot of their life and the glory of God their only goal. At whatever cost to themselves they continue to minister the truth trusting that God will settle all accounts on the Last Day. If you do not have this spirit, if your reputation is too precious for you, you cannot progress far in getting revelation of God.

A teacher must work hard

There are no shortcuts to gaining knowledge and understanding; a theologian learns as a result of assiduous study. It is common amongst young believers, who have learned some doctrines and developed a system, to think that they now know everything; the joy of gaining a deep understanding of some Biblical teachings overwhelms them. However, the truth is that it takes many years to even have a basic balanced view of Scripture; learning more complex doctrines takes much longer. As we progress in our understanding of God, those we teach may think that we know a great deal but we ourselves know the truth; that is, that we are merely scratching the surface. The true theologian never stops learning.

Thus those who want to gain the truth need to allocate sufficient time to grow in knowledge and this means self-discipline and personal sacrifice.

A teacher learns from others but also thinks independently

Only a fool works in a vacuum; theologians must interact with other good interpreters of the truth. Regarding essentials, it is also crucial that theologians rest heavily on the confessional work of the church throughout the centuries; cardinal issues have been thrashed out by many great, godly men before us; any variation on these cannot be trusted. If someone comes up with new ideas about the two natures of Christ or the procession of the Spirit they are likely to be wrong. Modern teachers who try to unite antagonistic systems in the hope of unity, such as Calvinism and Arminianism in a foolishly titled Calminianism, merely show that they have not studied historic attempts to do this (Amyraldism) which have been refuted by sound theologians.

Also, odd theological conclusions, which derive from flawed exegesis of Scripture, must be rejected. This means that our studies of the text must be stringently checked by recourse to eminent Biblical scholarship in the form of commentaries. Good theology stems from accurate textual studies; these, in turn, need the support of specialist interpreters. Only a fool would ignore the evaluation of a certain passage from men who may have prepared for many years to write a sound commentary on a certain book. This is especially the case where the passage is based upon complex original language problems, which require philologist aid. Often dangerous teachings arise from wrongly interpreting passages of Scripture which are ably countermanded by academic commentaries. If there is a difficult Greek or Hebrew passage and I interpret this in a manner which gives rise to a novel doctrine, I would be a fool if I did not check the commentaries of men who had spent decades studying and teaching on the original text and whose work contradicted my interpretation for grammatical reasons. We do not need to re-invent the wheel; the scholarly work of great men who have gone before us should be consulted.

Having said all that, the teacher should always plough his own furrow and submit to his own conscience, having read widely and listened to many counsellors. It is no good simply trusting in the work of others without coming to conclusions for yourself; blind allegiance to a single teacher is worthless. The good teacher will question everything until he comes to a satisfactory state of conscience about all issues. If his conscience is truly submitted to God, then the Lord will guide the man into the truth.

This means that we must beware of thinking that we have arrived if we have spent three years in some sort of theological seminary. I continually come up against people who have been professionally trained in theology and yet possess the very minimal amount of Biblical understanding, or even historical understanding. Seminary is, at best, a basic preparation; but in many cases seminary is a hazard. Most of the errors around today first gained a lease of life in some seminary or other; some of the greatest heresies, such as Open Theism, Federal Vision or the New Perspective, were initiated by a seminary professor. In fact, many of the American seminaries are seed plots for compromise and error and cannot be recommended. The British ones are not much better; indeed most are very weak indeed. Formal theological training is not a guarantee of being effective in the truth.

Each new generation needs men who will come to conclusions on their own and interpret Biblical doctrine in ways that are appropriate for their age and will fight for the battles raging in their time. These will often be different from battles that occupied earlier generations. We do not need to fight old wars but give our people the truth that is relevant for them now. Thus we may often need a new sort of emphasis in theology and must always seek revelation from the Holy Spirit to guide us personally into the truth of Scripture. He will give us what we need now.

A teacher does not rely unwisely upon confessions

Following on from the last point we must mention the place of confessions.

I have stated that where the confessions, in unity, teach cardinal doctrines accurately they should be affirmed. There is little that has escaped the attention of confessions on cardinal theological questions over the centuries. Thus even those that differ on ecclesiology find agreement on cardinal doctrines: the Congregational Savoy Declaration and Cambridge Platform and the Baptist 1689 Confession agree and support the Presbyterian Westminster Confession on cardinal theological issues, but differ on ecclesiology. Thus great men from differing church backgrounds all agreed on the cardinal issues and to veer away from these would be great folly.

However, on secondary issues we have to be more humble and less audacious. Sadly, it is the case that this does not happen. Baptists call Presbyterians names and Presbyterians issues diatribes against Baptists. This is sinful behaviour; sinful attitudes will not lead people into more truth. Sectarianism brings a full-stop to doctrinal development; and this is where people who put too much trust in confessions fall apart.

We must come to agreement that ecclesiastic and sacramental matters in the confessions are secondary and should not cause sectarianism. Thus when you baptise a person must not cause division. How you baptise a person must not cause division. How you structure your church must not cause division. Church liturgy must not cause division. Church government variations should not cause division.

Now we can individually fight for the Biblical truth of these issues and criticise that which is wrong in our view, but we must never make these secondary issues a point of separation. We must maintain the unity of the Spirit despite the fact that one is a credobaptist and another is a paedobaptist. Presbyterians, independents and Baptists ought to fellowship as brothers.

Another problem is sticking completely to one set of creeds. Dutch Reformed Presbyterians (of which there are many in the USA) uphold the Three Forms of Unity (the Heidelberg Catechism, the canons of the Synod of Dort and the Belgic Confession) while other Reformed Presbyterians use the Westminster Confession. Sometimes there is severe antagonism between these two very similar streams. There are Reformed Baptists who affirm the First London Confession of 1644 while others adhere to the Second London Confession of 1689, which is founded more upon the Westminster Confession. Often these two streams are at war with each other. Yet other Strict Baptists only adhere to the Goatyard Confession and are at loggerheads with both of the previous Baptist streams. All of this is folly.

After the start of the Reformation, Reformed churches developed confession after confession after confession for a hundred years. Often national bodies adopted their own confession based

upon previous ones, such as the Belgic Confession for the Lowlands, the Helvetic confessions for Switzerland and the French confession written mainly by Calvin. Scotland had its own confession; Ireland had the Irish Articles; England had the 39 Articles and the Westminster Confession. There are many others. To say that one confession is correct and all the others are less worthy (or wrong) is folly.

This leads us to the point that confessions are not inspired and should not command the same loyalty as Scripture. People cause wars between Christian churches over the defence of a certain confession but Scripture commands that we receive each other and tolerate each other in love.

I have had people attack me for a certain view on the basis that I contravene their particular creed. Usually they completely ignore the argument in view, which they do not interact with, and instead simply attack my ecclesiology because it differs from their standard. Men who strongly affirm the authority of the Bible on the one hand, attack my position on independent house churches because it differs from their confession, even though it is unequivocally more Biblical. This is folly.

Loyalty to a certain confessional standard must not inhibit one's dependence upon the authority of Scripture and neither should it ruin fellowship in the body. If your defence of your creed leads you to compromise the unity of the Spirit or the final authority of Scripture, you will be deceived and not led into truth. The Spirit inspired Scripture; the Spirit also maintains the body of Christ—it is a unity in the Spirit. It is the Spirit who leads us into truth; if we deny Scripture, in upholding a wrong emphasis in a creed, or destroy the unity of the Spirit, by sectarian attitudes, we will be deceived. The Spirit will not support us in working against the very things that he upholds (Scripture and church unity).

A teacher learns from history

Although we must fight the current war, on many occasions this war is a repeat of a previous war. History not only shows us the eruption of false doctrines, nor just the way the church combated these heresies, but it shows us the fruit of these errors. When we observe how false teachings took hold in the past we can learn how this doctrine developed in communities and what ravages took place as a result. History reveals how errors affected generations of people: how families were split, children abused, individuals fleeced, churches destroyed, pastors losing their ministry, nations misguided and so on.

There is no doubt that those who ignore history will find that they repeat the mistakes of history. On the one hand we see the revival of heresies in the same form as the historic version (such as Arminianism), but we also see the original error masquerading as something else in a new form. Thus the modern New Age variety of mystical errors in interfaith churches is a similar resurgence to ancient Gnosticism.

We also see aberrations arise that emanate from a false religion which are not specifically taught but which, nevertheless, clearly arise from a similar false root. Thus many of the symptoms and signs of radical Charismaticism (such as the Toronto Experience variety) closely equate to the signs found in Hindu Kundalini yoga. If you press the same mystical buttons you will get the same mystical results, whatever the name of your religion. Knowledge of the effects of the occult in historic religions helps us to be aware of the dangers of certain techniques, such as inculcating

passivity and suggestibility in an audience softened up by ambient music. Charismatics were not taught about Kundalini yoga as something to be desired, but the methods used by radical Word Faith preachers exactly equated to the disciplines of Hindu mystics. The result was occult deception outworked in mystical symptoms brought about by the loss of self-control and rationality. Another example is the historic case of mesmerism and hypnotism which exactly correlates to the effects of suggestibility in Charismatic healings; the Charismatic version is nothing new at all but a repeat using the same hypnotic methods. This has been proved by an unbeliever masquerading as a Charismatic preacher who was able to replicate Charismatic healings, even in the street to passers by.¹ We should learn from history.

A teacher must persevere

Some truths are easier to understand than others are. Those truths which require deep study are usually the ones that people give up on. Thus I find that even experienced preachers of the truth have subjects which they just do not understand at all; they tried and eventually gave up. Well the true theologian does not give up, even if it takes him years to finally grasp a subject. He just keeps hammering on and one until one day it finally dawns on him. If you give up you will never progress.

I studied the doctrine of sanctification for forty years. For most of those years I could speak on the subject with a degree of authority and could explain most aspects; but there were parts of the doctrine which just did not make sense to me, especially in its relationship to certain other doctrines. It was only after forty plus years that the truth finally dawned on me and my understanding of the doctrines became well-rounded. This is not to say that there are not aspects which I have yet to understand.

Now when I look at other studies on sanctification I observe that the theologian involved also does not understand it properly; sometimes they will even admit this. Aspects that I consider to be crucial are ignored altogether; usually this is the result of following some denominational bias. When I read some honest expositors on this subject (such as AW Pink) I find that they had a very similar experience. Only those who persevere get to fully grasp the doctrine.

Perseverance is different to assiduous study. It is a refusal to let go until you have really understood what is going on. It is a dogged determination to get to the root of a thing and gain control of it. This spirit of determination to understand everything is behind all good teachers.

A close relationship with God

We have hinted at this in a couple of the points already, but it is worth emphasising. The true teacher is one who has a deep, close, intimate, continual relationship with God.

There are those preachers who love God, who serve the church, who study the Bible to a degree for sermon preparation and who pray formally every morning in their short devotions. But these fail to grasp the truth about God and do not progress in doctrinal understanding; they merely parrot the systematic doctrines they were taught somewhere. In fact, often, such men are preoccupied with the administrative affairs of running the church and personal development in grace is not a priority issue. This is not the way to grow in knowledge.²

The good teacher is one whose relationship with God is closer than that with his wife. He pours his heart out to the Lord every day and clings to him for support on every issue. It is the ardent

desire of such a teacher to really know God's character better and better, and to probe his mysteries. Like the Lord Jesus, this teacher does not simply want to educate people in a dead dogmatic way; he wants people to know God better for themselves and teaches truths that will help people understand God's attributes.

Often he will deal with an abstract piece of teaching, or combat an error, by explaining how this relates to God and what changes it makes to the doctrine of God. For instance: in teaching about the dangers of Arminianism he not only explains why it is unbiblical, but he also shows how it misrepresents God. Arminianism destroys or perverts almost every attribute of God and thus it is not only a false Gospel, but the God of Arminianism is a false god. Many other errors blaspheme God in a similar way.

Thus dealing with doctrines is closely related to the teacher's understanding about God, and this comes from his growing relationship with God.

Further than this, the example of the Lord Jesus himself is much more than merely taking a series of doctrines and teaching them to certain people. The job of the teacher is to actually represent God the Father to men on earth. Thus Jesus could say:

Then Jesus answered and said to them, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of himself, but what he sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner.'

[Jn 5:19](#)

'I can of myself do nothing. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is righteous, because I do not seek my own will but the will of the Father who sent me.'

[Jn 5:30](#)

Then Jesus said to them, 'When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am *He*, and *that* I do nothing of myself; but as my Father taught me, I speak these things. And He who sent me is with me. The Father has not left me alone, for I always do those things that please Him.'

[Jn 8:28-29](#)

For I have not spoken on my own *authority*; but the Father who sent me gave me a command, what I should say and what I should speak. And I know that His command is everlasting life. Therefore, whatever I speak, just as the Father has told me, so I speak.

[Jn 12:49-50](#)

Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on my own *authority*; but the Father who dwells in me does the works.

[Jn 14:10](#)

Now some Reformed have formalised this and teach that whenever a preacher in their denomination preaches, it is the voice of Christ to the church, no matter what he says. Clearly this is nonsense since many preachers have taught errors. We cannot formalise this matter. To do so is to preach Roman Catholicism, that the authority of Jesus lies in the office, no matter who is in that office.

But what we see in John's Gospel ought to be the highest goal for genuine teachers in the church—to do what the Father is doing and say what the Father is saying by the Spirit of Christ. Now we will never be able to do this perfectly like the Lord, but the closer our relationship to God, the more we will be in accord with God. Obviously this matter rests upon a dependent attitude, but also with a submissive spirit that seeks to do the will of another and not my own.

It also requires faith. Such faith is not like Charismatic 'faith' which is based upon producing material things such as physical healings or money, but is a faith that knows God and knows what God is doing. There are few in history that evidence such faith. Yet this faith is crucial to knowing what to teach a congregation.

Every time the local church meets there is an agenda set by God; there are things that God wants that congregation to learn that day. There are things that God wants to teach them so that they will be prepared for the trials of the week to come. The teacher in that church needs to know these things so that he can encourage and edify the church. Now simply sticking to a pre-ordered, prepared message on a selected subject will not be able to comply with what God wants. The preacher must be adaptable and ready to speak on what God desires. This is a danger with prepared ministry for the Sunday meeting, something Scripture says nothing about at all. In fact even Calvin did not use notes in his main expositions.³

When Paul travelled to the various planted churches, he spoke what they needed to know and he discerned this when he got there. He did not prepare a really professional speech with exquisite illustrations that he spouted time after time; he spoke right into the needs of that church in extempore fashion based upon his personal knowledge of truth and his close relationship with God. This sort of teaching is largely ignored today.⁴ We can even see that their letters to the churches are not carefully prepared, pre-planned theses, but are really letters to friends. The letters go off on tangents, they digress, they forget source references (OT and secular), they suddenly address individuals, and they issue commands. The letters arise from the relationship of the apostle to the church and from the relationship of the apostle to God.

Teaching must arise from a relationship to God and be based upon relationship to the people. It is not a means of self-promotion by virtue of a professional lecture; it is not a bunch of sound-bites; it is not a jocular entertainment; it is an edifying message from God suited to the needs of the church at that time. This is prophetic ministry—teaching from Scripture that is relevant, powerful and spiritual. Such ministry only appears when the teacher is very close to God and hears what God is saying.

Conclusion

There is more to learning the truth than being a Christian, studying the Bible and reading a systematic theology. Learning the truth has more to do with character than anything else. Only truly godly people will really learn the truth as God holds it. The key issue is having a deep and close relationship with God and being absolutely dependent upon him for power to edify. May God multiply such men.

For with You is the fountain of life; in Your light we see light. [Ps 36:9](#)

Footnotes

1 As evidenced in a TV expose by Derren Brown in 2011.

2 I could add here that the normal structure, governance and administration of the church actively work against both the leaders and the people growing in knowledge. Everybody is too busy keeping the organisation going, maintaining the church building, encouraging financial giving to unbiblical features, organising meetings, fighting 'fires', keeping spinning plates in the air and so forth. Having small churches meeting as a family in a home with plural elders avoids all this.

3 Teaching formal doctrines does require preparation and this sort of ministry ought to be done in a separate meeting mid week. In fact, this is the place where long discussions, questions and give away fact sheets are also necessary.

4 Another problem with carefully prepared Sunday sermons is that they are so professional that they put off young men from seeking to minister. They feel that they could never aspire to such professional lecturing. Worse still when western preachers go to a foreign mission field with six carefully prepared messages that they have preached several times. They speak with such liberty and authority and professionalism that the poor church members are aghast at how professional and out of reach such messages are to them. Thus they become dependent upon the visits of these men (which bolster the pride of the preachers) and do not develop as they ought.