

How Do You Know What's True and Right?

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From Confusion to Clarity

Ephesians 4:14-19

There is a podcast called “Tales from the Rabbit Hole”. It’s run by a guy who had a website for years where he debunked conspiracy theories. He decided that he might be more successful in changing people’s minds if he had conversations with conspiracy theorists rather than just dismantle their argument. So, in the podcast he interviews cult members, UFO investigators, flat-earth believers, the 9/11 hoax community – they believe that it was explosives from the American government or Israel that brought down the World Trade Center, QAnon people. All these folks who have gone down the rabbit hole.

And he interviews their family members – spouses, children, parents – who have been affected, who are close to those who went down the rabbit hole. It typically starts with somebody doing online research, watching a YouTube video and then another video that links them to an entire, all-encompassing, conspiratorial worldview.

Perhaps you’ve heard the conspiracy theory that the COVID-19 pandemic is part of a strategy conceived by global elites like Bill Gates to roll out vaccines with tracking chips in them. These tracking chips are activated by 5G technology so that every one of your movements will be tracked by the government. When you try to argue with one of these conspiracy theorists that Bill Gates was not behind the COVID pandemic and he’s not putting microchips in vaccines, they have 50 YouTube videos to tell you why you’re being duped.

Or maybe you heard about the conspiracy theory which said that COVID was actually being spread by 5G technology. In England, people who believe this, actually burned down 70 cell phone towers to stop the spread of COVID. The Prime Minister had to appeal to people saying that there’s no truth in this. But, of course, he was part of the conspiracy.

Alex Jones, the radio host who often fuels many of these conspiracy theories, falsely claimed that the yogurt maker, Chobani, which employs refugees, had been caught bringing in migrant rapists to rape children in America. In the lawsuit brought against him by Chobani, Jones was forced to admit that this was entirely a lie. But it damaged Chobani’s reputation.

A QAnon believer, the folks who think that there is a child sex trafficking, Satan worshipping ring run by deep state operatives – all part of a much larger conspiracy –

wrote to me a few days ago, pleading with me to talk about QAnon and let people know the truth about what's going on.

There are people running for Congress who espouse these conspiracy theories. Millions of ordinary Americans, including some of you who are listening to me right now, have embraced at least one of these theories. Surveys indicate that many conspiracy theorists, including the QAnon person who wrote me, claim to be Bible-believing Christians.

If you are a follower of Jesus, if you claim to believe that the Bible is the Word of God, then truth matters to you. Or at least, it should matter to you. After all, the word truth is used 224 times in the Bible. Claims of truth show up everywhere in the Scriptures. There are verses like this:

Slide John 8:31-32

³¹To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. ³²Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

And we read Jesus' famous words in

Slide John 14:6

⁶Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

The Apostle Paul says this in

Slide 1 Timothy 2:3-4

³This is good, and pleases God our Savior, ⁴who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

The Apostle Paul further says that the last days will be characterized by the very thing we are currently experiencing.

Slide 2 Timothy 4:3-4

³For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. ⁴They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.

We live in a world filled not only with conspiracy theories, but in a world where no matter what you say, somebody can immediately look online and find 10 counter arguments or 20 videos contending for exactly the opposite perspective. So, how do we know what's true? How do we know what's right? Today I'm going to finish up our

series that we called “From Confusion to Clarity”. And my message is simply titled “How do you know what’s true and right?”

There are typical approaches to finding what is true.

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Typical approaches to determine what’s true

There are several very good, non-partisan fact-checking sites. One of the most famous is the Pulitzer Prize winning Politifact

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Politifact.com

It’s run by a non-profit organization from the Poynter Institute in St. Petersburg, Florida. It began as a project of the Pulitzer Prize winning *Tampa Bay Times*. Their ratings range from True (for completely accurate political statements) to Pants on Fire (for false and ludicrous claims).

Another good political fact-check organization is FactCheck.org

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Factcheck.org

It’s a project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania.

If you hear a claim like millions of undocumented immigrants voted in the last election, you could just fact check that at a nonpartisan fact check site. Or if you hear a non-political claim that seems fantastic like cell phone towers are spreading COVID, you can go to the website snopes.com. This is a great source for debunking myths and urban legends.

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Snopes.com

Listen, conspiracy theories and myths are passed around by really well-intentioned people. I just had a pastor of a local church write to me with incredibly spurious medical claims supposedly promoted by a medical expert. I immediately went to Snopes and sent him a link. I said, “Listen, you’re not a doctor and neither am I. You shouldn’t be handing out medical advice. Before you pass this on any further, you might want to investigate this claim. Here’s what Snopes says about it.”

The problem is, that while these fact check sites are useful when it comes to checking a claim like “Bill Gates is trying to inject tracking devices in COVID vaccines,” what the fact

check sites can't do is answer the really big and important questions of life like "How I live a good and meaningful life?" or "How can I ensure that my life will count for something?" or "How can I become the kind of person I have always wanted to be?" or "What are the values I should be teaching my children?" You can't find answers to questions about the meaning of life or what values you should have on a fact check site.

So how do you determine what's true, what's right regarding the bigger questions of life? Here's what the Apostle Paul says in

Slide Ephesians 4:14-21

¹⁴Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

¹⁷So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. ¹⁸They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. ¹⁹Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed.

²⁰That, however, is not the way of life you learned ²¹when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus.

It's interesting to me that when Paul speaks about not being deceived and holding onto the truth, he does so in the context of teaching about Christian community. And this is a remarkably contemporary insight into how we all determine what is true in life. Better than doing your own internet research. Better than listening to the pundits or the people giving hot takes on the news.

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Better approaches to determine what's true

If we're trying to figure out answers to the big questions of life: What kind of people are we going to be? Whose opinions should we pay attention to? What values should we hold? The Apostle Paul would say to us what he said to the Ephesians nearly 2,000 years ago. He would say, "If you're trying to determine what is true and right, first of all, choose your community wisely."

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Choose your community wisely

Again, the context for all of this discussion in vv. 14-21 about the truth and holding onto the truth and not being pushed around by every teaching and conspiracy theory and all

of that is Christian community, the church. Scripture teaches that the community that we choose for ourselves will shape our values and our beliefs. You always need to ask yourself what is the community that I'm a part of doing to my soul? As a result of being part of this community, what is happening to me? Am I becoming a better person? A kinder person? A more joyful person? A more grace-filled person? Or am I becoming an angrier person? A more anxious, fearful person? More paranoid? More filled with rage? The community that you choose, the community that you listen to, will shape your values and your beliefs.

Of course, a person's chosen community these days could be your online community – your Facebook community or Reddit. If you fill your heart and mind all day with social media from certain type of people then your values, your beliefs and attitudes will be shaped by that. So we Christians always need to pause and ask ourselves – what is this political or religious or social group that I'm part of doing to my soul? Am I becoming more peaceful or more full of rage? More welcoming or more critical? More tender-hearted or more hard-hearted? Paul says to choose your community wisely.

Let me just bring this down. If you go online, you can read lots of stories about people who deconverted from Christianity to atheism. You know, the typical story is "I was raised in a Christian home, but now I no longer believe and here are my reasons." Very often the deconversion story is about how a fundamentalist Christian was confronted with the facts of science or some intellectual argument, they could no longer deny. There was a really honest from a former self-declared evangelical Christian who deconverted that really caught my attention.

A guy named David said he moved from a small conservative town to New York City. Over a period of time, he lost his faith and deconverted. What got me about his post was that it was way more self-aware and honest than many atheistic bloggers. He said that in the past the way he would have told this story is that he'd done all this serious reading and considered all the intellectual arguments and that's why I'm no longer a Christian. But he said the explanation was simpler! He joined a different community. He was no longer part of a church. Instead, he got involved with a group of friends who were all atheists. He said that the more connected he became to this new group the more he found his viewpoints changing.

That's the deal. When you consider the kind of person you want to be in five years or ten years: Do you want to be a kind person? Do you want to be more welcoming of people who don't look like you? Do you want to be more racist or less racist? Do you want to be faithful to your commitments or more of a cheat? Do you want to be a truth teller or a liar? Do you want to be more wrapped up in the pursuit of money or more generous? Do you want to be more concerned about your home decoration or more concerned about children in need? Who you will become depends upon the community you choose to be part of. Choose your community wisely!

Second, if you want to determine what is true and right, the Apostle Paul says

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Stop being a baby

Slide Ephesians 4:14-15

¹⁴Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.

Obviously, according to Jesus, we're to be like children in some ways. We're to imitate children's trust. Their ability to give themselves unreservedly. And, in our case, to give ourselves unreservedly to trusting God. We're to imitate children's innocence and their humility.

But there are other ways that we've got to stop being babies. Paul speaks about some of the negative qualities of children. He says that

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Babies tend to be unstable

Paul says that infants are like the waves tossed back and forth. Children change their opinions easily. They have no settled convictions. You know you're dealing with an immature person if the person changes their opinion based on the last conversation they had or the last thing they read or the last thing they heard on TV. A mature person has deep convictions. They are committed to a lifetime of learning. It's not that they never change, but they don't change easily, blowing with the wind. They put roots down. If they're a Christian, they put their roots down deep in the Word of God. They hold onto what's true even if it's unpopular at the moment.

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Babies tend to love excitement

Just think of church today. The issue for many people is not "is the message true?" or "does it line up with God's Word?" or in worship, "was I touching God?" The issue for a spiritual baby is not truth – rather, it's "was the service exciting?" "Did the speaker make me want to jump up and down?" "Was there a really cool light show?" The immature don't care about truth. They're not asking, "Am I being challenged to grow as a Christian? Am I being stretched? Does this teacher push me out of my comfort zone?" "Does this message make me love Jesus more?" Instead, babies love excitement!

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Babies tend to be easily deceived

Slide Ephesians 4:14

¹⁴ Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming.

Immature people tend to easily fall prey to every con artist, every charlatan. Virtually every book in the New Testament warns us about the threat of deception. In the text we read last week, here's what Jesus said in Matthew 24:

Slide Matthew 24:23-26

²³ At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Messiah!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it. ²⁴ For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. ²⁵ See, I have told you ahead of time.

²⁶ "So if anyone tells you, 'There he is, out in the wilderness,' do not go out; or, 'Here he is, in the inner rooms,' do not believe it.

The great temptation during crisis – during a pandemic, during a war, during economic crisis, during social unrest – is to blindly follow some self-proclaimed savior who promises to rescue everyone. "I will fix everything. Follow me, I'll save you!"

You ask, "How could someone be taken in by a person like Hitler? Or a Stalin? Or a Mao?" Students of leadership frequently talk about a toxic triangle of deception that involves three elements.

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Toxic triangle

We need a dangerous leader, but we also need a crisis environment – maybe a pandemic, an economic depression, a war, something that makes people really afraid – and here's the third thing you need, susceptible followers. Followers who are able to be deceived. Jesus warns us. He says,

Let me ask you a question, brothers and sisters, how can you protect yourself from being conned? How can you protect yourself from being taken in by every snake oil salesman, every slick politician or conspiracy theorists or YouTube videos? How can you determine what is true and what is right?

The Apostle Paul says this:

Slide Ephesians 4:17-19

¹⁷ So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. ¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding

and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts.¹⁹ Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed.

Paul provides us with a deep analysis of why we're open to certain kinds of arguments and closed to others. Have you ever talked with someone and presented them with some evidence and you think that evidence will convince them, that any reasonable or rational person looking at the evidence would see it in a certain way? But it didn't convince them at all. They just dug in even more! Paul says that the issue of determining what is true and what is right is not just a matter of the intellect. Yes, there is a problem in thinking. There's a certain futility in their thinking. Paul says that people are darkened in their understanding. There's a mist that lies over the mind that can only be blown away by the Holy Spirit. But he says that the deeper problem is not intellectual. And it won't be solved by better statistics or stronger arguments. It's a problem of the heart.

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Pay attention to your heart!

Slide Ephesians 4:18

¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts.

The inability to listen to perspectives other than the one we already hold is rooted in the hardening of our hearts. This word for "hardening" is an interesting one in Greek. It's the Greek word:

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Porosis = a kind of rock that is harder than marble

Paul traces our intellectual problems, our problems with figuring out what is true down to our hearts which are harder than marble. Medical doctors in Paul's day used this word *porosis* to describe calcium buildup in people's joints. Jesus calls this condition of the heart the hardened path or the stony ground. The Bible frequently points to the condition of our hearts regarding why it is that we won't accept the truth about something. This is 2,000 years before Freud taught us that the reason we do what we do is not just based upon conscious choices or the intellect. Our choices spring from something deeper – what Freud called the unconscious and what the Bible calls the heart!

Let me drop this down as I close today – what protects you and me from being deceived is not the truth we know but the truth we love! The Apostle Paul says this in

Slide 2 Thessalonians 2:10b, 11

They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. ¹¹ For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie

The issue is not how much information you have in your head, but what I've called for years "the inclination of your heart". As a pastor, that's what I always care about shaping – your hearts. I know that any argument I offer can be immediately challenged by six counter-arguments. The question we must always ask ourselves is why are we inclined to embrace certain arguments? Why are we disinclined to embrace others?

Again, the issue is not primarily what information we possess, but what we love that determines our destinies – what kind of people we are and what kind of people we will become.

If you're a person who loves the truth – about yourself, about your flaws and your strengths, about your family, about big issues like race or our country – or small issues like whether you're a good listener or too self-protective or whatever – if you're a person who loves the truth even if it's really uncomfortable to hear or unpleasant, or it's different than what you grew up with or it will cost you dearly then you will receive more truth and still more truth! But if you're a person whose heart is hard to the truth – because it threatens you or some personal interest of yours, or your group – than even the truth you have, Jesus says, will be taken away!

Set your heart on loving the truth in every area even if it comes from unlikely sources! Be someone who loves the truth and always wants more truth! How do you determine what's true and right? Choose your community wisely! Don't be a baby! Love the truth!

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From Confusion to Clarity

Ephesians 4:14-19

- I. Typical approaches to determine what's true
- II. Better approaches to determine what's true
 - A. Choose your community wisely
 - B. Stop being a baby
 - 1. Babies tend to be unstable
 - 2. Babies tend to love excitement
 - 3. Babies tend to be easily deceived
- III. Pay attention to your heart!