

## In Pursuit of Truth

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People were talking about Him everywhere. They whispered His name in the market place, families discussed Him at the dinner table, women drawing water at the well shared stories about Him, and religious teachers discussed and ridiculed His teachings. Everywhere Jesus went, crowds gathered. It was as if an unseen force was propelling the masses to investigate the rumors, to see for themselves the Man everyone was talking about.

In every village and town Jesus visited, people saw the sick grasp His garment and be healed, heard His voice command the lame to walk and watched His touch bring sight to the blind. Now, rumors were beginning to circulate throughout Israel that He had fed 5,000 men (who knows how many more women and children) by simply blessing five loaves of bread and two fish! Many began to ask: "Is this man a Prophet or could He be the promised Messiah?"

Questions like this enraged the religious teachers of the Jewish faith. Some of their best theologians questioned Jesus on numerous occasions, but His quick reply always made them look like fools. When they confronted him, the Man would never give a simple answer . . . He always spoke in confusing parables.

Most of Israel's religious and political leaders did not know what to make of this commoner turned teacher. He certainly seemed to lack respect for the customs of the church and disdain its leaders. The whole situation was beginning to get out-of-hand.

People were beginning to follow Him from town to town, saying He was John the Baptist reincarnated. Others thought He might be Elijah, while still others claimed He was, at the very least, a prophet.

Something had to be done. So, a select group of Pharisees and teachers of the law were sent from Jerusalem to gather evidence that would, hopefully, discredit Him among the people. Soon, this educated group of men had what they were looking for.

They approached Jesus and asked: "**Why don't your disciples live according to the traditions of the elders instead of eating food with `unclean' hands?**" (The rules of the Jewish faith required members to give their hands a "ceremonial" washing, before eating food.) Jesus' answer went straight to the heart of the matter. "**He replied, `Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: `These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.' `You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.' And he said to them: `You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!'"** (Mark 7:6-9)

You can imagine how shocked the religious leaders must have been at Jesus' rebuke. The Bible does not share with us the leader's response, but it would be easy to imagine them saying

something like: "How dare you! Who do you think you are? Do you know who we are? You don't even have a theology degree and yet you dare to explain the Scriptures to us?" Regardless of what their retort might have been, Jesus made it radiantly clear that following church traditions does not necessarily equal true worship.

It is easy to criticize those religious scholars, who taught and clarified The Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms (what we call the Old Testament) for the Jewish nation. Remember, when they challenged Jesus, they always used the Law of Moses to support their statements. So, how did these "standard-bearers" get so far off the high-road? Regrettably, in spite of their Scriptural knowledge, they lost sight of its Author.

They had become *spiritually dull* and did not recognize the Holy Spirit's verification of the One who stood before them. How lamentable that they did not *know* the great **I AM**, the very One who spoke to Moses at the burning bush and on Mt. Sinai. It truly is an oxymoron (a sharp contradiction) that these religious leaders held Moses in such high esteem, yet

Jesus mournfully said of them: "**O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.**" (Matthew 23:37)

These traditionally, educated men, considered Jesus a radical. His teachings extended beyond the confines of their religious doctrines and challenged their well-defined paradigms. Jesus stood outside their time honored traditions, saying: "**I am the way and the truth and the life.**" (John 14:6)

Although Jesus labored diligently to expand their spiritual legacy and open their minds to new, unfolding truth, they stubbornly rejected it. Spiritually blind, they could not comprehend the truth of Jesus' words: "**Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.**" (Matthew 5:17)

The Israelite nation had a strong ethnic heritage coupled with spiritual pride. They constantly referred to Abraham as the Father of their nation. John the Baptist identified this as a barrier to spiritual growth and said to those who had gathered at the Jordan River: "**You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.**" (Luke 3:7)

Unfortunately, traditions are hard to change.

Even the Jews who believed Jesus defended this strong national heritage. However, when Jesus challenged their cherished belief that a person must be a Jew to be considered one of Abraham's children, their feelings toward Him changed abruptly.

Jesus said: "**I know you are Abraham's descendants. Yet you are ready to kill me, because you have no room for my word . . . . 'Abraham is our father,' they answered. 'If you were Abraham's children,' said Jesus, 'then you would do the things Abraham did.'**"

(John 8:37,39)

Human nature tends to give us an illusion that we have reached a higher plateau than our forefathers. We consider ourselves as somewhat better than the Jews and are sure we would never make the same mistakes.

When people discuss the antediluvians and the flood that destroyed the world, it is amusing that most individuals believe that they would have been *within* the ark. What kind of odds do you think existed at that time, to be one of eight people who survived one in 100,000 or perhaps one in a million?

Lest we become too critical of Israel's educated leaders, we need to be sure we have not fallen into the same gutter, even though it may be along a superhighway of the 20th century. Let me assure you, Satan is no fool.

Actually, human nature has changed little over the centuries and if anything, we are more similar to the Jewish nation than we realize. If Satan was so successful in using traditions and spiritual pride as a stumbling stone for the nation of Israel, he will use it again, and very effectively, with Earth's last generation.

To be sure, the Pharisees and Sadducees were caught up in defending their Jewish heritage and faith, but we should be cautious not to become too critical of their behavior: **"You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things."** (Romans 2:1)

We need to use this information introspectively, as "lessons learned," rather than shaking our heads in disgust at the Jewish nation for their lack of spiritual insight. If the truth were known, 20th century Christians wrestle with the same issues, only they are disguised in modern colloquialism.

Today, we create many artificial barriers that limit our spiritual growth and our effectiveness as we witness for Jesus Christ. Recently, there has been a worldwide trend to return to cultural roots. While this, in and of itself, may be healthy, human beings have a hard time distinguishing between ethnic diversity and being part of the human race.

It does not matter what part of the world you live in, wars based on ethnic and cultural diversity are raging, causing great chasms of ill-will between people. Satan capitalizes on differences. He presents them as insurmountable barriers which fan the flames of hate between race and culture.

Satan's goal in perpetuating this kind of rhetoric is to slow down the progress of the gospel and keep people from experiencing the unity that comes as a natural result of *true* spiritual growth. Paul reminds us: **"Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit just as you were called to one hope when you were called one**

**Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." (Ephesians 4:2-6)**

Further, our attitudes bear a strong resemblance to our spiritual forefathers in another way. We separate people by erecting another barrier called denominationalism. Individuals staunchly defend church traditions, creeds and dogmas simply because they belong to that particular organization.

Some people would debate this conclusion, stating that it is not a matter of whether you belong or not, but that their study has led them to agree with the core teachings of a particular denomination. However, researchers tell us that less than ten percent of individuals ever change their religious orientation from which they were raised during childhood. This statistic seems to indicate that people have developed a habit, rather than study for themselves what is found in God's word.

Recently, however, CNN (Cable News Network) reported that this trend seems to be changing. There appears to be a grass roots movement building where people are beginning to challenge their church leaders regarding Bible truth. Perhaps this new phenomenon is due to the tremendous amount of study materials readily available in religious bookstores.

A diligent Bible student now has access to computer/CD ROM Bible helps, Bible commentaries, Hebrew/Greek study Bibles, concordances, etc. Now, with the development of the Internet, people literally have access to some of the greatest libraries in the world.

Is the availability of all this information coincidental? I hardly think so. I personally believe this information wave is Holy Spirit driven. God is propelling people to pursue Truth. Why? The world's population is about to experience the most catastrophic events ever to take place on planet Earth God is about to break His silence. (Matthew 24:21)

Every human being on Earth will be faced with one simple decision: Who is the authority in my life?

This is a serious question and our eternal destiny lies in our answer.

People throughout the world have many religious authority figures church patriarchs, prophets, Popes, Ayatollahs, ministers, etc. Paul wrestled with the same issues when he wrote his first letter to the Corinth church. Paul states: **"I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, 'I follow Paul'; another, 'I follow Apollos'; another, 'I follow Cephas'; still another, 'I follow Christ.' Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?"** (1 Corinthians 1:10-13)

Satan has effectively used differing theological opinions to impair the gospel's growth. In fact, some of the most diabolical acts done to human beings down through the ages have been

performed in the name of God. Nothing has changed. Today we continue to argue and debate, spewing hateful words at one another, simply over theological differences.

Satan continues to lead us with upturned noses down the path of spiritual pride. How unlike Jesus' example. His life radiated compassion and His words were like balm to a bleeding soul. It is interesting to note that Jesus saved his harshest rebukes for those who thought they knew all the truth.

Paul understood that **"Salvation is found in no One else, for there is no other Name under Heaven given to men by which we must be saved."** (Acts 4:12) Truly, the foundation of the believer's faith is Jesus Christ!

The believer may search for doctrine because Jesus Christ said it and taught it. However, Paul did not say, "I know in *what* I have believed," but rather, "I know in *whom* I have believed."

I know that I have taken a great risk by discussing these issues so candidly. Some people will read this article and assume that I am against denominations. This is not true, so please do not say that Wake Up America Seminars is calling for people to leave their churches! Nothing could be further from the truth.

However, we must be careful not to fall into the same trap as the religious leaders of Jesus' day. These men had stopped searching for truth.

They were quite content with the body of information they had received from their forefathers. Time is too short to pursue anything but a relationship with Jesus and Truth as it is revealed by the Holy Spirit through diligent Bible study.

It is imperative that we take our spiritual temperature by asking a few simple questions. With a prayerful attitude and an open mind, ponder the following questions: Whom or what am I defending? Am I passionate in my pursuit of truth and in my defense of Jesus? Do I spend most of my time talking about theology and church, or do I concentrate my discussion on Jesus?

A pastor recently made this statement: *I belong to my particular church because it represents to me the closest thing to the New Testament church I have found. If I ever find a church that represents Jesus Christ better, I will not hesitate to leave my church in pursuit of Truth.*

Very few pastors would be brave enough to say such a radical statement. I am sure the religious leaders of Jesus' day would not have liked it either. But, I honestly wonder how Jesus views it.

So, who is your spiritual authority? Be careful! A truthful answer may cause you to have an episode of spiritual indigestion.