

“A Humble Plea for Intellectual Honesty and Authenticity among the People of God:
A Key to Unlocking Dialogue with a World that has not acknowledged Jesus as the
Messiah”

by
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“The mark of a civilized man is his willingness to re-examine his most cherished beliefs.”
– Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes

Introduction

There is an epidemic in the world today. People are not open to the possibility of being in error. They hold their beliefs within a clenched fist, unwilling and therefore unable to see possible errors in their respective ideologies. It is not until individuals are willing to place their beliefs on the chopping block of critical scrutiny and rigorous examination that error can be hacked in half and tossed in the fire of falsehood, and truth can be given an opportunity to prove and demonstrate its ability to withstand the fiercest strike. As people of God, we should be the ones who set the bar high for this type of radical intellectual integrity. As genuine truth seekers, we need not be afraid of placing our beliefs to the test or allowing them to be challenged. If our beliefs are well founded, they will be reinforced and strengthened. Conversely, if our beliefs are shown to be weak and faulty, in so far as truth is our objective, we will be thankful to see the errors in our own thinking, thus freeing us to search afresh for what is true, right, and of God. When the world sees a people striving to be responsible thinkers, open to critique, reasonable, reverent, and painfully honest, they will be more willing to lend their ears to consider the kingdom we proclaim and the Messiah we follow.

A Deplorable State of Affairs

People have been beaten, bashed and battered for centuries by religious zealots, who are utterly unreasonable. Cornering passers-by, forcing undesired conversations, and bullying people with Bible passages is one of traditional Christianity's unfortunate fortes, or so it seems. Many unchurched people wince when they are confronted with this type of evangelist who has all of life's answers contained within a couple of pre-packaged trite little answers. These people are often overly simplistic and many times err on the side of presumption rather than caution.

Dangerous Dispositions Derived From Intellectual Dishonesty: Despicable Dogma

There are two common dangerous dispositions of those who lack intellectual honesty and authenticity: unwarranted dogmatism and indifferent apathy. The dogmatic mindset typically comes when individuals think that they possess absolute truth without question. This attitude that breeds false assurance is commonly displayed by those who think that there is no benefit in reading or studying opposing viewpoints because it would be a waste of time when one already possesses the truth. These people have not allowed themselves the possibility of being wrong. A spirit of arrogance can easily overtake those who are overly confident that truth, in its purest form, is in their custody. Trying to have a constructive

conversation with such a rigid, inflexible, and usually assertive person is undesirable and often disparaging.

Anesthetic Apathy

Apathy is found among those who do not care to stretch their intellectual muscles and are content to leave honest reflection and challenging of one's own perspectives to the scholars. Indifferent persons are susceptible to inadvertently believing whatever worldview and ideology their upbringing granted them, whether these beliefs are based on reality or not. Since such individuals do not care one way or the other, they will always remain the same, be that for better or worse. Although this may seem harmless, we must realize that there is often a link between the person who is not interested in deep, concentrated religious reflection, and those who are generally uninterested in the political sphere. Un-educated, ill-informed minds inevitably leads to a dumbing down and deterioration of our entire society and leaves us vulnerable to any and all who would take advantage of our ignorance. It takes diligence and time to think through and seek out answers, but then again, it is only those who seek that find according to Jesus.

Stumbling Blocks to Intellectual Honesty: Warped Worldviews

It is often the case that unchurched people protest that a certain brainwashing seems to have taken place to their acquaintances, friends, and loved ones after they begin attending church on a regular basis. The truth, more times than not, is that they are correct. Most people who frequent a church tend to gradually cease to think for themselves, and begin to rely on what they are being told by their leaders. Unfortunately, a large portion of this is due to the fact that many church attendees see the words and teachings that come from the pulpit as words and teachings coming more or less directly from the mouth of God. When congregants believe that their pastors and leaders are "filling in for God," they automatically believe, accept, and proclaim the messages and so called "truths" that descend from the pulpit. This conceptual framework produces staunch followers who have an uncompromising, unwavering devotion to their particular denomination, their particular church, and their particular leaders. It's not difficult to see why when considering their view of reality.

Presumptuous Pastors

A primary reason many congregants have this conception is because their pastors wake up on Sunday mornings convinced, or possibly self-deluded with the belief that the message they will bring to their congregation was brought to them directly by God via God's spirit that week in their study. Although some would not claim they have this immediate contact with God, they commonly word their experience with language that often leads others to believe that this is the case. When articulate and passionate men (or women) stand high above the pews in the pews, their lofty position in the pulpit alone appeals and appears to demand adherence to and acceptance of whatever is pontificated from on high. The sociological nature of pulpit preaching is intrinsically mentally deflating for the learner. By sitting below the teacher, intellectual submission is inherent from the get-go. Even though this is not always intended, or deliberate, many church leaders give off the aura that they are God's

spokespersons and that what they teach is, indeed, the bona fide word of God. The idea is propagated that anyone who disagrees with the authoritative Sunday morning teaching is disagreeing with the Bible, the church, and ultimately with God. This overly simplistic and often presumptuous mode of thinking is then transferred to the congregation and internalized. People with this mindset then begin to dominate conversations they have with others. All too commonly attached to this phenomenon is a rigid dogmatism that displays itself in an unwillingness to honestly listen and genuinely consider other people's points of view. And why should they, when they possess God's absolute truth! When one is utterly convinced that what one possess is "the truth of the matter," the exercise of serious thought is unnecessary and essentially a waste of time. Debate, dialogue, and discussion are discarded and replaced with unquestioned and unqualified dogma.

Insufficient Integrity

Sadly, many pastors and teachers are not even-handed when it comes to interpreting Scripture. There ought to be an acknowledgement, especially by teachers of the Bible, that ancient texts can often be interpreted in more than one way.¹ Many times it is not tenable to speak in terms of certainties, but rather probabilities and possibilities. The best Bible commentaries provide multiple translation and interpretation options and then give reasons why one particular understanding may be more viable than others. When legitimate alternative understandings of a given text are slighted, overlooked, or simply ignored, the impression is given to the learner that there is only one interpretation and understanding. The problem then becomes highlighted when students of different teachers come in contact with one another. Both students believe they possess the one and only true interpretation, yet each one embraces a conflicting viewpoint. Students then typically reason that their theological counterpart is either not filled with God's spirit, or is not saved at all since he rejects what the Bible is "really" teaching. When a modern reader looks at a text written 2000-3500 years earlier, there are many gaps that need to be bridged in order to comprehend the intended meaning. Many times, even after attempting to bridge each gap of language, culture, geography, and presuppositions, the interpretation of a text still remains in the realm of possibility rather than certainty.

The Big Question

This leads us to the question that must be asked, "Who is the divine interpreter of Scripture?" It should be obvious to everyone that each of the approximately 34,000² different self-proposed Christian denominations has a different conception, idea, and understanding of Scripture. Has God chosen one denomination to entrust "rightly interpreted" revelation? Do the Baptists have a monopoly on God's truth? Do the Assemblies of God churches receive special revelation from God that perfectly interprets each passage of Scripture for them? Does non-denominationalism have control of God's final word to the world? When this thought is contemplated by those who are serious about knowing "the truth" on any given issue, it can become quite overwhelming if looking for fast

¹ That there is debate and difficulty in knowing the original intent of parts of the Constitution written approximately 200 years ago should give us reservation concerning texts that are literally thousands of years old.

² <<http://www.sltrib.com/2001/May/05192001/Saturday/98497.htm>>. Accessed February 26, 2005.

and easy answers. Our society is used to food in seconds at drive through windows, meals in minutes with microwaves, news flashes, and fifteen-minute Jiffy Lube oil changes. Time, effort, mental fortitude, and collaboration are desperately needed to sort this out.

Do I think some denominations have a better understanding and interpretation of the nature of man and the final punishment of the wicked? Yes. Do I believe that Jesus' words about the Kingdom of God are best understood in the context of the Abrahamic promise, which includes real land on earth, literal human beings, and a real ruler? Surely! Even though I use hyperbolic language to communicate, this in no way means I have a perfect understanding of these things, or can't improve, progress, revise my views, or even be wrong altogether.

The Smooth Road Mentality

Another stumbling block to intellectual honesty and authenticity is a supreme desire to keep one's life stable and secure. Many people would rather remain ignorant or hold onto what they are use to and comfortable with in order to keep their life simple and without obstruction. Being fair with opposing viewpoints sometimes means that the strongholds of ideas are weakened, resulting in an undesired agony of uncertainty. I can remember constructing a castle of theology that was later torn down by sincere questions raised against my very seriously held beliefs. I finally realized that many of my beliefs were based on the idea that, if the Bible were interpreted verse-by-verse with careful exposition, utilizing cultural background and original language, then the true interpretation would always emerge. The knowledge that there were many equally scholarly and educated teachers of the Bible who disagreed with one another opened my mind to a world of interpretive options and theological humility. What originally began as a modification of one doctrine, ended up with a complete re-examination of my entire belief system. This process is natural and healthy, as people will only mentally mature by responsibly thinking through their childhood constructs. Even now, I continue to see myself in a process of self-examination, continuing to be self-critical of my ideas, beliefs, and perspectives. When others appear cool, collected, and extremely confident, it can be quite disconcerting, but the knowledge that we ought to be true and fair with the information at our disposal overwhelms any desire to make bold statements beyond what integrity will require.

Having a compelling desire to have strong convictions on doctrine, many shy away from fully pursuing honest reflection upon their own beliefs. Although ignorance is bliss, it is not a virtue. The end result of committing to intellectual honesty is a more honorable, humble, discerning, and biblically aligned people than otherwise. Those who diligently and earnestly seek God are rewarded by God; and I'm convinced that seeking God excludes believing ill-supported dogma and includes being honest with oneself and others.

Tradition, Pride, and Psychological Pitfalls

In American politics, most people who are born into a Republican tradition desire to die upholding that same party line. Conversely, people who are born into the Democratic viewpoint usually go to the grave fighting for Democratic ideas in which they were reared. It is easy to allow the pride of defending a particular tradition to become a part of one's identity. When a person's identity is wrapped up in representing a particular viewpoint, it becomes all the more difficult, if not impossible for that person to deviate or change his or

her position. Allowing one's political theory and supposition to be open to critique may lead the proponent to new or alternative proposals. Different and varied beliefs lead to new labels that may disrupt the pre-constructed and tenaciously maintained images. Losing one's identity can lead to haunting psychological problems that are only completely resolved when one's identity is re-established as a truth seeker, rather than any particular viewpoint.

These problems are intensely compounded when it invades the ranks of religion. People are usually initiated into their religion as babies, confirmed in their teenage years, and solidified to their faith/denomination in adulthood with marriage and the raising of children. When one changes their religious ideas, they are at times forsaken by their friends and families altogether. In switching theological positions, they make themselves vulnerable to cold, indifferent, and suspicious looks. They sometimes are no longer welcome to worship at the same church or be apart of the "in" group at social functions and get-togethers. They may even be completely disowned! For these reasons and others, religious ideas are often held out of the reach of rational scrutiny. It is easy to see how if upholding and preserving continuity with one's family tradition or political/religious heritage is the greatest priority, then honest reflection and assessing other viewpoints with integrity takes the back seat.

Rejecting Reason

Besides, many people have accepted the dichotomy between faith and reason. Many are convinced that only harm can come from applying logic and reason to their faith. Faith according to the religious masses allows them to hold contradictory ideas. When questioned about these contradictions, appeal is often made to divine mystery, or it is said that some things are just, "above reason". This is supremely unfortunate given that reason is the only God given tool we have for making sense of the data that we have at our disposal, be that from the natural world, or ancient texts (in our case Scripture). If we are unable to reject a proposition based on its being contradictory, we have no basis to accept or reject any information as being valid or invalid. If we reject reason, we will be left with no other tool to distinguish right from wrong, good from bad, true versus false, God from Satan. Those who are lauded for having great faith in the Bible based their faith (trust in God's promises) on their reason. Their consideration of God's trustworthiness and faithfulness lead them to trust his promises for the future. This did not involve accepting contradictions or taking a leap of blind trust. In fact, it would seem that God would not see favorably those who don't have strong reasons for trusting the individuals they do.

Based on the injunction to love God with all one's being, I am persuaded that God expects us to utilize our minds and think sincerely about the information with which we are presented throughout life. Religious ideas and viewpoints are not exempted. The faith of Jesus was rooted in the recorded history of ancient Israel, which demonstrated God's faithfulness to his covenant. In the New Testament, one difference between those who accepted Jesus as the awaited Messiah and those who did not is that the former took the time and effort to reasonably consider the lowly peasant-like, non-official teachings of Jesus with the intention of the possibility of learning insightful truth and doing that which was necessary to gain entrance into God's kingdom. The latter did not follow the same honorable pattern because the proposed messiahship of Jesus posed a threat to their religious-political power and prestige in the community. These hearers were not interested in the truth, but in keeping their status stable and secure.

Constraining Circumstances

One last stumbling block to intellectual honesty is the love of money. Many people who work in the religious world are dependent on the income they receive from the ministry. Most of the time, those who work for churches or teach in religious institutions are obliged to sign doctrinal statements that bind them to the doctrines delineated by those institutions. These statements are sometimes exceedingly comprehensive and doctrinally detailed. I can remember professors at my college who seemed hesitant, to say the least, to allowing themselves to critically evaluate objections when it came to issues that were spelled out in the statement; which sadly covered almost everything. If my professors had deviated in the slightest from the doctrines to which they affixed their contractual signature, they would have been promptly released from the institution, resulting in no job, no students, and no money to support their family. I do not think that there is any intrinsic fault with “faith statements,” but these typically broad and all-inclusive binding circumstances can easily hinder and restrain teachers from being completely free and ultimately fair and honest with strong arguments that challenge their positions. Since most of these men and women possess their dream job – getting paid to teach Scripture to students who are motivated to learn – being denied this opportunity by a small doctrinal change is akin to being exiled from the U.S for committing an arbitrary traffic violation. It is easy to see how financial attachment to an institution can have an adverse affect upon authentic thought and a true assessment of facts.

Self-Reflection

We need to be candid about the current situation in which we find ourselves. We are where we are and we believe what we do because we were either born into our beliefs, or we have had conversations, read various articles, books, and pamphlets which convinced us and led us to the conclusions we hold. For many, there has been a combination of the preceding elements. Acknowledging this reality should stir up in us a distinctive humility concerning our perspectives. I don’t believe that I have access to Jesus the way the disciples and apostles did.³ I have not had God whisper into my ear the answers to any of the theological questions I have wrestled with over the years.⁴ My beliefs are the outcome of my upbringing and many hours of reading, studying, and dialogue.⁵

Intellectually Honest Habits:

³ This paper presupposes that the certainty of our convictions should be based on the reliable historical documents that relay the genuine proclamation and testimony of those who were not only eyewitnesses but also interacted with the resurrected immortalized man, Jesus of Nazareth (Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:21,22; 1 John 1:1-3).

⁴ This does not mean that I have not prayed fervently for clarification, truth, insight, wisdom, and knowledge.

⁵ Frankly, the leisure of spending time reading and studying for extended hours is foreign to the common man, throughout most of history. First of all, only since the 15th century have books become widely available to the common man via the printing press. Secondly, people have typically spent their time trying to survive: hunting, building, cooking, farming, gathering, and raising children. Lastly, only in recent history have study tools – including Bible lexicons, commentaries, and technical exegetical and hermeneutical books written by scholars – been available to help in the pursuit of finding the original intent of ancient texts.

Abandon Haughtiness

One of my mentors once said that we should share the gospel with the attitude that we are nothing more than one beggar showing another beggar where to find bread. We were once empty-handed and in mortal need and now we believe we have found something of immeasurable value, not the least of which is the promise of immortality. We are merely recipients and benefactors of the gift we now possess. We should be grateful and consider it a privilege to share with the world the jewels of truth that we have come across in our search for treasure. Condescending attitudes must depart as they are unbecoming, incongruous, and assassinate constructive conversation. Who wants to discuss and listen to people who think and act as if they are the greatest things since Frappuccinos? Recognizing that we are infinitesimally small in comparison to an immeasurable universe and can be wiped off the map by any number of natural disasters, any semblance of haughtiness that hinders productive dialogue about God is foolish.

Demolish the Double Standard

Why should we expect the general population to listen to us if we refuse to listen to them? We expect Muslims to consider the compelling evidence that the New Testament provides concerning the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross, yet rarely do we take the time to read the Koran or consider the Islamic claim that it is God's revelation. We expect Jewish persons, those entrusted by God as recipients and keepers of God's revelation, to hear how Jesus fits into God's plan for the restoration of all things, yet rarely take time to seriously listen to the objections raised as to the validity of his proposed messiahship. It's as if only we have something to say and nothing to learn. If we request that others authentically listen to us, we can at least do the same for them. Who knows how much we may learn?

Acknowledge Sound Arguments

Debates are typically composed of people who are in the business of winning arguments and putting on a show – entertainment a tad more civilized than the Roman Gladiators. Often enough, neither party is interested in sincerely and genuinely listening to the other position being presented, thus disabling themselves from being able to see possible mistakes or miscalculations with their own viewpoint.⁶ Rarely do we hear a debating contestant concede a valid argument by saying, “That is a good point; I’ll have to think about that some more and get back to you.” Statements of like nature would demonstrate that truth is the objective rather than preservation of an ego or a personally held doctrinal view. It is imperative that we develop and practice this listening skill on a regular basis.

Read Widely, Purposefully, and Often

A healthy life habit for those striving to be intellectually honest is to read widely, purposefully, and often. People typically read books that build up and strengthen the positions that they already possess, but scarcely are people found who actually read and fairly

⁶ If the debate is in front of the public, it could be argued that the purpose is not for the proponents to convince each other, but to display opposing arguments with the intention of allowing the audience to decide which case is stronger.

consider the best-written books with which they disagree. Reading opposing viewpoints will either lessen the force with which one currently holds current perspectives or it will strengthen present ideas by having a firsthand opportunity to see that the strongest argument that an ideological opponent possesses is still found to be weak or otherwise unsound. Reading alternative theories and proposals in opposition to current convictions is a benchmark that demarcates an authentic desire to learn. Another reason for reading broadly is that history teaches us that the truth is not always apparent and obvious but oftentimes elusive. Many times revolution was based on ideas that were scorned, quenched, and kept from the public's perusal. Pamphlets were banned and many times burned so that those desperately needed ideas and proposals of freedom would be unavailable and eventually forgotten. Often, valuable books that contain minority opinions are not circulating among the mainstream, but are left without funding and therefore lack large readership.⁷

Thinking on the Edge

We need each other to tackle the hard issues. What should be our basis of fellowship that will consequently unite us? How do we know if an ancient text contains truth from God, about God, or is just another person's opinion? What criteria do we use to distinguish our interpretation of Scripture from the actual "authoritative" meaning of Scripture? Should the truth of the matter be that these questions are unimportant and unnecessary altogether as our lives may be more productive without these stumbling blocks? Should we concede that we are better off leaving these questions unanswered for the present time? Is it tenable that God is supremely more concerned about our respect and love toward others than God is on our contemplation of these theoretical questions? Maybe such questions hinder true progress. But are these not the issues that require the most honest thought and reflection?

May the Revolution Begin!

When we talk to people about God and Jesus there should be a transparent authenticity. We should not be seen as people who have their heads stuck in the sand. We should not stuff cotton in our ears when opposing viewpoints are presented or our own viewpoints are challenged. We should not be ashamed to admit that we do not have all the answers, because good answers are not always easy to find. We should be seen as people who are eager to live with integrity, allowing our consciences to be persuaded by what is most convincing, even if that means losing money, jobs, friends, and family. Our desire to honor God even if we are unsure exactly how to do so, should be visible and translucent. We should be known as people who are hungry and thirsty for truth and willing to suffer the consequences for living out that truth. We should be distinct from others because we are attempting to be honest with evidence, even when it calls into question our present beliefs. We should be willing to bring our truths under the light of intellectual scrutiny because we are convinced that they will hold strong when not only thoroughly but also fairly evaluated. On the contrary, we must be willing to change our views if they do not withstand meticulous investigation. In the end, this sort of revolutionary intellectual integrity will attract the

⁷ This is especially true for books on Conditional Immortality. Many of the best-written books on the subject were by men in the 1800's. These books have been unpublished for decades and are now beginning to gain an audience though photocopied manuscripts and E-books available on the Internet.

world's attention. People will be drawn into dialogue concerning the kingdom we eagerly expect and the man from Nazareth whom we follow as the long-awaited Messiah.

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