
A Checklist for Truth



Message by Pastor Tom, Interim Lead Pastor
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Scripture Passage 1 John 4:1-6
Vancouver Chinese Baptist Church Vancouver, Canada



When people today go looking for a church, if in fact they ever do, they often have a check list of good and valid questions. Such questions as

What are the facilities like for toddlers and children?

What programs do you have for young people?

What do you have for young adults?

What kind of music do you sing?

Is there parking?

What do you do for the homeless, street people?

What is your position on social issues such as abortion and homosexuality?

These are all legitimate questions. But there is a question often missing. One that hardly anyone seems to ask today. That question is – what does your church believe? What do you teach? The reason why his question is often missing is because our cultural climate provides the context for mixed and opposing opinions to what truth is.

Here are some headings to help us understand the spiritual and philosophical climate in which we live.

PRAGMATISM sees truth as whatever works. In pragmatism truth inevitably becomes relative. There is no absolute truth. We assign a positive value to whatever works, and whatever works is better and therefore right. It is a kind of ethical Darwinism, the survival of the fittest.

The real crucial conflict between Christianity and pragmatism is a conflict between on the one hand what is right and true, and on the other hand what is simply expedient, what works. The principle spokesman for pragmatism is a man in the Gospels called Caiaphas. He said “it is expedient [pragmatic] for one man to die for the good of the nation” the issue of right and wrong was not considered. Just do what the job demands, and forget about the ethics.

PLURALISM Under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Canada defines itself as a pluralistic nation, a mosaic of cultures and religions in which one should not be allowed to impose one set of beliefs over others. Truth is seen as a smorgasbord.

So no single truth that overarches everything, rather there many truths. Some of them conflicting with each other, that sort of jostle and bump against each other, and

yet try to manage to live together under the same roof.

Yet within this pluralistic mosaic, there are tendencies that run counter to the current of true pluralism. There is a strong urging towards a monolithic culture which is one of uniformity and neutrality.

So in pluralism, absolutes are a threat because they present convictions. Convictions are quickly equated with prejudices. Facing this social pressure, Christian distinctives are forced to conform and fit into religious neutrality.

This double sided-emphasis of both diversity and uniformity means that the Christian truth no longer has a place of privilege in culture. It has to find its feet in the rough and tumble of the market place of ideas.

For many people, the Christian gospel is seen as just one of many voices, its message is part of the religious cafeteria that people visit.

MODERNISM is a period in history, running perhaps about 200 years from 1750 to 1950. Science and knowledge became supreme. It gave birth to the spirit of humanism, in which people could live without God and without the reality of the spiritual universe. Reality was

whatever you would prove, see, touch, examine. Humanism had little or no place for the world of the spiritual or the supernatural. Humanism gave us what Os Guinness called a striptease. It offered us everything and gave us nothing. Its drive for economic satisfaction and material happiness did not satisfy quest of the human heart for a spiritual reality.

But we are moving out of modernism into a different climate, the mood of postmodernism, which simply means after-modernism.

POSTMODERNISM this is the title given to the spirit of the age in which we now find ourselves.

One of the bright spots in this milieu is the recovery of an interest in and a desire for spirituality.

The good news is that today we are finding a new interest in spirituality. Spirituality is not only permissible. It is popular, and spirituality is a big seller. It makes money. It sells books. It welcomes guests on Oprah. It makes best-sellers out of people like Deepak Chopra. It gives centre stage to a best selling book and an entire industry called *The Secret*. Its slogan is a new era for humankind.

It seems that people are hungry for anyone who has something new or fresh to say.

This new spiritual hunger is good news. It is also bad news.

With the demise of Christendom, the objective data that people used to have to determine and evaluate truth has changed. Truth is now shaped and determined on the basis of pragmatism, relativism and pluralism.

In the demise of Christendom, the steady abandonment of the Christian faith as the moorings of society has left people with empty and hungry spirits.

G K Chesterton said

“When man stops believing in God, he no longer believes in nothing, he now believes in anything.”

We need to take some of the responsibility for this as Christians for two reasons.

1. Christians have often succumbed to a lazy attitude towards the faith. Our knowledge of our faith is often fuzzy and less than it should be. Christians cannot afford to be intellectually lazy!

A Gallup Poll in 2000 asked people questions about the Bible. Here are a few of their responses.

When asked who preached the Sermon on the Mount, only half of the people knew. Others suggested it was Billy Graham. Some others said Martin Luther King.

75% of the people said the saying, God helps those who help themselves, was in the Bible.

10% said that Noah’s wife was called Joan of Arc.

8% said that Moses was one of the 12 apostles.

2. Also, we have to confess that orthodox doctrine and biblical teaching has not always led to Christians living changed lives in the power of the Spirit. We have not always seen the marriage of the truth of God and the transforming power of God in our lives. Christian ethics are sadly often no different than anyone else’s ethics.

The Church simply will not and cannot survive in the future. Perhaps no more than ten years or so. If Christians do not know their own Bible and if their lives are not substantially different because of Christ. Without this substantive change, the ark that once saved us will become the Titanic!

So What is truth?

This is the same question that Pilate asked the crowd at the trial of Jesus.

1st John 4:1-6 is a critical passage for us. It presents us with the challenge of asking how a passage will be stamped with truth in the midst of conflicting spiritual voices today. It addresses one of the three tests which John develops in his short letter. This is the doctrinal test.

1 John 4

1 Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

2 This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God,

3 but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.

4 You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.

5 They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them.

6 We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.

It begins with a strong warning, do not believe every spirit. There are a lot of voices out there that will confuse and bewilder you.

Test the spirits. Test, this is the word for testing metals, putting this under the heat and seeing what level of purity they really have.

1 Thessalonians 5:21 gives us the same challenge.

"Test everything. Hold on to what is good." We cannot afford to be either gullible or closed-minded.

What kind of grid should we have in our minds, a checklist, that we can use to put truth against? Without that, we have neither the ability nor the competence to sift truth from error.

This challenge is not just for people seeking truth. This is also a challenge for Christians. I continue to be amazed at what some Christians swallow and follow. We are warned about this.

2 Timothy 4

3 For the time will come when men 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.

4 They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.

Here are 7 characteristics of a truthful message. The need is to keep all seven in focus.

Test #1

Does this message lead me to love God more?

Deuteronomy 13:1-3

1 If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a miraculous sign or wonder,

2 and if the sign or wonder of which he has spoken takes place, and he says, "Let us follow other gods" (gods you have not known) "and let us worship them,"

3 you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. The LORD your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul.

Christian truth is rooted in the belief that there is only one God and that we are called to love Him with all our hearts and minds and souls. This is called the Shema. (Duet 6).

Jesus says that this is the first and greatest commandment—to love God.

So the starting test for truth is simply, is what I am listening to, what I am following going to move me closer to loving God more, serving God more, or in some way that I will need to see with discernment and insight, may this teaching lead me down a road that will really take me away from God?

Test #2

Does this message affirm the fullness of Jesus?

1st John 4:2 says that a truthful message agrees with the truth that "Jesus Christ has come in the flesh."

This is because the person of Jesus Christ is the touchstone of truth or error. The most critical question we can ask about truth is, what does this say about Jesus, who he is?

John is challenging the dualistic nature of gnosticism which separated the spiritual and the physical. In the person of Jesus, this division is ended.

Colossians 2:9

For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.

Christian truth is founded on the basis that Jesus is fully God, fully man and that he existed in eternity with the Father. This is not something that the Jehovah's Witnesses can accept. They believe that Jesus was a created being, and that there was a time in which he did not exist. Their teaching fails the test.

This also means that much of the new age teaching about Christ-consciousness fails the test. The truth of the Incarnation which we celebrate at Christmas is the ultimate yardstick against which we will measure everything.

But the tests regarding Christ do not stop there.

Test #3

Does this message ask me to yield to Christ as Lord?

When Paul wrote to the church in the city of Corinth, he was writing to a church that had to sort out false spirits from genuine or authentic spirits. They knew the reality of a false charismatic spirit and an authentic charismatic spirit.

1 Corinthians 12

1 Now about spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant.

2 You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to mute idols.

3 Therefore I tell you that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus be cursed," and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit.

A truthful message is one that will move men and women to bring their lives under the authority and lordship of Jesus Christ. In a time when there is a great emphasis and some confusion about the role of the Holy Spirit, we need to remember the teaching of Jesus.

John 16:13-14

But when He, the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth and he shall glorify me..."

The true Spirit affirms and supports the work of Christ in us.

We need to ask, if I follow this teaching, will that lead me closer to knowing and experiencing the truth that Jesus Christ is Lord of my life? If I follow this teaching, will this lead me closer to the place

where I find that I bow my will and bend my knee before Him?

Test #4

Is this teaching consistent with the tapestry of God's Word?

The Scriptures teach a lot of things, and to understand them properly, you have to keep them in a delicate balance and tension with one another. Most heresy begins as truth which is taken out of context, magnified and enlarged out of all proportion to its original meaning and intent. The fragile tapestry of the Word of God is broken.

We need to understand that there are what I call, large truths, great themes of God, redemption, salvation, grace, and then there are smaller truths. The smaller truths have to nest within the teaching and emphasis of the larger truths, and when we allow the smaller truths to dominate, the real message will quickly become distorted and out of context.

People will argue that what they are teaching is in the Bible. That may be true. The words may be in the Bible, but they are taking the truth out of context and distorting its meaning.

Not everything in Scripture has to be read and followed with equal weight. When we follow the demands of Scripture, we need to understand how it

applies. Nothing will lead us astray, with greater speed but also greater danger, when we major on the minors.

Test #5

Does this teaching echo the consensus of Christian history and the Christian community?

One of traits of our modern culture is individualism. When we bring this spirit of individualism into our spiritual lives. We teach people in Bible study to ask, what does this passage of Scripture mean to **ME**? That sounds good but it tends to have little sense of communal accountability.

Truth is not a commodity of individual interpretation or experience. Truth sits in the midst of the whole people of God.

This means that we need to look backwards and ask, how has the church, the whole church in history, thought about this passage, this truth? This retrospective question is critical. Truth has walked a lot of miles and we would be grossly negligent if we ignored how the church in history has handled the issues of truth and faith.

The second thing is that truth needs to be weighed in the midst of community, discussed in community, prayed about in community, practiced in

community. This cuts across the individualism that we are used to living in.

2 Peter 1:20-21

You must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation."

It does not mean that we arrive at truth by voting on what we believe. Truth is not democratic, but truth that comes from God also resides in the midst of fellowship.

Test #6

Does this teaching bind me or set free me?

Jesus says (John 8:32) "we will know the truth and the truth will set us free.

Richard Foster:

"Somehow the human spirit has the extraordinary knack of taking the best teaching and turning it to the worst ends. Nothing can put people in bondage like religion."

Here are some things to watch for:

- teaching that tries to get you to follow what another person wants you to do
- teaching that tries to replace the grace of God with rules.

Truth will demand of us more than religion would ever dare to ask. It will call us to follow a deeper law. The law written on the heart.

Test #7

How does truth change how people behave?

We get the idea for this test in the way in which John talks about "us" and "them". There are two different audiences. We can test the spirit and the truthfulness of a message not only by examining its content, but also by examining its audience. What kind of people does this message and truth produce?

Sometimes you will hear people say, what we believe is not that important, what is really important is relationships, that people care for and love one another. Yes we are committed to growing a people who will love one another, but who also need to know the truth.

Truth sifts and sorts the people who respond to it. People who know truth as we find it in Jesus must, they must live substantially changed lives because of truth. Knowing truth demands nothing less!

We need to ask every Sunday, when we dismiss you, what kind of people are we sending out Vancouver Chinese Baptist

Church into the streets of Vancouver? What message have they heard? Has it been a truthful message? And how will that message be lived out this week?

The reason is most people today will not open a Bible and read the message of God's love, but God is giving them a bible, a Bible that lives, breathes, walks and talks, our lives.

This is exactly the picture Paul draws for us.

2 Cor 3:3

3 You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

Postscript:

We have been talking about these tests as though truth was simply a pile of information, a list of beliefs, a collection of data that you simply check off on your checklist.

The impression is that if you can go down the checklist, saying YES to each one, then what you believe is the truth.

That falls far far short. It is that, but it is so much more!

Embracing the truth is not just an intellectual checklist. It is coming to intimately know and fall in love with a person, whose name is Jesus!

When you take bread and wine this morning, know that you are being nourished by the One who is truth.