

EQTH105 Basic Bible Doctrine

Unit 6b How Do We Know?

Presented by the



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Hello and welcome back. We are now in the second lesson of the last unit in our study of basic Christian doctrine. And perhaps it's time to ask the question, "How do we know?" The very word doctrine means truth. And it's a fair question to ask, "What is the truth?" In fact, Jesus was asked the very same question when he was on trial. The story is in the 18th chapter of Luke [sic John 18:37]. The Scripture says, "Then You are a king!" Pilate said. "You say that I am a king," Jesus answered. "For this reason I was born and have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to My voice." "What is truth?" Pilate asked.

The irony of that question has always amazed me. Here Pilate was looking truth right in the face, asking "What is truth?" He didn't know or want to admit that Jesus is truth. Earlier, the apostle Thomas asked the same question. In John 14:5, he basically asks, "Lord, how can we know?" and Jesus answered, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." Jesus said, "I am the truth." This whole course is about truth and what we know and how we can know it. The term revelation used in the context of Scripture and doctrine means God's disclosure of truth. More specifically, revelation means God disclosing to humanity truths we would not otherwise know. Human beings could not find out these truths for themselves. It refers to God giving truth to humanity. This is the idea behind the term revelation.

For example, when Peter confessed Jesus as the Messiah or the Christ, Jesus told Peter that his confession was something that was divinely revealed to him. It was not something that he concluded on his own. We can read this in Matthew when Jesus asked, "Who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven." [Mat 16:15-17] This understanding by Peter as to Jesus' identity did not come from any human source, but rather was the result of God's revelation to Peter through the Spirit. It was divinely disclosed.

Divine inspiration refers to the recording of God's truth. It means that God prevented the writers from recording error when they wrote the various parts of Scripture. All the things they recorded are accurate. The words were actually said, and the events actually happened. Revelation therefore is concerned with the giving of truth, while divine inspiration refers to the recording of truth. It is important that we understand the difference. And this brings us to an important point. The Bible is divinely inspired, but not every word was divinely revealed. Divine inspiration does not always imply revelation. To put it another way, we should not necessarily assume that everything in Scripture has been divinely revealed by God. For example, Moses was divinely inspired by God to record events that he himself witnessed. These events were the actual source of his knowledge on the subject. He saw them. The subject matter was not beyond human knowledge but was there for any observer, including Moses, to record. However, the interpretation of the meaning of the event could only come from God. He alone explained the significance of what occurred.

We also have to distinguish between certain words of Scripture and the faithful recording of them. There are statements in the Bible that are lies, yet the lies are correctly recorded. The statements are not given by divine revelation. The devil, for example, was certainly not speaking for God when he made the various statements in the Bible that are attributed to him. Jesus told the religious leaders of his day that they were of their father, the devil. The devil is someone who lies whenever he speaks. Jesus said, “You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.” [John 8:44] Another translation of this reads this way: “Your father is the devil, and you do exactly what he wants. He has always been a murderer and a liar. There is nothing truthful about him. He speaks on his own, and everything he says is a lie. Not only is he a liar himself, but he is also the father of lies.” Now, the devil lies every time that he speaks, yet the devil’s words are recorded in Scripture. This is because the Bible records what actually happened. But that does not mean that those words that Satan said were inspired by God. He did that on his own. So Scripture reveals inspiration.

It also reveals illumination. Perhaps there is something in Scripture that needs to be emphasized or explained. In the New Testament, the word revelation sometimes refers to what is known as illumination. As an example, Paul wrote the following to the Ephesians: “I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you spiritual wisdom and revelation in your growing knowledge of him—since the eyes of your heart have been enlightened—so that you may know what is the hope of his calling, what is the wealth of his glorious inheritance in the saints.” [Eph 1:17-18] Paul wanted the Ephesians to gain spiritual wisdom in revelation, illumination, in their knowledge of Christ. Revelation in this context refers to what we call illumination, the ability to understand the truths that God has already revealed. Human beings are not able to impart divine revelation. They are only able to receive it.

In any case, the term revelation refers to God’s giving of his truth to humanity. And we know that the Bible says that God has revealed himself to humanity in four different ways. They include (1) nature, (2) our conscience, (3) Jesus Christ, and (4) the Bible. So let’s take these one by one. First, nature has revealed God. The universe itself, with its vastness and complexity, gives testimony to God and his glory. Look to Psalm 8:3-4, which says, “When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained, what is man that You are mindful of him?” Another psalm says, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the end of the world. In the heavens God has pitched a tent for the sun.” [Psa 19:1-4] Just contemplate the raw beauty and vast splendor of the mountain range or the immense majesty of the ocean or even the exquisite and intricate design of something as simple as a rose. And they all stand giving silent witness to their creator, the God of heaven.

And yet in all that, the testimony of nature only tells us about God in a limited way. The Book of Job says this: “He binds up the water in His thick clouds, yet the clouds are not broken under it. He covers the face of His throne, and spreads His cloud over it. Indeed these are the mere edges of His ways, and how small a whisper we hear of Him! But the thunder of His power who can understand?” [Job 26:8-9, 14] However, note this. Even though natural revelation only reveals God in a limited way, it still leaves every human being without excuse. Paul writes to the believers in Rome, “For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse.” [Rom 1:20] So Paul is saying that God has revealed himself through nature. And every human can see nature. Even in the crowded city where we may not be able to see the mountains or the ocean, we can still see the heavens.

The second way that God reveals himself is through our own conscience. God has disclosed himself through the spirit or mind of humanity. All societies have a certain moral code built into them in which stealing, lying, murder, and such are universally condemned. This is what C. S. Lewis refers to as a universal sense of ‘ought.’ So humanity’s sense of right and wrong testifies to God’s existence. The apostle Paul wrote, also in Romans, “For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things contained in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them.” [Rom 2:14-15]

These two things taken together are called general revelation. The third type of revelation was when God has revealed himself to the world through the person of Jesus Christ. The author of Hebrews tells us, “God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in times past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds.” [Heb 1:1-2] Jesus himself testified that he had come to earth to reveal the will of God the Father. In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus says, “All things have been handed over to Me by My Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and he to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.” [Mat 11:27] So for 33 years, God himself, in the person of Jesus Christ, walked on earth, lived among us, and taught great truth, and shared the good news about the kingdom of God.

But the challenge with this revelation is that no one who was alive when Jesus lived on earth is still alive, so that testimony is largely lost to us. But we do have the final source of revelation, and that is the Scripture. Of course, I am talking about the Bible. The writings themselves testify of God’s existence. God has shared knowledge about himself through the written word, the Scriptures. The Bible is God’s revelation of himself to humankind. The Scripture says of itself, “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine (that’s the word truth), for reproof and correction, for instruction in righteousness.” [2Ti 3:16] The Bible is humankind’s source for the knowledge of God and his plan. And in that revelation, God has given extensive opportunity for belief. General and special revelation, the natural order from the beginning of time, and the writings that are 2000 or more years old all provide ample opportunity to know about him by means of nature, the human conscience, Jesus Christ, and through the Bible. Humanity has no excuse whatsoever for rejecting God.

So we started off asking, “What is truth?” How can we know what is truth? The answer is that God has revealed truth to the human race in four ways: nature, the human conscience, the person of Jesus Christ, and finally, in the Bible. Each of these methods testifies to his existence. Each of these methods testifies to the truth. Humanity has no excuse whatsoever for rejecting him.