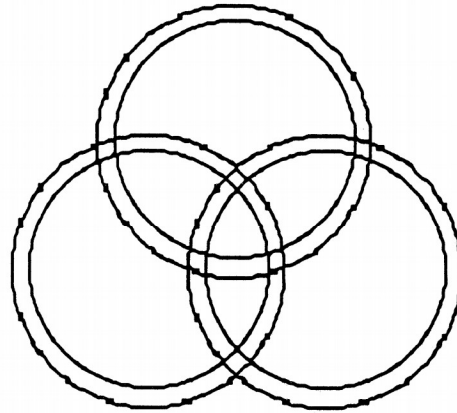

The Indivisibility of Truth

This is an article that those of you with a philosophical bent will no doubt enjoy. Truth...it's one of life's big questions. But whatever your intellectual pretensions, don't be put off by the title. The nature of the truth God has revealed to us has enormous implications for ministry, fellowship and how we approach his word.



If we were to picture all the different things we know to be true as building blocks, what would they look like? Perhaps they would be like lego: little interchangeable bits that we could fit together in many ways, sometimes using some pieces, and sometimes others. We certainly wouldn't need to use all the bits to make a successful building. Some Christians suggest that God's truth is like this—there are many different aspects to it, and we needn't accept it all to erect a successful building.

However, there are other kinds of blocks. My children have a jigsaw puzzle consisting of three wooden blocks. By themselves, each of the blocks has a strange, almost bizarre shape, with no particular meaning, and no stability. When joined together they form a stable and attractive little kiwi (*readers can insert their own cross-*

Tasman joke here, Ed). Only when properly joined do these blocks have any meaning and function—even two of the blocks joined together won't stand up.

Christian truth is like these kiwi blocks, not like lego. The pieces are not interchangeable or irrelevant. Only when the total puzzle is assembled do each of the pieces assume their proper place, function and purpose. And only with all the pieces in place can the total picture be seen in all its truth.

Each of the truths of the Gospel depend on each other. Consider, for instance, the following series of statements:

- Jesus is fully human
- Jesus is fully divine
- Jesus was our representative on the cross
- Jesus was able to make a full, perfect

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and sufficient sacrifice for sins on the cross

- God's word is true

Far from being distinct or separate (and dispensable), these truths are interrelated. We cannot dismiss one and still retain the others. If Jesus was not fully human, how could he stand in our place as a representative? If he was not fully divine, how could his death be sufficient payment for sins? If God's word is not true, how can we put our trust in the Jesus that it reveals? To trust God is to trust his Word, is to trust his Son, is to trust his Son's word...and on it goes. These are not interchangeable, independent lego blocks of truth. They stand, or fall, together. They are indivisible.

IMPLICATIONS

The indivisibility of Christian truth has deep implications for the ministry of the Gospel.

BIBLE

Firstly, it has implications for our reading, teaching and preaching of the Bible. The various viewpoints and teachings of the Bible cannot be partitioned off from each other, as if they were simply the compiled works of a group of disparate authors. They are all an integral part of a meaningful whole.

Any part of the Bible, therefore, is worth reading and preaching—each section is part of God's overall revelation. Perhaps we should spend less time working out which part of the Bible to work on and more time reading it! Undoubtedly there are some sections which are easier to understand than others and which seem easier to apply to our lives, but these sections are no more essential or 'true' than the more diffi-

cult passages. Even the passages which are 'untrue', such as the advice of Job's comforters, are part of the whole that we need to read, learn and teach.

An increasingly common practice these days is to look for the different 'theologies' of the Bible. The theology of Paul is contrasted with the theology of Jesus, and Peter, and John. This atomistic approach to Bible reading, while perhaps having some

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interpretative value, misunderstands the indivisibility of truth. The kingdom of God and the atonement, for example, are not two separate messages. A view of the kingdom that does not have at its centre the atoning death of Jesus has seriously misunderstood the Gospel. Though Paul hardly ever writes of the kingdom and Jesus rarely mentions the atoning merit of his death, there is no justification for pitting these two truths against one another.

Our Bible reading, then, is a two-way process: we need to read each section in view of its place within the whole, as well as altering our perspective of the whole according to what we find in each composite part.

As we have seen in a previous article ("Herman Who?", *Briefing #4*) one of the most serious weaknesses in contemporary biblical interpretation is the failure to see the total message of the Scriptures from the perspective of the gospel. Christ is the fulfilment of the law, the yea and amen to all ▸

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the prophets, the pivotal figure in the whole of the Bible's message—he is the interpretative key for understanding the Scriptures.

2 EVANGELISM

The indivisibility of truth presents a conundrum for us in the area of evangelism. Based on what we have said thus far, to omit any of the gospel would seem to distort the truth—if the different parts are interrelated surely we need to preach all of them. On the other hand, we sense that there is no need to preach every Christian doctrine when we explain the gospel to someone; surely someone can come to faith in Christ without being a systematic theologian. Let us look at both sides in turn.

Eliminating some part of the gospel will ultimately lead to its distortion. One cannot

It liberates us from having to give our non-Christian friends every piece of Christian knowledge we possess.

preach the gospel while purposefully avoiding the resurrection, for example, without coming unstuck. Those who don't believe in the resurrection of Jesus will end up misrepresenting the atonement, since the resurrection is closely related to it (see the intriguing statement in Romans 4:25). While these people may use the right words, it will eventually become clear that their meaning is quite different.

That is not to say that we need to include each and every gospel doctrine every time we preach. To continue the example, preaching the resurrection faithfully would be sufficient to call on people to repent and believe. We might not go into the details of the atonement, or the doctrine of creation, or the triune nature of God, but because we

believe these things (and would, given time, explain them) our resurrection doctrine will be true.

To use Francis Schaeffer's terms, we can have 'true truth' without 'complete truth'. Because of the fundamental unity of truth—its indivisibility—things that are truly 'true' will represent accurately the whole truth, even though we mightn't have the time (or the knowledge) to expound every facet of truth.

This second side of the conundrum is very helpful in evangelism. It liberates us from having to give our non-Christian friends every piece of Christian knowledge we possess. We concoct indigestible mixtures of sin, creation, judgement, Trinity, atonement, resurrection, salvation, holiness, repentance, faith... Our insecurity about the indivisibility of truth compels us to include everything lest we somehow misrepresent the truth. There is no need for this. By making sure that what we do say is true and significant, we can ask people to respond to God, even though they do not know everything there is to know.

3 FELLOWSHIP

With whom should we fellowship in the gospel? It is a question that has vexed Christians down through the ages, and it is a problem for us in modern Australia.

Various groups invite us to work with them in organisations or on particular projects. How should we discriminate between them? When we move to a new town or suburb, the choice of which congregation to attend can be confusing—the one that bears the familiar brand name may hold to some, but not all, of the truths we hold. Should we join up anyway? Should we fellowship with a person who doesn't accept the full authority of the Scriptures but does believe ▸

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in the resurrection? And what of the man who is Anglo-Catholic in his theology, but is nevertheless 'spiritually minded'?

Given the indivisibility of truth, no-one who omits or denies part of the gospel can faithfully and accurately preach the rest. It is impossible to labour in the gospel alongside such a person. We may enjoy a superficial unity at first, but when the heat is on and the gospel needs to be expounded or defended, we will find ourselves parting company at crucial moments. In the final analysis, a truncated gospel is a false gospel.

Paul rejoices (in Philippians 1) that some of his opponents were preaching the gospel even out of bad motives. This doesn't amount to an acceptance of shoddy gospel preaching, as some have suggested. Paul makes allowances for impure motives, not an impure gospel. We should assume that his opponents were preaching the truth, even if it was with a jealous intent.

Christian fellowship that does not have as its basis an agreed truth of the gospel is headed for disunity and disaster. As Andrew Reid pointed out in his article in *Briefing* #7, the IVF was indeed wise to establish their university evangelism on a solid and true doctrinal basis. Without this kind of basic agreement, joint evangelistic efforts are impractical.

CONCLUSION

God's revelation in the Scriptures covers certain key issues with great clarity. The

Bible doesn't address every area of knowledge—it doesn't claim to be exhaustive—but what it does tell us is true; indivisibly and absolutely true.

Furthermore, part of this truth is the assertion that there are some parts of life that are inconsequential. On some issues we are free to disagree with each other, because the Bible doesn't canvass the topic or regards it as trivial. We shouldn't conclude from what we have said about the indivisibility of truth that unless we agree on *everything* we can't agree on *anything*. One man will

count one day more sacred than another, while others will count all days the same.¹ Each should do as his conscience dictates. We must be in agreement over the need for obedience to our conscience, but we are free to differ

on the significance of certain days or times.

While it is not always easy to establish precisely the level of tolerance between different Christian understandings, the Bible does draw a line at various points: justification by faith alone², the divinity and humanity of Jesus³, the resurrection of Jesus⁴, the authority of Scripture⁵—these are some of the truths said to be of an absolute and fundamental nature.

Food for thought: what other truths are the building blocks for Christian truth? □

...part of this truth is the assertion that there are some parts of life that are inconsequential.

NEXT WEEK:

Youth Work

1. Romans 14:5
2. Galatians
3. 1 John 4:1-3
4. 1 Corinthians 15
5. 1 John 4:4-6