

Aye, Matey . . . “X” marks the spot . . .

. . . and this here’s a map to the buried treasure! by Pastor Marty

As a child—and even as an adult—I had dreams of finding a map that led to a hidden treasure. I don’t know of many young boys who didn’t. I’m not sure if as many young girls have the same fantasies, but it seems to be part of the nature of boys (and dogs) to bury things and dig up things. Perhaps that is why one study indicates that twice as many men go into the field of archaeology as women—they are still kids at heart. It appeals to part of our nature to look for a mystery, make a discovery, and gain a reward. Even in Eden, God pointed out that men would find value by digging in the dirt. I do not think this is just from the Fall; I think it is part of human nature as it was meant to be. The reason I say that is because Proverbs 25:2 seems to imply that God intentionally hides some things just so that we can seek them, He can reveal them, and there can be the joy of discovery. What parent doesn’t have as much fun playing peek-a-boo as the baby? However, it is as much growth as it is fun. Perhaps Jesus used parables not just because of human sinfulness but because we were made all along to search out, to discover, and to solve mysteries. If this is the case, God wants us to find what we seek—if it is good and we keep on seeking, that is. A buried treasure is meant to be found; otherwise, nobody would ever have made a map, and the treasure would have been destroyed instead of hidden.

If the buried treasure was not meant to be found, nobody would’ve made a map.

Of course, there is a difference between the treasure we find in the Bible and a chest filled with gold, jewels, and legal deeds; the former is concept while the latter is concrete, the one is ideals but the other is objects, and the one is relative, the other absolute—right? In our postmodern culture (is it just coincidence there is so much stress on being PC?), we are told that all truth is relative: what is true for one person is not necessarily true for another; one person’s morals are not another’s. This is the foundational difference between Theism and most other worldviews, such as Humanism, Naturalism, Relativism, Spiritualism, and of course, Postmodernism. Especially for the two faiths of Judaism and Christianity, truth is an absolute, founded on specific aspects of God’s character and nature. However, that does not necessarily solve all our problems because we still have to deal with interpretation—how we understand those absolute truths we find in the Bible. The simple example of predestination vs free will—which is just one of hundreds of theological debates—reveals how Scripture can be interpreted differently by various believers.

Even if we accept that absolute truths do exist, we still have to interpret them.

One simple answer to the question of how to interpret the truth found in the Bible is to study and “rightly divide” the Word of Truth. However, that itself can be somewhat elusive—or at least debated. There are so many different interpretations of the same Scripture passages

that it seems impossible to be sure we are correct and the height of hubris to claim it. We are stuck between the proverbial rock and hard place: to not believe what we believe strongly enough to say we are sure is to risk being what James calls “double minded” while claiming to know the truth for certain with no possibility of error is pride. Nevertheless, if we believe that there is absolute truth—which must be the case if God is who He says He is—and if God wants us to seek to know the truth—which every book of the Bible indicates—and if we are judged according to the truth we know—which the law and the prophets affirm—then we must believe that God wants us to know at least some of it. However, that is the major question: is it possible to actually know the truth?

Knowing there is absolute truth in God, is it possible for us to know the truth?

Beginning in the 1800's, there was a movement that began in relation to language. It stated that because words could have different meanings for different people, each person's interpretation was as unique as fingerprints. If we have ever mediated an argument between two people, we recognize there is some truth to that: what one person hears is not always what the other person says. However, this led to a new paradigm in education, which said that because we can never know with absolute certainty what an author actually meant, we are forced to base our knowledge on what it means to us personally and individually. The specific meaning of the source is like a buried treasure in which the map is lost. Even if someone were to actually find the chest full of gold and jewels, there would be no way to

prove that what was found was *that specific* treasure; it could be a different treasure, or just a part of the treasure, etc, etc. The obvious and regrettable outcome of that entirely valid and reasonable objection was that people gave up trying to discover the author's actual or original meaning because it was impossible to ascertain with 100% certainty. Instead, those who were most able to address the problem chose to work around the problem. The educators began to teach that because complete objective truth, at least in relation to an author's meaning, could not be obtained, all truth was subjective, and those who were taught listened; therefore, subjectivity became the new absolute standard. The major problem is that the reader now has more authority on the meaning of a source than the author does. Truth became subjective. As one of the founders of this philosophy said, “reality does not exist; only language exists.”

When no meaning can be entirely right, then no meaning can be entirely wrong.

As could have been expected with such a major paradigm shift, this turned out to be a very slippery slope. Once language, our primary means of communication, lost any direct link to the source, other disciplines followed. Biblical scholars embraced higher criticism to explain what could be known about the Scriptures; we decided we are better able to identify the date, authorship, and validity of books and passages in the Bible than primitive Christians of the first few centuries in the Church. Historians began to associate facts with urban legends; since any document from the past is basically a collection of subjective interpretations, history became—as one historian described it—inseparable from

fiction. This has even led to the claim that the Holocaust itself was just one group's construct. Suddenly, the only discipline that could speak in absolutes was mathematics because nobody can argue with statements like $2 + 2 = 4$. . . until we discover there is a mathematical model in which $5 + 5 = 12$. (If you are not aware of how this works, imagine that God had created us with only 4 fingers on each hand). This leaves us with a great dilemma: on the one hand, we must recognize that human perception and communication involves interpretation and at least a minor level of subjectivity; on the other hand, the logical conclusion is that this leads to complete relativity in all aspects of knowledge. Epistemology asks: how can we know anything?

How do we know anything if everything we know entails personal interpretation?

The first thing that is necessary is that we have to aim for that which is ultimately unattainable—perfection. I discuss this concept in previous writings on Practicing the Presence of God: we only become what we are meant to be by worshipping something greater than us—God. Just as gravity requires us to compensate by aiming higher when we shoot an arrow, the law of sin and death requires us to aim for perfection in order for us to overcome the spiritual entropy that is part of the fallen world. Likewise, if we do not continually aim to love other people the way the perfect-and-sinless Jesus did, we will not continue to grow in love. When it comes to seeking truth, we must aim to discover the absolute truth in full objectivity. Whether we believe such a thing is possible is not the point; the point is that doing so will at least require us to do the best job we can in the

process of research and discussion. Although true humility requires us to recognize that we are faulty and imperfect human beings, we do not want to factor that into the equation yet; if we do, we actually minimize growth. When we are learning archery, we continually make the target smaller and further away so that our skill develops and we improve; if we compensate by making the target bigger, we work against our goal. Likewise, if we convince ourselves that we cannot love as Jesus loves, then we make room for failure. Humility requires that we recognize our faults when we fail, but holiness requires that we aim for perfection when we try. If it were not so, He would not have called us to be perfect as He Himself is perfect; we must aim for perfection if we truly desire to improve. If we make subjectivity, relativity, and bias a part of the goal when seeking the truth, then we are essentially giving ourselves permission to err. The humility is vital, but it comes into play in a different part of the process—just as the archer adjusts the aim and trajectory, not the target.

In humility, we recognize our faults, but in holiness, we aim for perfection.

The solution I want to present here may not be the most original, but I believe it will get us where we want to go. It is loosely based on the philosophical argument known as Pascal's Wager. Pascal was faced with a very serious issue: how to argue for the existence of God on the basis of reason. He postulated that there are two ultimate possibilities—either God exists or God doesn't exist—and all humans live their lives according to their belief. He described this as a bet that all people were making with their eternal souls as the stakes. He concluded that

the most reasonable or logical bet would be the one with the most to gain and the least to lose. If God did not exist, those who followed God might miss out on some beneficial experiences in this life, but their eternal state would be the same as the atheist—nothingness; however, if God did indeed exist, the atheist would trade a life of personal pleasure for an eternity of loss and suffering. In other words, the safest bet is that God exists because there is less to lose.

If God does not exist, we lose a little; if God does exist, we can lose an awful lot.

This same argument can be adapted to help us learn how we can know the truth. For example, consider historians wanting to write about the events at the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. There is a massive amount of information available on this topic, but it is still necessary to be as objective as possible because if it is approached with a clear bias, that will affect not only the conclusions but also the data chosen and how data is interpreted. After researching and collecting as much data as possible, it is evaluated to identify the most reliable sources. Again, we must take a step of faith to believe that some sources are more reliable than others. We must believe that others before us have tried to attain as close as possible to a goal of perfect objectivity while we simultaneously recognize some succeeded more than others. Therefore, we evaluate our sources for the best data. The next step is where everything comes together: drawing conclusions based upon what we know.

We take it by faith that others have sought truth so we can now know truth.

This entire argument (and newsletter) is based on this premise: perfection as a goal is ultimately more successful than a goal founded on skepticism. To describe it in practical terms, we can use the example of the Quest for the historical Jesus, which asks how we can truly know anything about the person Jesus who walked the earth 2000 years ago. Using the argument presented here, we hypothetically have identified 10 things we consider to be true. However, true humility requires that we accept that we (or another) might have made a mistake. Maybe only 9 of those facts are true. What does that do to our conclusions? I am not a mathematician, but I can state with certainty that even 90% success aiming at absolute truth will be closer to the actual truth than 100% aimed at relative truth—where absolute truth does not exist. In terms of archery, continually making the target smaller and aiming for it will eventually result in more arrows clustered in a smaller area around that target than making a target increasingly larger—or not aiming at any specific target at all. If we begin our research and discussion with the premise that we cannot actually know anything about the human Jesus who walked the earth 2000 years ago, then we have already succeeded in our goal because our goal is to fail; however, if we begin by believing that we can learn things about Him because we are convinced that there is accurate truth out there that can be found and evaluated, then we will discover that even if we fail, our failure will be closer to the truth than not trying at all. We discover that we can know the truth, even if it is partly, as if in an imperfect mirror. Jesus said we would know the truth, and the truth would set us free. Partial freedom is better than none.