

An Effort Toward a Scriptural Perspective on the “Certainty of Knowledge”

I believe that the omniscient God is in possession of all truth, defined as “the sum total of reality which can be known comprehensively only by God”¹. God has revealed truth through His creation of the natural world (Rom. 1: 18-20), or what we call His general revelation. God has also revealed important truth claims through His Scriptures to humankind using the agency of inspired writers (II Tim. 3:16). These truth claims have been preserved in their expression and translation from valid manuscripts. Therefore, I have justification for believing that I can read the Bible with assurance that God is speaking to me if my heart and conscience are pure before Him through exercise of faith which He gives to me (Rom. 10). The aim of the Scripture is to point me to God’s Son, Jesus Christ who is the way and the truth incarnate (John 14:6), and “in whom are all of the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col 2:3).

The truth contained in Scripture is meant to be profitable for my growth in knowledge of Christ and Christlikeness through its “teaching, reproof, correction and training in righteousness (II Tim. 3:16). In a state of humble submission, my mind can reason through the Scriptures and understand that, although I was once dead in my trespasses and sins as a child of Adam’s fallen race (Eph. 2:1; Rom. 5), walking according to the world system of thought and behavior (v. 2-3), separate from Christ, without hope (v. 1-19); yet by God’s mercy and love (v. 4-5), I have been made alive together with Christ (v. 5) and raised from the ruins of the spiritually dead through His gift of faith (Eph. 2:8-9) by the “washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5).

Still, as a member of Adam’s fallen race; residing in a fleshly body, subject to the temptations of pleasure, pride, and power; and, residing within a world system that is at enmity with God, can I know truth? The answer is “Yes.” God’s Spirit within me is at work so that I am not like a child “tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine.” (Eph. 4: 14). Instead, I can have “This hope... as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure² and steadfast and one which enters within the veil (Heb. 6:19).

¹ “Integration of Faith into Teaching– Position Paper” 1993. Integration Task Team, Cedarville College.

² Sure = Gr., *asphales*, meaning “secure (literally or figuratively):– certain(-ty), safe, sure” (The New Testament Greek Lexicon)

Though once dead as part of Adam's fallen race, and though I am capable of making wrong judgements about claims of Scripture or of the natural sciences, God's regenerating work in my mind (rational capacity) and heart (center of my will) press me onward "to walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart..."(Eph. 4:17-18). Ephesians adds that I am to "be renewed in the spirit of [my] mind, and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth"(v. 23-24). When I submit to this renewal, I have the power to resist being "conformed" (molded) to this world's way of thinking and I can pursue taking "every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" (II Cor. 10:5). But in order to "walk as He [Jesus] walked (I John 2: 6), it follows that I must know God's truth with *certainty*. Is God real? Did Christ come in the flesh, live a perfect life, die for my sins, and rise the third day? Can I be certain that He is coming again? How does He want me to live? Can I hold to biblical truth claims with certainty?

Because I was once dead as part of Adam's fallen race, at times I succumb to the idea that God's truth is "too high, I cannot attain to it" (Psalm 139:6); but I must realize that the Source of this knowledge has "enclosed me behind and before, and laid [His] hand upon me" (v. 5). I must believe the scriptural teaching that divine truth has been made "accessible enough" so that knowledge does not constitute a limiting factor to me in accomplishing God's will. The Scripture in I John states that God has given me "an anointing from the Holy One, and you all know. I have not written to you because you do not know the truth but because you do know it, and because no lie is of the truth" (I Jn. 2:20-21). Thus, I have strong justification for believing that objective truth, from God, does exist, and the light of this truth has shone into my depraved heart which was too dead for me to manufacture it on my own (Eph. 2:1). Thus, it is not "subjective truth" but objective truth which God offers to us and through us to the postmodern world.

But how am I to relate to people who live in spiritual darkness and who walk "in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart..."(Eph. 4:17-18). Specifically, is it even possible to engage our postmodern culture with the claim that one can have certainty of knowledge without conveying a sense of arrogance and intolerance. Christ teaches

us that we are “salt and light” (Matt. 5:13-15). Furthermore, our witness of the truth should bring glory to God (Matt. 5:15). How can my certainty of the truth be tempered so as to actually enhance my witness?

First, I need the certainty of knowing that I can have God’s truth as an “anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast... (Heb. 6:19). Yet, armed with this inner certainty, I must not be insensitive to others who are also sinners in need of God’s mercy. I must realize that certainty of truth is nurtured by a growing faith; and faith is a gift of God (Eph. 2: 8-9), the “assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). Thus, certainty grows and matures as I abide in His Word through private devotions and prayer communion with Him. This ongoing “prayer closet dimension” of the Christian life results in a maturing and renewing of my “sure hope” (v. 19). Because I trust in God’s Word as objective revelation, and rely upon His Spirit for interpretation, the knowledge gained here is not merely subjective. Because of God’s objective truth, I have this “anchor” for my soul is a result of the private, intimate, sustained relationship between God and myself. But when I face the “sea” of needy faces and the diverse marketplace of subjective ideas in this world, my certainty must be expressed with compassion and a willingness to listen. Here, the Spirit produces His fruit which is “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23).

I have been quoting the Apostle Paul throughout this essay on the subject of “certainty.” His anchor was firmly in place, sure and steadfast. Thus, in the public forum of Athens, Paul forcefully declares to the philosophers that, “God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead” (Acts 17: 30-31). Sounds pretty certain, doesn’t he? But notice that Paul first approaches them with sensitivity and compassion. “Men of Athens, I notice that you are very religious in all respects” (Acts 17:22). A forceful apologetic seasoned with sensitivity can be a winsome trait of the Christian life as we are involved in discipleship and teaching within the church and the academy. It speaks of a life anchored in certainty through daily communion with God’s Word of Truth; while on the other hand “always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence...(I Peter 3:15).

As a biologist, I must make right judgements and express myself in public on issues such as bioethics and origins. There is much that I can learn from the Apostle Paul. On the one hand, I participate in empirical approaches to gaining truth about the natural world and communicate with many naturalistic biologists for whom the natural world is “all there is.” Hence, to them empiricism is seen as the only valid avenue to truth about the world including the most complex creature, man himself. However, my faith causes me to recognize the boundaries beyond which claims of natural science must give way to “another way of knowing” the Scriptures which present truth claims about the nature of the Creator and the nature of man which cannot be obtained through the sciences. Scientific arrogance must be made captive to submissive scholarship— a scholarship that humbly seeks to integrate knowledge obtained from the creation and from special revelation contained in Scripture. Contrary to post-modern thinking, my scholarship retains the certainty that absolute truth exists but recognizes that I must “acknowledge [my] continual dependence upon God, the only one who truly knows in full. [My] faith, then, is in God who knows all, rather than in [my] own intellectual ability to know perfectly.”³

My conclusion is that a renewed mind and submissive heart can have confident trust that, “though we know in part, and we prophecy in part” (I Cor. 13:9), yet we are able to meet in communion with the God of all truth through study of and obedience to His Word; and out of this communion, have assurance of faith that we can make right judgements that will guide our behavior in our homes, our churches, our workplaces, and our communities. Furthermore we can make right judgements about truth claims as scholars in our disciplines, and above all, love God with all of our hearts, minds, and strength, and love our neighbor as our selves in the spirit of I Corinthians 13. It is in this spirit that I specifically welcome comments from those who read this essay. May God be honored as a result.

John E. Silivus, Ph.D.

Professor of Biology

February 12, 2005

Rev. 2-16, 2-18, 2005

References:

The New Testament Greek Lexicon (Online: <http://bible.crosswalk.com/Lexicons/Greek/>).

Scripture Citations: *New American Standard Version*. Lockman Foundation.

³ Personal communication, Dr. Daniel Estes