SINCERITY AND TRUTH

In Chapter 16 it was shown that, according to the New Testament, Jesus is the only way of salvation. If this is true, another question that naturally arises is, “What about those who follow other religions?” A thorough response to this question will require several chapters. Let us begin by discussing issues of sincerity and truth.

Is Sincerity Enough?

Many people seem to think that the primary thing God is looking for is sincerity. They feel that what religion a person follows does not matter much, as they are all just different paths to the same God. The thing that matters is sincerity. But is sincerity enough? Is it not possible to be sincerely wrong? A person can sincerely believe that the road he is driving on will lead him to a certain destination, but if it is the wrong road, it doesn’t matter how carefully and diligently the person stays on that road—it will still not lead him to the desired destination. Or a sick person may sincerely believe that a certain medication will cure his disease, but if it is not the right medication, it will not, regardless of how faithfully the person takes it. So it is not enough to be sincere—one must be sincerely *right*. In other words, both sincerity *and* truth are important.

Jesus indicates this in his answer to the Samaritan woman in John 4:23: “But the time is coming—indeed it’s here now—when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. The Father is looking for those who will worship him that way.” Worshipping “in spirit” means worshipping from the heart, or with the spirit, in contrast to just going through the motions of doing certain rituals. In other words, it involves worshipping *sincerely.* But Jesus also says that those whose worship is pleasing to God must worship “in truth.” Both are important—one must worship sincerely, but also in accordance with what is true. And as we saw in chapter 16, Jesus himself claimed, “I am the way, *the truth*, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

Is there such a thing as Absolute Truth?

The above discussion presupposes that there is such a thing as Absolute Truth. But this idea is not accepted by everyone. Many believe that truth is relative—you can have *your* truth and I can have *my* truth, but no one should dare to say that his truth is the absolute truth. The issue of whether truth is absolute or relative is difficult to argue, because it is largely a matter of world view. Your world view is like a set of lenses through which you see the world—it affects the way you see and understand everything. World view is not easily or quickly changed, as it depends largely on cultural values and beliefs that have been shared by a group of people for many years. But perhaps a few comments and clarifications can be helpful in thinking the issue through.

First, if one consistently believes truth is relative, he should not say absolutely that there is no absolute truth, for in doing so he would contradict himself. In other words, a relativist should at least keep an open mind to the possibility that there could be absolute truth.

Second, believing in absolute truth is not an excuse for being close-minded. Many issues in this world are complex and need to be carefully studied from several different angles or perspectives. The Bible says, “The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward to question him” (Proverbs 18:17, NIV). This, however, does not mean that all truth is perspectival. There is a classic story about six blind men and an elephant. One blind man, feeling only the trunk, thought it was a snake. Another, feeling only the ears, thought it was a fan. The third, finding only the body, thought it was a wall, and the fourth, feeling only the legs, thought it was a tree. The fifth, finding the tail, thought it was a rope, and the sixth, feeling the pointed tusk, thought it was a spear. While the story does show that what you think is true is often only a matter of perspective, one should take note that none of the blind men were right. The absolute truth was that the thing they were feeling was an elephant.

Third, absolute truth in the area of morality does not mean that every moral decision can be stated in absolute terms. The idea of absolute morality is based on belief in a moral God who has revealed certain unchanging standards of morality—for example, do not murder, or do not commit adultery. But there are still many areas about which God has not given a definitive moral standard. These are called “gray areas,” and the Apostle Paul has given a whole set of principles in the New Testament to help the individual believer come to a decision on these areas (see Romans 14, 1 Corinthians 8-10). Paul says, “So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves” (Romans 14:22). Paul acknowledges that believers had different opinions about what kind of foods they could eat (Romans 14:2-3) or about how to observe certain days (Romans 14:5-6). In these matters, Paul instructs the believers not to judge one another and to be fully convinced in their own minds. In other words, there are certain moral or behavioral issues about which one *can* say: “That is right for you (because you can do it in a clear conscience), but not for me.” But the difference is that one who believes in relative truth takes that attitude about everything, whereas the one who believes in absolute truth only takes that approach on issues about which the Bible does not explicitly reveal God’s will.

Fourth, belief in absolute truth is foundational to the great scientific and technological achievements of all great civilizations. In mathematics, it is an absolute truth that 1 + 1 = 2, 4 x 4 = 16, and so forth. In Geometry, there are axioms that are assumed to be true without proof—in other words, their truth is self-evident. Building upon this foundation, through the application of logic, one can prove theorems, and with those proofs other things can then be proven. And so a whole body of mathematical truth has been derived which forms the basis for scientific measurement and calculation, which forms the basis for inventing things and discovering things. If no one had ever believed in the absoluteness of mathematical truth, then scientific and technological achievements of past generations would never have happened. Man would never have learned how to fly, nor would he have attempted or succeeded in going to the moon. We would not know how to make lenses to correct vision or perform delicate surgeries to remove damaged organs. If absolute truth exists in mathematics, then one cannot say there is no such thing as absolute truth.2

Fifth, if one believes truth is relative, he must deny the law of non-contradiction. This is one of the classic laws of logic and states that contradictory statements cannot both be true at the same time. For example, *A* is *B* and *A* is not *B* are mutually exclusive. Aristotle says that without the principle of non-contradiction we could not know anything that we do know. Moreover, scientific inquiry, reasoning and communication would not be possible without it.3  Henry Gensler, in Formal Ethics, says: “How do you respond to someone who denies the law of noncontradiction? Some logicians suggest hitting the person with a stick. A better idea is to pretend to agree. Whenever you assert something, also assert the opposite. Soon your opponent will want to hit you with a stick!"4 His point is that to deny the law of non-contradiction defies common sense and soon leads to absurdity.

The relevance of the law of non-contradiction will be seen in the next chapter, when we compare the Christian faith with other religions. Many people believe that all religions are equally true and that in the end they all teach the same thing. If this is true, then we can conclude that any religion will do, as long as you are sincere. But if the teachings of another religion contradict the teachings of Christianity, and if these contradictions are not merely on peripheral issues but relate to the core teachings of the faith, then both belief systems cannot be true and one must make a choice—either one or the other is true, or perhaps neither, but certainly not both.

ENDNOTES

1. Norm Giesler and Norm Brooks, When Skeptics Ask, Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1990, p. 257.
2. There are some who challenge the notion that mathematics is absolute truth. See for example, “Useful Invention or Absolute Truth: What is Math?” by George Johnson, New York Times on the Web, February 10, 1998 at <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/02/10/science/useful-invention-or-absolute-truth-what-is-math.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>
3. Paula Gottlieb, “Aristotle on Non-Contradiction,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, first published February 2, 2007. Online at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-noncontradiction>
4. “The Law of Non-Contradiction,” posted May 29, 2005 on Philosophy, etcetera, at http://www.philosophyetc.net/2005/05/law-of-non-contradiction.html