

Your Quintessential Knowledge Source: God's Word

By: Rev. Dr. Matthew Richard

Genesis 3 is the most tragic section in the whole Bible. It talks about the fall of Adam and Eve. In the text, Eve, who could be called the first enthusiast, departs from the quintessential knowledge source, God's Word, and eats the forbidden fruit. She believed Satan contrary to God's Word. This was the Devil's plan: to distance her from the Word. Adam, being the head of the family, should also have trusted God's Word, put Eve over his shoulder, brought her to God, confessed her sin, and said, "Now take my life." However, Adam took the fruit as well, disobeying and distancing himself from God's Word. Therefore, "since the fall of Adam, all human beings who are born in the natural way are conceived and born in sin. This means that from birth they are full of evil lust and inclination and cannot by nature possess true fear of God and true faith in God." [1] Mankind, who was created in the image of God, now has an image that "is not lost, but turned to its opposite." [2] Otherwise stated, because of the fall "sinners have further diminished their ability to comprehend who God is and what his disposition toward his human creatures is." [3] Mankind's nature is weak, his view of truth is tainted, his reason warped, his worldview blurred; mankind loves carnal things because man is bound in sin and the deception of the evil one. Therefore, in regard to the Word, we confess that the "words of Scripture are not spoken merely in order

to elicit agreement of noble feelings among the hearers, but rather to form, reform, the hearers." [4] Because of mankind's need for the Word, after the fall, God did not abandon His creation but rather "entered into conversation with his human creature immediately after they had broken off their relationship with him, and God has continued to make contact with fallen sinners in order to reveal himself to them as well." [5] Simply put, "The Word of God invades the world of sinners" [6] and continually functions as the only source, rule, and norm of the church's faith and practice. The Word must invade; it must be the church's source of knowledge and faith. For apart from the Word, the church and the world are left in despair with counterfeit and fallen knowledge sources. [7]

As already stated, the truth of God's Word is the quintessential knowledge source for the church and world. "According to Scripture the Church has no doctrine of its own, no doctrine alongside and without Christ's Word." [8] However, the Word of God is not without competition; other counterfeit sources of truth confront individuals and the church. For example, while logic, scientific method, and the tenets of rationalism do contain elements of truth, these systems have inflicted substantial consequences upon church and culture by diminishing the authoritative status of the Word as a

source of truth. The Scriptures are even abrogated “by substituting for it the regenerate reason, or, as it is also called, pious self-consciousness, Christian experience, Christian Ego, faith consciousness, faith, spirit, etc. . . . all these sources and norms, when they are used alongside and apart from the Bible, are simply illusions.”[9]

In 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 the Apostle Paul discusses the message of the cross in the midst of other knowledge sources saying:

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful,

not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

In this text, Paul identifies three different ways of knowing truth; networks on which all else rested. The first is the Jewish way of knowing truth, the second is the Greek way of knowing truth, and the third is the Theology of the Cross. Concerning the first two ways of thinking, Paul is saying that, “the Jews seek for ‘miraculous signs,’ and the Greeks seek wisdom and through these means they hope to find the answers to questions about God and life.”[10] Otherwise stated, the Jewish way demanded external signs and wonders in order to judge whether or not a messenger was of God. They demanded and wanted tangible signs, subsequently laying forth criteria of what is truth and what is not. The Greek way held to their love of philosophy and knowledge. They held to the wisdom of the world as their way of knowing truth.

What both of these systems have in common is that the learner/knower is

ultimately in control. In both cases, knowledge and truth need to be validated by set expectations.

The third option that Paul describes is the cross of Christ. Interestingly, the cross was rejected by the Jewish *and* the Greek way of thinking. W. Harold Mare comments on this saying:

To the unsaved Jews, however, this message of a crucified Christ was a 'stumbling block,' an offense for they expected a political deliverer. To the non-Jewish world the cross was 'foolishness'—criminals died on crosses, and they could not see how the cross provided any moral philosophical standard to help them toward salvation. Furthermore, the Greeks and Romans looked on one crucified as the lowest of criminals, so how could such a one be considered a savior? From their viewpoint, the Greeks would have had difficulty in conceiving of how a god, being spirit, could become incarnate and thus provide a god-man atonement for sin. [11]

Both the Greek and the Jewish ways of knowing truth, which are impacted by mankind's fall, cannot process the message of the cross. Furthermore, the message of the cross is still a stumbling block today. Robert Kolb and Charles Arand state:

God's saving and life-restoring Word causes those whose minds are trying to master life on their own terms to stumble. People are

accustomed to controlling their lives and their environments by learning through signs and empirical testing or through logical and rational analysis. Such people are offended by having to learn about the most important aspects of life, God, and their relationship to him just by simply listening and receiving God's gifts. They think the cross of Christ reveals nothing but the end or absence of wisdom and power. They are wrong. Into sinful chaos and darkness, God's Word speaks the might and the prudence of his way of recreating fallen, straying human creatures in order to restore light and life. [12]

Contrary to the competing messages of various knowledge sources, the word of the cross is the Christian's message.

The word God speaks from the cross leads them back to listening to him and taking him at his word. It permits them to acknowledge him in the midst of death and despair. This word from the cross enables them to fill in the blanks in their lives. It clings to his promise when everything else contradicts the word of his love from the cross. It enables his people to confront and describe themselves and the world around them honestly and forthrightly. The theology of the cross liberates God's children from having to construct falsehoods in order for life to make sense. The truth of the cross sets them free to speak the truth, no matter how bad it is, so that God's truth in Jesus may restore the good. [13]

The message of the cross is the Christian's knowledge source in the midst of other knowledge sources. Keep in mind, though, that "the 'theology of the cross' does not mean that for a theologian the church year shrinks together into nothing but Good Friday. Rather, it means that Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost cannot be understood without Good Friday." [14] In other words, it does not mean that conventional wisdom, logic, empiricism, observation, etc... are completely dismissed/disregarded, but rather it is "from the cross that everything is understood, because hidden in the cross is the deepest essence of God's revelation." [15]

In summary, truth is attached to the person of Christ; the idea of truth stands and falls on Jesus (See John 14:6). Truth is Christocentric. However, truth is not only defined by the person of Christ, but truth is also derived from Christ's cross; truth is also Crucicentric. Therefore, Jesus and the salvific cross, as expressed in God's Holy Word, are the Christian's quintessential knowledge sources. Indeed, in the words of Herman Sasse, "from the cross . . . everything is understood, because hidden in the cross is the deepest essence of God's revelation." [16]

[1] The Augsburg Confession, Article II, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 37-38.

[2] Gerhard Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990), 49.

[3] Robert Kolb and Charles Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology: A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2008), 144.

[4] William H. Willimon, *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), 113.

[5] Robert Kolb and Charles Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology: A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church*, 144.

[6] Ibid.

[7] See John 15:1-ff.

[8] Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics: Volume 1* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 202.

[9] Ibid, 200.

[10] W. Harold Mare, *Romans through Galatians: Volume 10*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary with the New International Version. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976), 194.

[11] Ibid, 195.

[12] Kolb and Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology: A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church*, 146.

[13] Ibid, 147.

[14] Hermann Sasse, *We Confess: Anthology*, trans. Norman Nagel (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1999.), 38.

[15] Ibid, 39.

[16] Ibid.