



"Trying to determine what is going on in the world by reading newspapers is like trying to tell the time by watching the second hand of a clock."

—Ben Hecht

12-Oct-12

What Is Truth?

The goings-on in this world constantly remind me why a certain quotation from the late novelist Michael Crichton, author of *The Andromeda Strain*, *Timeline*, *The Great Train Robbery*, *State of Fear*, and many other bestselling books, resonates so much. In a speech delivered to the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco on September 15, 2003, he said in answer to the question of what he considered the most important challenge facing mankind:

The greatest challenge facing mankind is the challenge of distinguishing reality from fantasy, truth from propaganda. Perceiving the truth has always been a challenge to mankind, but in the information age (or as I think of it, the disinformation age) it takes on a special urgency and importance.

Last night, millions of Americans viewed the intense debate between Vice President Joe Biden, a Democrat, and Representative Paul Ryan, a Republican. Both candidates thrust and parried with a steady onslaught of statistics—an armory of dollars and percentages—that each insisted were

correct and verified by both governmental and independent audits and studies. Of course, the statistics that were waved about had been carefully chosen to support and spin each candidate's position on the several major policies that were "discussed."

But who is the viewer to believe? Among the topics that the moderator brought up, a few were contentious. For instance, Romney-Ryan will put forward a "framework," sparse on details, to reduce the deficit, lower taxes, and create twelve million jobs, welcoming bipartisan support. Obama-Biden will cut middle-class taxes but force wealthy Americans to "pay their fair share," ensuring that Obamacare, Social Security, and Medicare remain to help everyone. The Republican candidates will take foreign policy out of the hands of the UN and take a cautious approach to pulling out of Afghanistan and intervening in Syria. The Democrat candidates will honor their agreement with their allies regarding the Afghanistan exit plan and do what they can to support the rebels in Syria without sending in troops.

One viewer may see a clear choice between the two sides, while another may see only different shades of red. This brings up another point made by Crichton:

We must daily decide whether the threats we face are real, whether the solutions we are offered will do any good, whether the problems we're told exist are in fact real problems, or non-problems. Every one of us has a sense of [the world](#), and we all know that this sense is in part given to us by what other people and society tell us; in part generated by our emotional state, which we project outward; and in part by our genuine perceptions of reality. In short, our struggle to determine what is true is the struggle to decide which of our perceptions are genuine, and which are false because they are handed down, or sold to us, or generated by our own hopes and fears.

Or, as a cynical, career-politician named Pontius Pilate once asked [Jesus](#), "What is truth?" ([John 18:38](#)). Not only had he spent his adult life clambering upward in Roman politics, but as governor of Judea, he had also spent many years skirting the pitfalls inherent in Jewish politics. He knew how the world works. Each political party or religious sect had its own

"truth," and who could know which was correct? Certainly, an outsider as he was could not separate the pure from the dross. He knew from experience that in a sophisticated world like the Roman Empire—or like our modern civilization—what is perceived to be true is often more important than what is actually true. Clever men can ride such perceptions to the heights of power.

Crichton's warning, then, while intended for us in these [Daniel 12:4](#) times, spotlights an age-old challenge: How do we determine the truth? Our problem is more difficult than Pilate's was only in the fact that we are faced with a tsunami of information each day, as compared to his mere trickle of news. It has been posited that just one Sunday *New York Times* contains more information than the average medieval villager would receive in a lifetime, and we can be sure that a Roman official would gather somewhat more. As the prophet wrote, "Knowledge [information] shall increase."

Even so, human nature is the same now as it was then, so the level of dishonesty and trickery in those who supply the information is probably nearly the same. Just as Pilate had to discern the facts in the case the Jews brought against Jesus, we have to determine, in a myriad of instances, what is truth and what is marketing, propaganda, spin, disinformation, hyperbole, etc. We must ferret out motives, discover fallacies, and consider probabilities and potentialities. None of these things is easy to do, but some of us, perhaps even many of us, have become proficient in doing these things due to being constantly forced to make such evaluations.

By "us," I mean members of the church of [God](#). There is a good reason—in fact, two good reasons—why we may be better at this than others are: 1) We have access to the truth in God's Word, and 2) we have the help of the Holy Spirit to discern truth. Jesus tells us in [John 8:31-32](#): "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." This is an extremely significant statement. It links God's Word with the truth, discipleship with living the truth, and understanding the truth with liberty.

Divine revelation, which we have in Scripture, gives us the foundational truths that do not change, providing us with a starting point of discernment and oftentimes a great deal more. This allows us to cut through the static and grasp the heart of an issue, comment, or claim, making the determination of

truth or error easier. Moreover, if we are living the truth, we have experience to know what works and what does not, giving us a further edge. Finally, a deep understanding of the truth allows us the freedom to choose what to believe and what to reject.

In terms of discerning truth, God gives us an awesome gift in the Holy Spirit, which [John 14:17](#) calls "the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive." Later in that [Passover](#) message, Jesus instructs the disciples that the Spirit "will guide you into all truth" ([John 16:13](#)). Most specifically, He implies spiritual truth, "the deep things of God" that Paul writes about in [1 Corinthians 2:10-16](#)). However, those spiritual truths do not exist in a vacuum. They reach out into every area of life, shining a light on what is real and exposing what is false. Paul concludes his teaching by saying, ". . . he who is spiritual judges all things" (verse 15), and in actuality, such a person with God's Spirit is in process of developing the very mind of Christ (verse 16).

The task of discerning the truth in these confusing times is before us. We can be thankful that God has given us the tools to meet the challenge and overcome it.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Keeping the Truth Pure](#)

by Charles Whitaker

Charles Whitaker cautions that although God's Church has correct or right doctrine, we need to know more than right doctrine. We must be able to use right reason (supported by scripture and God's Holy Spirit) to support and defend right doctrine. If keeping or understanding doctrine comes from wrong, distorted, or questionable sources or wrong motives, the doctrine may be contaminated or defiled. If we allow doctrine to be contaminated with man's flawed, syncretistic reason, it will contaminate, defile, or profane the truth. One of Job's 'counselors,' Eliphaz, derived his hopeless, pessimistic

and non-edifying advice (not from Biblical sources) from demonically inspired Gnosticism, putting himself at variance with God's Word. Bildad also encourages Job to look to non-biblical secular, Gnostic teachings of a mysterious, shadowy "fathers of fathers" - based upon the teachings of Satan rather than God's Word. We need to be careful of modern Gnostic syncretism found on television evangelists and commentaries.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[The Whole Truth](#)

by John O. Reid (1930-2016)

Most of us have heard the courtroom mantra, "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." John Reid, however, applies these criteria to our behavior, showing that many of us shy away from "nothing but the truth"!

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