

Inferences and Unfolded Truth

People believe all sorts of things for all sorts of reasons. “What” we believe is important, but it should be obvious that “how” and “why” we believe are also important. Our mind is a marvel, and its working has interested philosophers for many centuries. Like every other branch of learning, the philosophy of the mind has passed through many different stages. Trends in philosophy come and go, and we are influenced by them more than we like to admit. But when it comes to something like the philosophy of the mind, we ought to stop and think about what has happened. As people who study the Bible, we devote a lot of attention to the concepts of “knowledge” and “belief.” What is “believed about belief ” should be of practical interest to us.

There was a time when philosophers had confidence that the human mind could reason its way toward sure knowledge. Back then, classical logic was a serious study, undertaken to discipline the mind in reaching valid conclusions. But that period of philosophy is long gone. It has been many years since academic philosophers have said anything positive about either objective truth or our ability to apprehend it.

Ideas accepted in the classroom eventually reach the street, of course, and so it’s no surprise that ordinary people now speak very skeptically about human reasoning and knowledge. Pervading nearly every area of study, including Bible study, are the notions that (a) there is no such thing as real truth and (b) the reasonings of the human mind are never anything more than subjectively accurate. Wherever “reasoning” or “inference” have to be used, we are told, one person’s conclusions are as “true” as any other’s. One can’t “know” an inference, he can only “believe” it. And it must be held privately as an “opinion,” something only subjectively true at best.

In the area of Bible study, a great deal is heard now about the skeptical brackets that must be placed around anything learned by inference from the Scriptures. According to this view, we can’t be sure of any truth except that which comes from direct, explicit commands and statements. Whatever may be implied by these direct statements must be kept in the non-dogmatic realm of tentative truth.

Richard Whately, the nineteenth century British philosopher of rhetoric, said something about inference that is even more pertinent today than when he wrote it. He said that the “object of all reasoning is to expand and unfold the assertions wrapped up, as it were, and implied in those with which we set out, and to bring a person to perceive and acknowledge the full force of that which he has admitted; to contemplate it in various point of view; to admit in one shape what he has already admitted in another, and to give up and disallow whatever is inconsistent with it.”

The point is significant, especially in regard to Bible study. In nearly every truth there are “wrapped up” some other truths which cannot be other than true if the first truth is granted. Valid reasoning “unfolds” these, and the unfolded (inferred) truth is no less true than the fact with which we started out. In real life, it would be ridiculous to cut our

convictions down to the bare minimum of what we can know without any “reasoning.” We must make sure our reasoning is valid. But valid reasoning does yield truth. And the fact of the matter is, there’s precious little of anything that we can know without some use of inference.

The very truth that Jesus is Lord must be inferred. It requires some reasoning, like most other truths. Jesus Himself did not make many direct statements to the public about His deity. But He implied a great many things, and He held His audiences responsible for making the right inferences about Him (Jn. 9:30-33; 20:30,31). Jesus’ lordship is not the only inference that people could make; it was simply the most reasonable. The fact that reasoning was involved did not mean that one person’s reasoning was as good as another’s. Jesus taught that people would be lost if they failed to make the right inferences and reach the right conclusion (Mt. 11:20-24).

The truth about Jesus of Nazareth is a spiritual truth that can’t be known by direct, sensory observation. It’s an implication. It can only be inferred from what has been observed (Jn. 20:8). Do we therefore have to remain tentative about it? Certainly not. Our conclusion can be certain, even though we use reasoning to get there. We simply have to do the same thing those who saw Jesus had to do: we have to unfold one truth from another, grasping additional truths that are implied by previous ones. Then and now, the “blessed” are those who reach the right conclusion: “Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (Jn. 20:29). Truths that are “unfolded” are not only knowable, they are sometimes more important than the facts from which we unfolded them!

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