

“The Death of Absolute Truth...the Birth of Truthfulness”

John 8: 21-32

Trusting an Unknowable God

By Sam Keen, pg. 69-70, *Hymns to and Unknown God*

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Josh McDowell, an evangelical author and speaker, was quoted in 2006 saying, “In 1991, 52 percent of our born again church kids said there is no absolute truth. In 1994, 62 percent said there is no absolute truth. In 1999, 78 percent of born again church kids said there is no absolute truth. In 2002, 91 percent of our born again church kids said there is no absolute truth.” (abideinchrist.com). In a period of eleven years that number jumped from just more than half to over 90%.

I do not question his data that born again church youth are rejecting the claims that there is absolute truth. Where he and I differ is this. Josh McDowell says that the cause of the problem is the influence of secular education and the secular media in the last 40-50 years. I would argue that what he perceives as a problem is no problem at all. The cause is that we live in a changing world and these born again Christian youth have looked at the evidence and found the arguments for absolute truth sorely lacking.

From the outset I do want to establish that I am not interested in the deeper philosophical argument about whether there is absolute truth or not. Philosophers from Plato on have made some very airtight cases for the presence of absolute truth. And at a philosophical level I would not debate that point. My sermon title is really about the claims we Christians have made regarding absolute truth.

What is especially interesting about this situation is that Josh McDowell is concerned about today’s youth rejecting the absolute truth claims of Christianity. Yet, look at who the statistics are about. He is not citing today’s youth in general. He is not even citing the youth who have never entered into a church. He is citing, in his own words, born again kids in our churches. He is saying that 91% of church youth do not believe in absolute truth. Look at what is happening. Young Christians themselves are rejecting the Bible as being absolute truth, yet it is not keeping them from becoming practicing and faithful Christians.

I am sure that this may puzzle many of us. We may want to ask, “*If they don’t believe that the Bible is true then why would they follow Christ. If they don’t accept that it is God’s inerrant Word then why would they become born again Christians?*” I said it last week and I’ll say it again, “*Welcome to the exciting, confusing, and changing world.*” Young people today largely become Christians not because they believe the Bible to be universally true, but because they experience it as truth in their own lives.

What really excites me about this is that it brings back into vogue some of the more traditional ways of seeing Christianity. Now, when I say traditional I am not talking about how we have practiced our faith in the last 50 to 100 years. What is happening is actually a return to the “good old days.” What is happening is actually a return to the faith as it was practiced in the first few centuries of Christianity.

The best way to get at this is to go back to our Scripture lesson today. This is one of those sermons where a single word makes all the difference in how we understand a text. Remember how I said that many of today’s young Christians may not believe in the truth of the Bible, but they do experience the truthfulness of the Bible. In the New Revised Standard Version, John 8:32 is translated as, “**and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you**

free.” I decided to check out how Eugene Peterson translated this same verse. Before I opened it up I was thinking to myself, “I just bet he translated the word *know* as *experience*.” I was rather pleased with myself when I read this, “**Then Jesus turned to the Jews who had claimed to believe in him, saying, “If you stick with this, living out what I tell you, you are my disciples for sure. Then you will *experience* for yourselves the truth, and the truth will free you.”**” The NRSV reads, “**you will know the truth**” and Peterson’s translation reads, “**you will experience the truth, and the truth will free you.**”

The reason that Eugene Peterson can take such liberties with his translation is that translating is not an exact science. The translators of the NRSV and *The Message* are both working with the same Greek word, *epiginosko*. It is one form of the word, *gnosis*, that we know is translated as knowledge. A Gnostic is one who has *gnosis*, that is, secret knowledge. A Gnostic is one who is *epiginosko*, that is, one who is “in the know.”

But, it is not necessarily correct to translate *epiginosko* as “to know.” *Epiginosko* is the stronger form of the word *ginosko*. Both mean “to know.” But, *ginosko* is more along the lines of “perceiving or being aware of.” It would be like me saying, “I know Councilman Randy Leonard.” The truth of the matter is I do know Randy Leonard because I have met him on two or three occasions. That would be how *ginosko* would be used. *Epiginosko* would be like me saying, “I know my kids, Phil and Julie.” See the difference? I have a very casual acquaintance with Randy Leonard, but I can still say that I know him. My children, on the other hand, I know much more intimately. I really know my children. I know their motivations, their struggles, their hopes and their dreams. My life and their lives in intimately woven.

A really good example is how the Old Testament uses the word, *yada*. Jerry Seinfeld made this famous with his “yada, yada, yada” phrase which just means, “you know, you know, you know...” In Genesis 4:1 we have this verse that reads, “**Now the man (referring to Adam) knew his wife Eve, and she conceived.**” I am hoping I don’t have to fill in the details for you here. In the Old Testament “to know” someone was not just to recall their name, but was to be intimately tied to them. The point is that there is a difference between knowing about God and really knowing and experiencing God intimately. Just ask Eve! There is a difference between believing in the idea of God and actually living into the reality of God.

Josh McDowell is concerned that 91% of today’s born again young Christians don’t believe in the absolute truth of the Bible. What he finds a source of deep concern I find is a reason for hope for the church. He sees the rapid erosion of the Christian faith. I see the resurrection of our faith among a new generation. Josh McDowell and many of us are used to thinking there are only two options: if you believe in the absolute truth claims of the Bible you become a Christian; if you don’t believe it’s absolutely true then you reject Christianity.

Today’s young people are leading the way toward a third option (an option that actually resurrects what our ancient way of experiencing the Biblical text). That option is that you don’t have to believe in the absolute truth of the Bible to experience it’s truthfulness. What today’s young Christians are doing is rejecting the idea that our version of the truth is the one, absolute, be-all-end-all, truth of God. And at the same time they are giving their heart, mind and soul over to God. They are turning their lives over to Jesus even as they question his final authority over all life and for all people.

Isn’t it a wonderful paradox: to not know for sure whether your version of God is the one universal, absolute truth and, yet, to throw your whole body at the foot of Jesus and commit to living into the experience of God. It’s sort of like a young spouse saying, “I don’t know for sure

that this is the right person for me, but I am going to commit myself heart and soul to our life together.

I remember in seminary one of professors was famous for his word studies and he would say, "It's not believing *in* Jesus; it's believing *into* Jesus." Only now are young Christians beginning to teach me what my old professor was saying two decades ago. It's not about just knowing God; it's about intimately participating in God's life. We don't just believe in Jesus; we experience the truth of Jesus. We aren't saved by believing in some external absolute truth; we are saved by living out the birth of truthfulness in us.

Sam Keen writes, "*God is not an object to be known or a problem to be solved by human intelligence, but is...the totality within which we live, move, and have our being....Faith is dancing in the dark.*"

If you want to look into the crystal ball for the future of the Church in America look at today's evangelical youth. Josh McDowell reports that 91% of born again youth in churches do not believe in absolute truth. They do not believe the Bible is infallible. They do not believe the Bible is inerrant. They do not believe that their version of God is one true way of seeing God. They do not believe that what they hold to be true is what is actually true. Yet, they love Jesus. They entrust their lives to God. They look to the Bible for guidance and wisdom. And they experience the freedom of living into Jesus truth.

It's like the man who is running through the forest to get away from a bear. As he is running he comes across another man who asks, "Where are you going?" The first man squeaks out between gasps, "I am running away from a bear." "How do you know for sure you are going the right direction?" The man replies, "I don't know for sure. But, I am not about to stop and find out."

Today's young Christians will tell you that they don't know for sure that following Jesus is the right way, the only way, or the best way. But, they will also tell you that following Jesus has saved their lives. They will tell you that in Jesus they experience hope and love and forgiveness. They will share that they know in their heart of hearts that their purpose is to live into the peace, the justice and compassion of Jesus.

Josh McDowell reports that today's young born-again are rejecting the claims of absolute truth by the Christian Church. He finds reason to be alarmed. I find reason for hope. Jesus said, "**If you stick with this, living out what I tell you, you are my disciples for sure. Then you will experience for yourselves the truth, and the truth will free you.**"

We live in a changing world. One can reject the claims of absolute truth and still experience the love and salvation of entrusting our lives to God. Sam Keen says, "*Faith is dancing in the dark.*" I love that image. We may not know what is ahead of us, but we dance nonetheless.

Here is the deal: Adam knew Eve so well that she conceived! How well do you know Jesus?

Followed by Hymn No. 275 "God of Our Life"