



The Power of Open-Mindedness

*“The greatest enemy of knowledge is not ignorance,
it is the illusion of knowledge.” **

As Christians, we all want to grow in knowledge and understanding—of the Bible, of God’s way of life, of *“the truth.”* After all, such knowledge is precious—and we’re admonished to seek spiritual insight above all else (Prov. 4:7). But the pursuit of truth can be a tricky thing: While we all maintain an undeniable conviction about our current understanding, the acquisition of truth typically requires us to acknowledge our *intellectual fallibility*. In other words, before we can learn anything new of value, we sometimes have to admit that we are wrong.

Most of us have been brought up with a set of beliefs and values that we essentially inherited from our parents—or from others who are central to our environment and culture. This is especially true when it comes to religion: we don’t choose what we believe, it is handed down to us. (I’m a Baptist because my mom was a Baptist and because her mom was a Baptist before her!) Rarely do people ever question their familial *belief set*; tradition is just too entrenched. And as time goes on, we tend to surround ourselves with people who both share and reinforce our values and beliefs.

We could go on like this for the rest of our lives, happy in our comfort zone, eager to maintain the status quo. But as many of us have experienced, we one day found ourselves challenged—forced, really, into considering some alternate point of view or alleged “truth” that didn’t belong to our deep-rooted belief set. And it wasn’t just a matter of accepting some “new” truth, it meant *giving up* certain cherished ideas.

But fortunately we gave the matter serious consideration. It was uncomfortable, humiliating, even embarrassing. And as the dust settled, three things became clear: 1) We just learned something new—some wonderful new truth; 2) We really *do* “see as if through a hazy glass” (I Cor. 13:12); and 3) There are people out there who know more—a lot more—than we do.

Coming to grips with our *intellectual fallibility* is tough, but it ultimately serves us well in our search for truth. It allows us to move forward and grow in understanding, ferreting out error and replacing it with what we *now* believe to be *“the truth.”* Over time we solidify our belief system, our set of “proven” concepts or doctrines; we fortify our position on various teachings and slowly come to see our belief set as *unshakable*. We hold fast to it, defend it, and reject even the suggestion of doubtfulness. In short, we own it.

And this is a good thing. After all, as Christians we want to have *confidence* in our values and

beliefs—to be sure we’re standing on biblically solid ground. But over time, something regrettable can happen. Our sense of human *fallibility* can become a casualty of a stalwart, “I’ve got it all nailed down” mindset. We may find ourselves unwilling or unable to entertain the idea that we could *still* be wrong about ... something, anything.

What happened to our open-mindedness? Our teachable spirit? And remember, it was our willingness to *admit error* that actually brought us this far.

Real open-mindedness

We hear it everywhere: “You need to have an open mind!” Problem is, most people don’t understand *real* open-mindedness. They think being open-minded means being a “free thinker”—someone who is open to all kinds of ideas and never critically questions anything. But that’s *worldly* open-mindedness, and even the standard dictionary definition reflects this perspective by using terms such as unbiased, unprejudiced, neutral, nonjudgmental. Such *pseudo* open-mindedness—where “everything is tolerated and nothing is questioned”—is a dangerous intellectual snare that emanates from a larger multiculturalist/diversity agenda advocating permissive liberalism. Worse, such “open-mindedness” denies the existence of *absolute* truth.

Skeptics and atheists are praised as open-minded “free thinkers”—a mindset where tolerance and moral relativism are touted as ultimate virtues, where every philosophical idea or faith system is of equal value, worthy of equal respect. On the other hand, favoring a particular belief set or faith system over another means you’re narrow-minded, unenlightened. And if you embrace the idea of absolute truth, you’re considered bigoted.

So obviously we want to avoid this *worldly* “open-mindedness.” But what about *real* open-mindedness? Let’s try to pin it down.

First, consider this: Open-mindedness is relevant only when we are confronted with other peoples’ beliefs or ideas, typically when those beliefs or ideas are in conflict with our own. Thus, open-mindedness is essentially a nonissue if you are already in agreement with someone.

So what does “open-mindedness” look like? It all starts with the honest realization that you don’t know everything; that you *have been* and *could still be* wrong; that you may have overlooked something. In fact, you are, *right now*, wrong about something that you *think* you have nailed down. Remember, there are things you don’t know. Lots of things. And worse, *you don’t know what you don’t know*. Or as Robert Frost put it, “We all proceed with insufficient knowledge.”

To genuinely have an “open mind” means to be willing to *honestly* consider or look into new and different ideas—even those that might run counter to your established belief set—when presented with *credible* evidence. It means being willing to admit error when presented with evidence that you may have been wrong. Believing something passionately is a wonderful thing. Yet when you assume that your belief set is untouchable, you create a mindset where no new truth can take hold.

But let’s qualify things a bit. Being open-minded does not require you to consider any and

every crackpot idea that gets floated. There has to be *compelling evidence* that your current position might be somehow flawed. And not everything is on the table—nor should it be. Since we’re primarily dealing with the area of religious beliefs, here’s an example: For over 40 years I have kept the seventh-day Sabbath, Saturday. Over the years I think I’ve heard and debunked every argument out there as to why Christians are not obligated to keep the Sabbath. And that includes off-the-wall ideas like “Lunar Sabbaths,” etc. So, for me, the Sabbath is *not* on the table. It’s non-negotiable. I won’t be giving any serious consideration to arguments contrary to Sabbath-keeping.

But some of my beliefs *are* on the table. They’re open for challenge—or at least could be. In other words, there are a number of ideas or truths about which I possess a high level of confidence, yet I am cautiously aware of the possibility that I could be somehow wrong. I base this on past experience: Over the years I have had numerous “untouchable” positions overturned by the introduction of new, compelling evidence. So I am quite aware of my *intellectual fallibility*.

Again, open-mindedness is really a nonissue when everyone is in agreement. But how do you respond when someone comes to you with what they believe is credible evidence supporting a position that is contrary to the position you currently hold? A truly open-minded person will genuinely listen and *give a fair hearing* to their evidence. Why? Because the alternative is to risk losing an opportunity to learn new truth, to correct error. The alternative requires you to *deny* your intellectual fallibility. So true open-mindedness involves a willingness to “loosen one’s grip” on a particular belief in order to give a fair hearing to arguments against that belief. And we find a perfect example of this in the Bible—in the case of the Jews of Berea.

The Berean example

In Acts 17 we read that the apostle Paul had been sent to Berea, a city of Macedonia, where he began preaching the Gospel, as was his custom, in the Jews’ synagogues. Paul had done so previously in Thessalonica—only to face rejection, scorn, and persecution by the Jews there. But his reception in Berea was different. “The Berean Jews were fair-minded, unlike those in Thessalonica, and gave serious consideration to Paul’s unfamiliar message—examining the Scriptures daily to see if Paul was right” (Acts 17:11).

Paul was preaching the reality of Jesus as the Messiah, a message highly offensive to Jews. The Jewish community both in Judea and throughout the diaspora looked for a biblically mandated messiah-king, one who would deliver Israel from all her enemies and restore her kingdom. And Jesus just didn’t fit the bill. As the Jews saw it, the true Messiah (who couldn’t possibly come from wretched Galilee!) would not allow himself to be killed—let alone be crucified like a common criminal.

So the Jews in Thessalonica would not budge from their well-entrenched beliefs—seemingly based on clear Old Testament passages—about the Messiah. Their knee-jerk reaction to Paul was the opposite of open-mindedness. They simply would not entertain Paul’s ideas.

But the Berean Jews were of a different mind. Luke, the author of Acts, says they were of a

more “noble” character—indicating that they were honest, fair-minded. They wanted to know the truth, even if it meant admitting that they had been wrong. Paul’s message of a *crucified* Messiah ran counter to their beliefs too, just as it did with the Jews of Thessalonica. But the Bereans wanted to be sure. Aware of their own intellectual fallibility, they “loosened their grip” on the orthodox Jewish perspective just enough to take Paul’s message seriously. Then they diligently began to examine the Scriptures to see if Paul was indeed right.

The opposite mindset is also noted in the Bible. In Revelation 3, the church at Laodicea is reprimanded by Jesus for their closed-minded arrogance. Their self-confident claim was, “I am rich. I have acquired considerable wealth and need absolutely nothing” (verse 17). Jesus answers, “Yes, but you fail to see that you are *spiritually* wretched, poor, blind, and naked.” While this church may have actually been wealthy, it is apparent that Jesus is pointing out their grievous spiritual condition. Their claim of absolute self-sufficiency carries obvious spiritual implications: Smug with their belief set, they had “*the truth*” nailed down. Who could teach them anything?

The Christian paradox: dogma verses doubt

In most religions, absolute commitment to one’s beliefs is viewed as ideal. And the stronger one’s commitment, the less open-minded one will be regarding those beliefs. Does this mean religious devotion is inconsistent with open-mindedness? Can one be completely resolved on an issue and at the same time be open to revising one’s beliefs on that issue? Is the only alternative to go through life with a leaky theological bucket filled with holes? Is there not a happy medium to this dilemma?

Attempting to harmonize these two positions—being dogmatic, yet allowing for doubt—often leads to significant apprehension. We strive to hold on to what we’ve proven (which, remember, came to us only by our willingness to admit error) while trying to maintain some kind of awareness that we could still be wrong. How do we deal with this tension between the need for conviction and the reality of human imperfection? How do we avoid a rigid, know-it-all mindset that leaves us boxed in? And how do we avoid losing that indispensable cognizance of fallibility?

The key, it seems, lies in being *honest*. There is an honesty that comes with open-mindedness, an honesty that says *I’m not all-knowing*; an honesty that realizes that the pursuit of truth is never-ending; an honesty that does not fear being wrong; an honesty that is confident that our world will not crumble to pieces if we discover that some of our cherished beliefs aren’t as solid as we thought.

Ultimately, open-mindedness is a choice—a deliberate choice. You *choose* to have an open mind because the alternative is untenable. It’s based on an awareness of your limitations. You come to realize that you *have been* wrong, *are now* wrong, and *will yet be* wrong about something—yes, even something important. You learn to value dissenting opinions, with all of their facts and arguments. Why? Because it is only by *incorporating* or *rejecting* such opposing views that one can enter into new truth or strengthen his or her existing convictions.

So open-mindedness becomes the only logical choice. And being wrong—it's not something we should fear. As educator Lawrence Krauss once said, "It's amazing to discover that you're wrong. In fact, it's liberating. It's not a threat. It opens your mind."

What are you afraid of?

Let's say a friend comes to you with what they believe is credible evidence supporting a position that is contrary to the position you currently hold, how will you react? Assuming that you *give a fair hearing* to their evidence, there are (at least) three possible outcomes:

1) Upon investigation you find that your friend is right. You actually learn some new truth—while humbly admitting your error. Everybody wins. 2) You are able to humbly show your friend his or her error—while maintaining your current position. Again, everybody wins. 3) Your friend is a clever salesman. He convinces you that he is right, when in fact he is wrong. Now both of you are wrong. Nobody wins.

This third outcome deserves some discussion—because many Christians worry that open-mindedness can lead them into areas of unbiblical or unsound doctrine. *This is a legitimate concern.* I have actually seen this numerous times over the years: you run across some wannabe guru on the Internet and off you go. This is why some church leaders discourage followers from reading "outside" materials and insist that only their brand of "*the truth*" is legitimate. But by far, *most deception* comes from well-meaning but misguided church leaders and pastors.

The reality is, *few* Christians are adept at proving or disproving doctrine. And some—so-called "babes" in Christ, for example—may be particularly at risk (Heb. 5:13). You *must* be aware of your limitations in this area and get the help you need to avoid being tripped up. The danger is real, so *take this responsibility seriously*. In an ideal world, the leadership of the church would never let believers go astray (Eph. 4:11-14). *In an ideal world.*

Still, we must never allow the fear of being led astray to paralyze us—to cause us to shrink from open-mindedness. The key is to *stay close to God*—only He can keep you from falling (Jude 24).

The pursuit of truth requires a teachable spirit and a willingness to recognize one's inadequacy on all sorts of issues. So never be afraid to say, "I don't know"—or of shelving something for future resolution. Not all questions must be answered in this life.

Be diligent to "test the spirits" (I John 4:1) and "prove all things" (I Thess. 5:21)—while keeping everything in perspective and focusing on the *weightier matters* (Matt. 23:23). And always remember: *You don't know what you don't know.*

* Quote by physicist Stephen Hawking