

Epistemology Part 3

How do we know when it comes to theological and spiritual truth?

In Epistemology part 1, I offered what to me are three core questions I ask of any claim to theological or spiritual truth. In Part 2 I explained the four sources of how we come to know or experience God and affirm what becomes theological and spiritual truth for us. They are: Revelation, Faith, the Holy Spirit and the Church (Link). In Part 3 I explain what have been identified in a different way as four traditional sources of theological or spiritual truth (often called the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral.” John Wesley was a 18th century English Protestant reformer, theologian and preacher, and also the founder of Methodism.)

1) The bible. Even as the bible was written by many persons over a thousand or so years, it offers us a diversity of narrative, poetry, law, letters and sayings all put together in two collections we call the Older and Newer Testaments. The Old Testament is the background story, wisdom and poetry of the Hebrew people leading up to Jesus and the first few generations of Jesus followers who composed the New Testament. Even as it was human persons who composed it all, we also believe the bible is inspired by God who makes the story and the words come alive in our hearts. And if and when this happens in us, it becomes revealed, divine truth and Holy Scripture.

2) Tradition and the teaching of the Church. Even though as Protestants we can hang loose when it comes to traditions of the past, and even as we recognize that every institution is flawed including the church, we also recognize that we have much to learn from those who came before us and we have much to learn from others in the fellowship, worship and learning that happens in the Church. To assume that we can figure out all the truth there is to know on our own is the height of arrogance, ignorance and foolishness. From the earliest days of the church, people learned and grew their faith not only through the risen Christ and his Spirit but also in the fellowship and sharing they did with each other. We are no different in our need today.

3) Reason, intellect, the mind. As Presbyterians, we have privileged the importance of “thinking” the faith more than most other Christian denominations. It’s not enough to simply experience God. We must discern through our thinking and reflection what it is we are experiencing. Is it truly God? We know enough when we look around us in the world what spiritual experience and religious zeal can do. It can be as destructive as it can be life-giving, and it can harm in devastating ways as much as it can transform lives and communities. Developing our critical thinking, cultivating our intellect, and becoming smart about our faith is as important as feeling it in our hearts.

4) Human experience. And finally, yes, we must experience any truth that is spiritual in order for it to be genuinely true. But we must also reflect on what we experience. Does our

experience lead to judgement and even hate? Does it make distinctions that fail to understand and empathize with where others are at or their experiences of faith and life? Does it privilege our experience of what is true as the truth with a capital T? Even as our experience is a critical source of spiritual and theological truth, without critical thinking, without the fellowship and sharing with the experiences, knowledge and perspectives of others within the church, without the collective wisdom of traditions that have stood the test of time, and without intelligent and open-hearted study of the scriptures, we cannot grow in our understanding of spiritual truth that is of God.

What do you think?