

Truth and Discernment

In recent years we have experienced a proliferation of conflicting news. Everyone seems to have a new theory, the inside scoop, or have just read a news article explaining what is “really going on.” This has had a significant impact on our people, even creating conflict within churches. How should we respond when faced with contradictory information, and how are we to determine what to believe? Perhaps more importantly, how can we as leaders sort through this barrage of information and guide our congregations in truth?

The goal of this writing is to address these questions. We have divided the content into four parts. This is to make it more readable as well as to assist church leaders who desire to share this content in church bulletins, newsletters, or periodicals.

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COMING SOON

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Part 1: What Is Truth?

“What is truth?” This profound question echoed down the stone hall as the man who asked it, ironically, seemed too impatient to wait for an answer. The Bible says that when Pilate “had said this, he went out” (Jn. 18:38). It was the right question, asked of the right Person. But, like many of us, Pilate failed to carefully pursue the answer.

Today, people are asking the same question. Faced with an abundance of conflicting information, people are not sure what to believe. One source proclaims that this is “the truth,” while another shows strong evidence that “truth” is over here. And in the midst of this perplexing and chaotic swirl, humanity is confused. What then is truth?

The God of Truth

Truth has many definitions in modern culture, but for our purposes we will define it as that which is in accordance with fact or reality. It is the way things actually are. Truth stands alone, unmoved by popular opinions, false narratives, or fake news. It is unchanged by arguments, personal feelings, or even rulers who deny it. Truth is immutable, a characteristic of Almighty God Himself. Notice these descriptive words used by Moses as he sang of an unchanging God: “He is the Rock, His work is perfect: For all his ways are justice: *A God of truth* and without injustice, Righteous and upright is he” (Deut. 32:4, emphasis added). Like a rock, God’s truth never moves. The characteristics of truth—its permanence, enduring nature, and transcendent immutability—are all descriptions of God Himself.

In the New Testament, the Apostle John describes Jesus as “full of grace and truth” (Jn. 1:14). That is an amazing statement, yet Jesus took it one step further. “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn. 14:6). That must have startled Jesus’ disciples. Jesus didn’t say that He always told the truth or that truthfulness is one of His characteristics. He said He is truth. Jesus is truth personified!

Just before Jesus left this world, He promised the coming of the Holy Spirit. Notice how Jesus describes this coming Comforter.

“But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, *the Spirit of truth* who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me.

However, when He, *the Spirit of truth*, has come, He will *guide you into all truth*.

(Jn. 15:26, 16:13)

Since God loves truth, promotes truth, embodies truth, and is Truth, it only follows that His people will be lovers of truth. To love Jesus is to love truth. To live in Jesus is to live in Truth, daily guided by the Spirit of Truth. We should be known in our local communities as lovers of truth. Our words, manner of life, and the way we operate our businesses should provide a public declaration—“This is a lover of truth!”

The Church—Truth Demonstrated

Jesus' church is also called to the serious responsibility of collectively demonstrating truth. In the Apostle Paul's letter to the church at Thessalonica, he stresses the importance of loving truth. Setting aside any potential prophetic meaning, notice how he contrasts followers of Satan (who love a lie) with followers of Jesus (who are lovers of truth):

And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming. The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive *the love of the truth*, that they might be saved. And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who *did not believe the truth* but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

(2 Thes. 2:8–12)

Truth is a defining characteristic, a clear distinguishing line between two kingdoms. The one is known for loving, pursuing, and knowing truth. The other is identified by deceit, hypocrisy, and lies. The one passionately seeks and pursues truth—the other opposes it. Jesus' kingdom is Truth, and Satan's untruth.

Our society clearly aligns itself with Satan's kingdom as it increasingly calls evil good, insists that wrong is right, and peddles misinformation of every kind. Carelessness with truth is a defining characteristic of the kingdom of this world; if we pass on false narratives or deceitful theories, we are helping the father of lies. Believers should take this reality very seriously.

Kingdoms which view truth lightly use swearing to inform others when they are being entirely honest. But Jesus wanted a kingdom where His citizens tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth—all the time! Jesus instructed His disciples, “Do not swear at all... But let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No’” (Mt. 5:34–37). Paul told Timothy that he was writing “so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:14, 15). Do we understand the significance of these words? God's church is to be the “ground,” the underlying support for truth itself.¹ That is a tremendous calling!

There should be a clear picture of truth coming from our local church communities, giving our world an accurate description of reality.² Paul warned the church at Ephesus that they shouldn't be like “children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting” (Eph. 4:14). The church is to demonstrate stability, unmoved by false doctrines and unverified theories. We are to be a truth-believing, truth-loving, and truth-telling people. This was the original testimony of the early Church and

1 This is the only time this Greek word, *hedraïōma*, is used in the Bible. It speaks of support, a prop, or something underneath that is immovable and settled.

2 As Brett McCracken has written, “Shouldn't Christians, as followers of the man who called himself ‘the truth’ and said ‘the truth will set you free,’ be leading the charge to recover truth and model wisdom in a post-truth age?” (*The Wisdom Pyramid*. Wheaton, IL, Crossway, 2021, p. 22)

the historical position of the Anabaptists. A man's word was his bond, and people could depend on what he said. This is still God's desire for our local churches.

But what if a church becomes slack with truth, casual with research, and willing to pass on unverified information? Or worse, what if a church becomes known for believing the unbelievable and peddling false narratives?

Lost Credibility

Our churches seem fairly united on the basic doctrinal truths regarding Jesus Christ. We can articulate the New Testament message and share the important facts regarding Jesus' life, death, and glorious resurrection. We can even agree that it is important to share this truth with our unbelieving neighbors, and we talk about looking for opportunities to share "truth" with others.

But when we say a man is truthful, we are referring to more than doctrinal truth. We are also assuming he is serious about truth in his family life, with his neighbor, and with the facts about the product he is selling to a customer. Consequently, when he shares information about a current political issue, we assume he has done due diligence in verifying its veracity. His reputation depends on it, and we would no longer refer to him as an honest man if he was careless with truth, regardless of the subject.

So what happens when we lose credibility?

Let's assume a member of your congregation has a desire to share his faith in your community. He has grown up believing what he learned from his parents and what was taught in school, but he tends to believe sensational stories which come from people he trusts. He has never really enjoyed reading and has subconsciously assumed that occasionally skimming the headlines provides a fairly accurate perspective of our world.

One day he meets an agnostic on the job site. He wants to eventually share his faith, but in an effort to first build relationship, this member in your congregation begins by discussing current news events and his perspective on our world.

Church member: "Did you know that much of what the government is telling us really isn't true? A lot of this stuff is just made up. I have even heard that things like the Jewish holocaust never actually happened."

Agnostic (frowning): "But there are many pictures and videos of death camps. I saw them in school!"

Church member: "That's probably just part of the government's plan to mislead us. It's not hard to fabricate pictures and movies. You can't really believe any of the news anymore. There are huge things going on behind the scenes, and the government is constantly trying to deceive us!"

When your church member then attempts to share his faith, how much credibility would the Gospel message have? How can a message about Jesus be deemed credible if the messenger is seen as careless with truth in other parts of his life?

Our witness in the world is no stronger than our love for truth and connection to reality. When credibility is lost, individually or collectively, our ability to impact the kingdom of darkness and share the message of Jesus (Truth) is diminished. Why should honest seekers ask us for spiritual truth when we thoughtlessly pass on the unverified or untrue?

What Is Truth?

Recently many of our Anabaptist communities have experienced internal stress, partly because we can't agree on what is true. The result has been conflict within and a damaged Christian witness without.

Consider this parable:

Don and Ron are respected members in their local Anabaptist congregation. They both love the Lord, have godly families, and profess a deep love for truth. For years they sat on the same pew each Sunday, harmoniously enjoying their Christian lives together.

Then COVID hit.

Don observed what was happening, and the truth seemed obvious. The Bible warns that in the last days self-centered men will be lovers of themselves and not want to submit. They will rebel against rulers and disdain governments. This disrespect for authority will impact even the church. As Don listened to his news sources, read the material that came into his home, and conversed with friends who saw things as he did, the situation was clear. Masks and attempts to restrict gatherings were simply an attempt by the government to contain a pandemic. This was a medical virus, not persecution! Further, aren't we supposed to obey our rulers unless their commands conflict with God's? Failure to submit to this would simply demonstrate to our children that they need not submit to rules they don't agree with either!

Ron watched what was happening as well, and the truth seemed just as clear to him. This was exactly what the Bible said would transpire in the last days. Things would grow worse and worse, governments would become more corrupt, and powerful men would compete to control the people. The powers of darkness would creep in, and very few people would be able to stand. As Ron listened to his news sources, read the material that came into his home, and conversed with friends who saw things as he did, the situation was clear. Masks and attempts to restrict gatherings were simply government overreach, and anyone who couldn't stand up to this wouldn't be able to stand when more severe persecution came either!

Two good Christian men who had grown up in the same community and worked and worshiped together for years were suddenly unable to communicate. Each had his own news sources, solid evidence, friends who agreed with his perspective, and even Bible

verses to back up his position. Neither was willing to back down or compromise on what he saw as Scriptural truth.

As many of us can attest, this isn't just a wild hypothetical story. We have seen firsthand the unrest that differing opinions can have on a local congregation. We also suspect there will be more difficult situations in the future, and Satan would love to divide our churches. He loves dissension and would like nothing better than to destroy our families, discourage our children, and mute our witness to the world. The church is called to be light to a darkening society. But how can we do this if we are unable to even agree on what the truth is, where to find it, and which sources are trustworthy?

Don and Ron are at an impasse. Neither trusts the other and both are sure they understand the "truth." If they were in our congregation, what would we as church leaders do? Are our churches prepared for a continuing flood of half-truths, misinformation, and false narratives? Are we capable of coming together and discerning which issues are even worth debating and defending? Some issues are obviously worth investigating. But in a world awash in "facts," how are we going to discern truth?

These are questions we should be asking and issues we will consider in the following parts of this article. Just like Pilate, who asked the right question yet walked away, it is easy to say that we want truth, yet never apply ourselves or teach our people how to properly discern. It is time for our Anabaptist church communities to apply themselves to the issue of truth and discernment. A church's ability to share truth will be no stronger than its love for truth.

Part 2: Why the Struggle?

People came to America for different reasons and with divergent ideals, religious beliefs, and perspectives. Consequently, there have always been issues threatening to sever the union. Whether federalism in the 1700s, slavery in the 1800s, or Vietnam in the 1900s, America has always seemed to have a controversy threatening to split it apart. But something about the current division is different, and much of the reason rests on how we receive our news.

There was a time when the front portion of a newspaper seemed primarily devoted to the facts, and the back page held the editor's opinion. Today, however, much of the information we receive seems to be slanted, and the reader must work hard to discover truth. And there is much more material to sort through. Throughout history, investigating, producing, and disseminating news was labor intensive. Consequently, there was much less of it. But in today's world, with the availability of inexpensive communication tools, anyone with an opinion can be a news publisher.

Inflation of Information

The western world is awash with information. The number of news sources is mind-boggling, and everywhere we turn someone is trying to shape our perspective. Fueling much of this is the internet which seems to empower and amplify the brash, the ugly, the weird, and the extreme. Outrage and shocking headlines attract the most attention, and false narratives proliferate. Social media and web-based platforms (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Google, etc.) are funded by ads, and the more time a user spends on a site the more income is generated. Even newspapers' primary revenue stream is from advertising.

Of course, it didn't take marketers long to discover that the way to keep people on a site is to feed them a continual diet of news that agrees with their perspective. Complex computer algorithms have been created to discover each viewer's beliefs, causing the customized content to be a regurgitation of that person's viewpoint. These little echo chambers continually remind us how perceptive we really are, and we like that!

Americans who lean Republican will begin seeing an abundance of right-leaning articles on their news feed, and those who lean left find a profusion of articles proving that Democrats are correct. Confirmation bias³ is a universal human tendency, and the electronic world has quickly learned how to profit from this human weakness. This exploitation not only creates profits for these media companies, it also increases the deep ideological divide among Americans. In the past, people had different opinions but were largely working off the same information. Today, the "news" a person is consuming may be completely different than his or her neighbor's, yet each assumes their "news" is accurate and balanced. With neighbors (and church members) receiving information from opposing perspectives, conflict and misunderstanding are inevitable.

The wise man wrote, "Get wisdom! Get understanding! Do not forget..." for good reason (Pro. 4:5). Wisdom is much more difficult to obtain than information. The assumption today seems to

3 Confirmation bias is the tendency in people to favor information that confirms their existing beliefs.

be that humanity's greatest need is more information. But more information, of necessity, calls for increased discernment to properly use it, and the average American is already consuming far more "facts" than he or she can properly sort or validate. News feeds, websites, blogs, and articles have forced America to become a nation of prolific information skimmers. We read a few news articles or listen to a podcast and subtly believe we are an expert on the topic. We know what the "real problem" is, who the next president should be, or what the "real" cure is to a dreaded disease.

Where Are We?

One might assume that Anabaptist followers of Jesus, committed to truth and focused on a different kingdom, would be free of the divisions that plague our nation. Yet we are seeing this political partisanship creep into our churches. If you care about the unborn, insist on biological gender, or encourage traditional family values, you are associated with Republicans. If you are concerned about minorities, the poor, the treatment of immigrants, or even attempt to be a good steward of creation, you are labeled a Democrat. Yet all of these were Biblical values long before the current political polarization. So why do we see church members like Don and Ron dividing along political lines? How can a group of Christ-following people fall out because they are seemingly unable to agree on what truth even is? The answer may be that some of our greatest strengths as Anabaptist people come with corresponding weaknesses.

Seven Strengths that Can Become Weaknesses

1. We love simplicity and common sense.

We love practicality, level-headed pragmatism, and simple lifestyles without outward adornment. These are unquestionably Biblical values. The Apostle Paul commended the church at Corinth for operating out of "simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom," and we believe this is still God's will for us today (2 Cor. 1:12). We love common sense and eschew impractical head knowledge. But mishandling a strength creates a weakness, and simplicity is no exception.

It can be easy for us to assume that every problem has a commonsense solution, and world dilemmas are actually not very complex. This suspicion that uncomplicated answers exist makes us vulnerable to misinformation, and we tend to fall for simplistic answers to multifaceted dilemmas. Perhaps there is a spike in oil prices, or a sudden increase in the cost of lumber. Someone comes along and says, "I just heard this whole thing is the result of price gouging. A few men at the top have cornered the market, and they are driving the price up, taking advantage of the common man!"

This comment may or may not be true. But our love for simple solutions makes us susceptible to these easy-to-understand explanations, regardless of the fact that supply and demand is rarely that simple. It is actually very difficult to get large numbers of suppliers to agree to these kinds of schemes. But the simplicity of the proposed solution appeals to something deep within us.

There is also something intoxicating about knowing and sharing the inside scoop on hidden information. So we pass it on. And the simple, yet often erroneous, explanation continues.

2. We have a strong belief in Biblical separation from the world.

When the Bible calls us to “come out from among them, and be separate,” we believe it means what it says (2 Cor. 6:17). Paul told the church at Rome, “Do not be conformed to this world” (Rom 12:2), and we understand these words to still be applicable today. But misunderstanding this vital principle creates a weakness. For many years, we have operated as a counterculture movement within a larger society. We have even been given special exemptions by our government and, over time, we can begin to see ourselves as unique, better than, or somehow different than general society. But being born into an Anabaptist community does not exempt us from selfishness, greed, and other universal human tendencies.

When assessing world problems, we can too quickly lay the blame on others—other people, organizations, or even some wealthy man with a hidden agenda. Blaming the world’s woes on some social movement or a particular political party may be tempting, but it may simply be a way of bypassing the reality of universal sinful tendencies. All of us are partly responsible for the woes of this broken world, and by quickly assigning blame, we may be overlooking our own complicity.

In contrast, consider godly men in the past who willingly embraced their own humanity and culpability for sin. Leaders like Nehemiah, who verbally confessed his own weakness and connection to a sinful people (Ne. 1:5–7). Or men like Daniel: when addressing the sin of Israel, he didn’t come to God saying, “They have sinned.” He began his prayer of repentance by embracing his own humanity with the memorable words, “we have sinned and committed iniquity, we have done wickedly and rebelled, even by departing from Your precepts and Your judgments.” (Dan. 9:5). Isaiah didn’t say “They are like sheep.” He said, “All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way” (Isa. 53:6).

It is tempting to blame America’s woes on some powerful group or political party. That is much easier than admitting that the problems in our world are actually the result of humanity’s selfishness and sin. While Christians are to be separate from the world, we need to be careful about separating ourselves too far from the humanness of humanity. All of us, as selfish humans, have contributed to the brokenness of our world.

3. We are suspicious about an overemphasis on head knowledge.

Whether considering books or higher education, we believe that “Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies” (1 Cor. 8:1). We have watched many institutes of higher learning, even those that originally promoted godliness, transform into organizations departing from, even denying, Biblical truth. Over the years much of our caution has been vindicated and our suspicions confirmed.

Yet once again there is a corresponding weakness. It is possible to forget there is still value in careful study and accrued knowledge and experience.

It is easy for us to believe, after skimming a few articles, that we have a better grasp on a topic than we actually do. But does the person who skims an article or listens to a sales pitch about a medical issue have a better understanding than the scientist who has spent years studying a specific disease? Who is displaying the most humility: the one who has studied little, yet claims to understand both the malady and the cure, or the doctor who has researched for years yet admits he or she still has much to learn?

A disregard for accumulated knowledge and the advice of experts makes us easy prey for scams and hucksters. It is the height of arrogance to suppose that many medical researchers who have studied for years know less than I do after a few Google searches. Yet it has become common to hear plain people proclaim with certainty that a particular natural substance cures some disease that the medical community is still attempting to effectively treat. Educated researchers can be wrong and greedy pharmaceutical companies may promote drugs that are less than the best. But if we, as the uneducated, are going to disagree with the educated, we should at least express our opinions with great humility.

Although we must read with caution and discernment, it is through reading sources which challenge and stretch our perspective that we discover how little we really know and how much there is to learn. Avoiding information that challenges our viewpoint can encourage arrogance.

We are often incapable of recognizing our own incompetence. Our basic understanding of a topic can blind us to our ignorance. This inability to self-assess accurately has become known as the Dunning-Kruger effect, and all of us are susceptible. I may have listened to a surgeon talk about heart surgery, read a couple articles on the subject, and subconsciously conclude I have a fairly good grasp on the topic. But the reality is that the little bit I do know blinds me to the massive amount of knowledge I lack and to my need to learn from true experts in this field. My slight knowledge deludes me, and my ignorance feels like expertise!

The answer is to either study diligently at increasing my knowledge of the subject or humbly listen to those who have. It has been said that “As our circle of knowledge expands, so does the circumference of darkness surrounding it.” In other words, increasing knowledge of a given subject correspondingly increases our realization of our ignorance. This is why people who have made a particular subject their life study are sometimes more inclined to admit they have much to learn than those with brief exposure who speak boldly with greater confidence.⁴ Arrogance and pride are not found only among the educated, and if we are going to properly discern truth in our time, humility is essential.

4. We are a trusting people.

Most of us have grown up in settings where truth was expected and confidence in each other the norm. This is a huge blessing. The Apostle Paul told the church at Thessalonica that he had confidence that they would “do the things we command you” (2 Thes. 3:4). He trusted them, and trust is essential in our church communities. But the parallel weakness is that we are more susceptible to deception. When a product, service, or cure comes along that sounds amazing

4 As Albert Einstein famously said, “The more I learn, the more I realize how much I don’t know.”

and fits the need at hand, we tend to believe the claim, especially if it is delivered by someone we trust.

If Aunt Mandy tells us that a certain herb cures a disease, or Uncle Joe says that a particular political party has pulled a shenanigan, we know that must be true. After all, Uncle Joe and Aunt Mandy have proven themselves to be honest for years. We know we can trust them! This fact is so powerful that we rarely investigate information we hear from trustworthy sources, especially if it agrees with our preconceived opinion. But where did Uncle Joe and Aunt Mandy get their information? Of course they accurately conveyed what they heard. But how do we know their original source was correct?

Instead of investigating we pass the information on, and others trust its veracity due to our proven trustworthiness. In this way, misinformation (and disinformation)⁵ continues to spread. How often do we stop and investigate claims we receive from people we trust? Answering this will reveal much about our commitment to integrity and love for truth. Sometimes our desire to share the latest sensational information is stronger than our love for truth itself.

5. We love order and despise chaos.

Like our Creator, we love bringing order out of chaos, and when events are unexplainable, we naturally search for logical explanations. This desire to make logical sense (order) out of the illogical (disorder) makes us susceptible to false explanations. We see patterns, or accept explanations, where none exist. This is a tendency sometimes referred to as patternicity. Our minds, created with a propensity to seek meaning, quickly “connect the dots” and try to ascribe meaning to events. Sometimes we even develop false explanations.

An example would be the waves of the ocean. Many of us have heard that waves tend to come in groups of seven, with the seventh wave being the largest. This theory has been disproved repeatedly, yet it continues to attract. Occasionally the seventh wave is the largest, giving strength to the myth. But in reality this theory is passed on because we like predictability and explanations for random events.

We know that God does, at times, place significance in numbers and sequence. So this knowledge, coupled with this tendency to find patterns, makes us vulnerable. Someone may claim to have found a secret code in the Old Testament that can help you accumulate wealth, a sequence of events that points to a particular date when the end of the world will come, or a series of dates that seem to validate some conspiracy theory. The simplicity of a pattern that confounds the wise of this world appeals to something deep within us.

6. We believe that the forces of evil have power.

The Bible teaches us that evil exists in our world, a spiritual battle is taking place, and behind the scenes Satan is at work. But many false narratives being promoted go too far, giving the father of lies unjustified recognition, relying on his unlikely ability to unite self-centered men and

5 Misinformation refers to information which may not be intentionally false. Disinformation is information purposefully designed to deceive or mislead.

women to sacrifice for a cause which brings them little in return. Narratives of this nature should be viewed with skepticism since they contradict what Scripture teaches and what we observe about unregenerate human behavior.

For example, we sometimes hear that medical researchers actually know how to cure cancer, but they just aren't telling us. Or that oil companies have a motor which operates on perpetual motion but are keeping it a secret. Or take the "Flat Earth" theory: according to this belief, the earth is not a round globe but flat. All the educational curricula, photographs from space, and first-hand accounts of those who have traveled to space have been manufactured to fool mankind.

Yet consider the concerted worldwide effort necessary to hoodwink humanity if this and other conspiracies of this sort were true. Imagine the millions of people who would need to link arms, sacrificially set aside personal agendas, ignore opportunity for personal fortunes, and secretly work together harmoniously, all with the goal of bamboozling the larger populace. Are self-centered men capable of disregarding the potential for personal gain they could receive from exposing these scams? Does Satan have enough power to cause millions to selflessly unite for a false purpose? This is a level of harmony that the church has struggled to accomplish, even with the power of the Holy Spirit!

Evil men do deceive. Governments and marketers have always used deception to accomplish their purposes, and we can't immediately dismiss every seemingly wild narrative. But we should be wary of narratives which depend on large numbers of people sacrificially working together. This does not line up with what we know to be true about self-centered unregenerate humanity.

7. We want to be active workers.

We believe we are to be active in our world, fighting against the forces of darkness and exposing the tactics of the enemy (2 Cor. 2:11). God is at work, and we are to be laboring together with Him (1 Cor. 3:9)! Actively engaging is one of our strengths. But Christians can get so caught up in the work and easily forget Jesus' proclamation that His Kingdom and battle strategy are going to be different, completely opposite to the kingdoms of this world (Jn. 18:36).

Sam, a member in an Anabaptist congregation, enjoys listening to his favorite political talk show host, Frank Truth, on the way to work each morning. Frank Truth is a no nonsense, say-it-like-it-is radio host who regularly laments the eviction of God from schools and the culture. He fearlessly reminds his listeners that returning to God is the only way to stop our moral decline, and frequently requests prayer for important events transpiring in government. He even sends out emails, calling for Christian watchfulness during these critical times. Last week it was an important bill in Congress, and this week the Supreme Court is considering weighing in on abortion.

Sam wouldn't necessarily agree with all of Frank Truth's theology but likes the fact that Frank is on God's side of these important issues! Frank also gets things done! Millions listen to his program, and when Frank encourages people to vote a certain way, boycott some godless organization, or apply pressure on a politician, things happen! Sam likes that!

But Sam is unaware that something within HIMSELF is slowly shifting. Spending far more time listening to Frank Truth than to fellow believers, Sam's perspective has changed. At one time Sam saw the church as powerful, and God's primary means of bringing change to our world. But now when he thinks of needed change, his mind goes to court rulings and getting a particular political party into power this fall. There have also been moments (although he would never mention it) when he wonders about the wisdom of not voting. Where at one time Sam dreamed of ways to build the kingdom of God, his mind now gravitates to ways to bring transformation through government.

Sam has been slowly drawn in and ensnared. Frank Truth may be right about some of what he opposes, but he is wrong about the methods he proposes. Jesus said His kingdom is not of this world, and Sam has slowly lost this perspective. He has assumed he could maintain a kingdom focus while drinking at the well of political activism. But he is wrong. We eventually become what we consume.

As followers of Jesus, we desperately want to see light overcome the darkness in our world, and it is exciting to see the many ways God is working in our day. But it is also a time of great deception. Satan would love to subtly persuade us that we need to utilize Satan's tactics (violence and coercion) to achieve God's goals (redemption and love).

The Seriousness of the Situation

It is essential that the church, and especially its leaders, recognize the urgency and significance of the challenge. We must realize the result of naivete and of failing to carefully evaluate the information we consume. We are in danger, not only of losing our focus, but of also losing our reputation as pillars of truth. *Christianity Today* published an article entitled "Fleecing the Faithful—Again,"⁶ sharing the startling reality that the American Christian community is losing more money to fraudulent schemes than they are sending to overseas missions. The article specifically mentioned Anabaptist losses, referencing \$33 million lost in Ohio by 2,600 investors, most of them Amish. This article was published back in 2011, but unfortunately the problem of naivete doesn't seem to have lessened. Sadly, Christians in our day have become easy targets, famous for gullibility, and viewed as poor thinkers. But what are we to do?

Completely severing ourselves from all news isn't the solution. Followers of Jesus (Truth) will want to have some sense of what is going on in our world. Ignorance and a lack of curiosity should not be the trademark of God's people. Yet, how can we know what is true? How can we help each other become people of Biblical discernment?

In the next part, we will look at the importance of developing a strong personal foundation, essential for navigating a confusing time.

6 Walker, Ken. "Fleecing the Faithful—Again: Former YWAM Leader Defrauds Many." *Christianity Today*, vol. 55, no. 6, June 2011, p. 54ff.

This paper was prepared by ViewPoint: Anabaptists working together on current issues.

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ViewPoint builds on the Anabaptist value of community wisdom. A team comprised primarily of older, ordained men forms the core executive group. Subcommittees are then formed to address particular issues, drawing in people experienced in the subject.

ViewPoint was formed in response to repeated calls for help in addressing issues facing conservative Anabaptist leaders. A number of church leaders asked Faith Builders (Guys Mills) to facilitate the effort. The ViewPoint executive committee includes Steven Brubaker (PA), Merle Burkholder (ON), John Coblentz (PA), Matt Landis (PA), Gary Miller (ID), and David Yoder (KS).

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Truth and Discernment

In recent years we have experienced a proliferation of conflicting news. Everyone seems to have a new theory, the inside scoop, or have just read a news article explaining what is “really going on.” This has had a significant impact on our people, even creating conflict within churches. How should we respond when faced with contradictory information, and how are we to determine what to believe? Perhaps more importantly, how can we as leaders sort through this barrage of information and guide our congregations in truth?

The goal of this writing is to address these questions. We have divided the content into four parts. This is to make it more readable as well as to assist church leaders who desire to share this content in church bulletins, newsletters, or periodicals.

PREVIOUS SECTION

The Problem

Part 1: What is Truth?

God’s people are to be known as lovers of truth. When we believe and pass on false narratives, our witness is muted.

Part 2: Why the Struggle?

Why are we having difficulty? We look at seven conservative Anabaptist strengths which have corresponding weaknesses.

IN THIS SECTION

The Solution

Part 3: Building a Personal Foundation for Discernment

How committed am I to truth, and what can I do to develop Godly discernment in my own personal life?

Part 4: Steps to Godly Discernment

When reading a news article or listening to a narrative, how can I know what to believe?

Addenda: Ideas for Growing in Discernment

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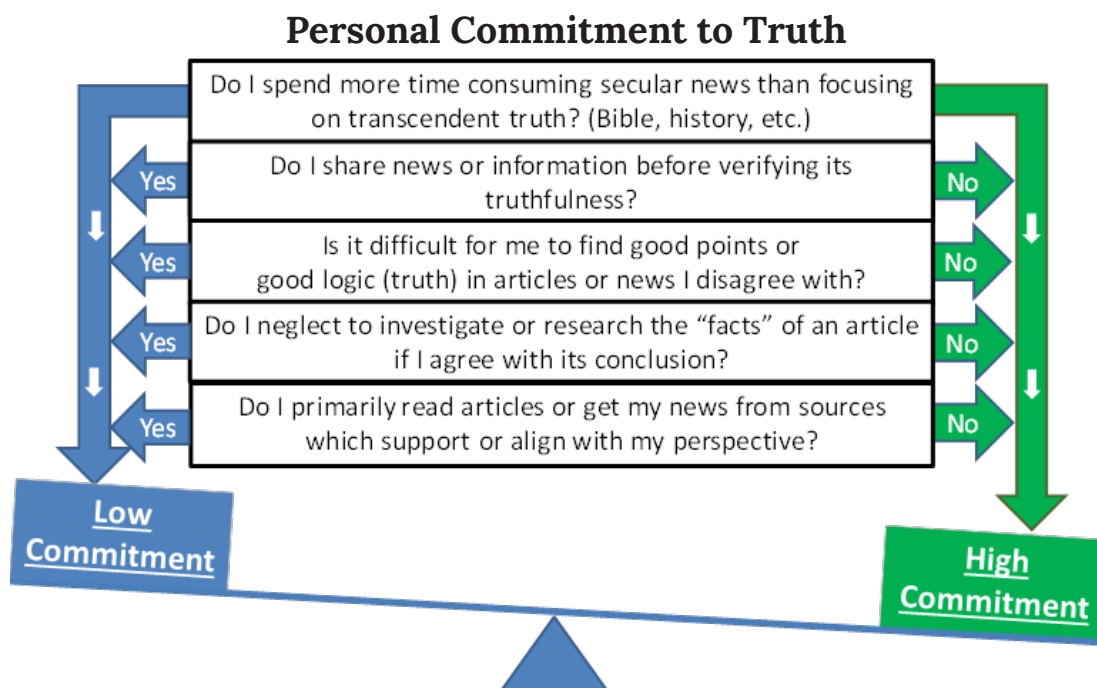
Part 3: Building a Personal Foundation for Discernment

How can we encourage wise Biblical discernment, avoid misinformation, and keep ourselves from gullibly chasing the scams and false narratives that seem to plague our plain communities? More importantly, how can we develop and help others develop a personal Biblical foundation capable of sorting through the conflicting “facts” we face in this time of information gluttony?

A Look Within

It is essential that we begin by looking within. How vibrant is our personal commitment and connection to Truth Himself? Are we walking with Him and seeking direction as we navigate this challenging time? When weighing news sources, medical propositions, financial offers, and other claims—how strong is our personal commitment to truth?

The questions on the chart below are designed to help us take personal inventory. While no individual question will be conclusive, each provides a clue about our personal love for, and commitment to, truth. If someone would monitor the inputs into our lives on a given day, where is most of our information coming from? How diligent are we about ensuring that what we read, watch, listen to, and pass on to others is founded on truth? Are we drawing from multiple news sources with divergent perspectives and viewpoints, or do we gravitate to sources which primarily confirm our opinions? How much thought have we put into understanding a source’s biases or ensuring an organization’s accuracy in reporting? If we are going to become judicious, discerning followers of Jesus, we must begin by analyzing our own daily habits and the wells of information we are drawing from. Leaders in particular must model good discernment skills.



Identify and Confess Your Own Biases

We understand that news sources are biased but often forget that each of us is biased as well. Bias is a little like wearing colored glasses. Information flowing into our minds is always colored by our experiences and assumptions. We are also influenced by what we want to be true and tend to see every new piece of information as confirmation of our previously held belief.

For a person who believes that the earth is flat, every article promoting his opinion will confirm his position. Conversely, every article which points out the flaws in a flat earth reinforces his suspicion that the round earth theory is a clever and deceptive hoax. The better the arguments for a round globe, the more deceitful the round globe deception appears. Regardless of what he hears or sees, everything has the potential to confirm his belief.

We tend to laugh at others who get caught up in this cycle. But the tendency to arrogantly believe that our own perspective is balanced and correct is universal. This is why all of us immediately insist on investigating claims which disagree with our opinion, while feeling little need to research claims which agree.

We must be willing to purposefully and ruthlessly investigate our own assumptions and allow others to do the same. If we are going to help our congregation become men and women of discernment, it is important that we model this humble willingness to have our cherished opinions scrutinized. Is my love for truth actually stronger than my love for what I want to be true?

Humble Confidence

It is tempting for leaders to back away from controversial topics and fail to provide solid leadership. But failing to provide guidance increases susceptibility to false narratives. And often these are being promoted by the most outspoken and the least informed. Leaders need to listen, as people need to be heard. But there is also a time for leaders to humbly share their own perspectives. While there is much in the political and scientific world that we cannot be absolutely sure of, God has not left us without recourse. Jesus, knowing His disciples would be called to lead in difficult times, told them to be “wise as serpents and harmless as doves” (Mt. 10:16).

We may not be able to provide absolute proof that Neil Armstrong stepped on the moon. But we should be capable, with humble confidence, to examine the evidence, respectfully listen to differing opinions, and arrive at a functional conclusion, even regarding current events of the day. So how are we to do this? Let’s look at some ways we can help our people build a good foundation for wise discernment.

Loving God with Our Minds

When Jesus was asked which commandment is the greatest, He responded with, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ This is the first commandment” (Mk. 12:30). We talk about loving the Lord with all our soul and strength, and we hear sermons on the importance of loving God from our heart. But

what does it mean to love God with our minds? Loving God in this way speaks of using our minds as God intended. The brain, like a muscle, requires proper exercise and nourishment to operate optimally, and this is essential if we are going to develop intellectual strength. This is part of loving God with our mind.

A godly person with strong intellectual character will be known for his love and commitment to truth. More than a desire for fame, wealth, or proving that his opinion is correct—he wants to know and understand how things really are. He is constantly seeking to align his life with reality. He understands he has inherent blind spots and is committed to continuous learning. A person of intellectual character is willing to keep asking questions, even if those questions reveal his own ignorance and make him appear foolish. He wants truth! He understands that feeding upon good information is vital to developing a healthy mind, and his judgment will be no better than the material he feeds on. So, what kind of material will he feed on? What will his bookshelf look like?

The First Two Books

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding” (Pro. 9:10). If we are going to be people of discernment, we will need to begin with a foundational knowledge of God. We need continual reminders that there is a God, and we are not Him. For centuries, theologians have referred to two books which reveal the glory of God—His written Word, and His book of creation. There is no better way to keep the majesty of God before our eyes than by a continual and thoughtful study of the Bible and careful observation of His creation. The Psalmist describes the man of God as “a tree planted by the rivers of water” (Psa. 1:3). This is a person who meditates on the Word of God day and night, has developed a healthy fear of the Lord, and is prepared to properly discern. He isn’t going to be moved by the latest unverified rumor or get-rich-quick scheme. He believes that beginning with the Bible and seeing the world through God’s eyes is better than starting with sensational headlines and going through the day making sense of events through the world’s eyes.

The Bible is the meat and potatoes for developing the character of one’s intellect and, in ways difficult to quantify, gives us a basis for accepting or rejecting truth claims. It helps the child of God interpret life’s events, keeps us concerned about the issues that are concerning to God, and causes us to focus on all of life from God’s perspective. Coupled with the Holy Spirit, the Word of God helps a judicious person maintain an awe of God and is essential in his continued development. The Bible is the most important book on a wise person’s shelf.

The second book, our natural world, is also important. Carefully considering creation reveals much about the mind of the Creator and prepares our minds for proper discernment. The anthill instructs us in the importance of sensible planning, the lily reminds us of God’s faithfulness, and ordinary grass teaches us about the brevity of life and the foolishness of trusting earthly wealth (Pro. 6:6, Mt. 6:28–29, Is. 40:6–8, Jm. 1:10–11). A person who wants to develop his or her mind will spend time considering and meditating on the diversity in plant life, the power in thunder, and the constancy of the morning sun. All of these provide a proper foundation for evaluating the latest claim or fearful headline. Whatever the latest political shenanigan or scandal, the cycles of creation teach us that God is unmoved by the current drama. A wise person will spend less time

in the news, and more time considering nature. Psalm 8 describes the result of simply gazing up into the night sky. “When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, The moon and the stars, which You have ordained, What is man that You are mindful of him?” (vv. 3–4). The Apostle Paul built on this thought, noting that the character of God can be known, simply by observing nature. “For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead” (Rom. 1:20).

Is it really possible for the person who has been considering the complexity and immensity of our universe to become anxious over a passing rumor? After pondering the fact that it takes light over four years to travel to earth from the closest star, how concerned will I be with a drop in the Dow Jones? Carefully pondering the Word of God and creation helps us keep the latest news or theory in perspective. As one author has said, “Nature is one big, beautiful symphony that is always playing, if only we take out our earbuds long enough to listen.”¹ If we are going to be people of intellectual character, these first two books are the most important. Yet they are not the only books a prudent man or woman will read.

A Wise Man’s Bookshelf

A wise person will also draw from inputs which hone his ability to discern and accurately process information. One of these is a good understanding of history. Individuals who have studied the past are less inclined to unhealthy kneejerk reactions and have less tendency to immediately accept simplistic answers to multifaceted dilemmas. Life can be complex, so reading broadly helps us look for nuances that others might miss. Good books stretch our minds and increase our capacity to process. Whether a biology textbook, an account of someone who lived in another era, or a biography of a leader who had to make difficult decisions during a critical time, good books give us a foundation to consider truth claims. Reading about the past or about people living in a different culture helps us realize our limited perspective. We put the book down with a greater understanding of how much there is to learn and a deeper appreciation for our own finiteness.

The cumulative effect of habitually reading good books is profound, an integral part of developing sound judgment. Men and women who love truth have an ongoing childlike curiosity about our natural world. They are slower to immediately accept the latest slick theory and are humbly seeking God for direction. “Lead me in Your truth and teach me,” the Psalmist prayed (Psa. 25:5), and this is the consistent posture of the child of God. Wise people are willing to learn from other wise people. They understand that God speaks through His Word, through an inner voice, and through the writings of others who have wrestled through issues. Godly people are humble enough to learn from others. Their bookshelves will reveal this truth.

A Humble Reliance on Brotherhood

Godly people know from experience that they desperately need brothers and sisters whom they have given permission to speak into their lives, brothers and sisters who are willing to challenge and to share different perspectives. This is one of the reasons God has placed us in church

1 McCracken, Brent. *The Wisdom Pyramid*. Wheaton, IL, Crossway, 2021, p. 105.

families (1 Cor. 12:4–25). More than most of us understand, we need local churches who do more than just meet on Sunday mornings. Frequent dialogue regarding values and current events can be an excellent filter against erroneous thinking. It helps us interpret life, avoid tunnel vision, and harmonize Biblical truths.

There are other inherent blessings to church life. The wisdom of habitually gathering each Lord's Day and listening in silence to someone else expound on the Word of God is becoming more apparent in our day. We live in a noisy world, and it is essential that we periodically sit and listen without opportunity to respond or disagree. Through the week we rub shoulders with a culture that is constantly telling us, in an endless variety of ways, that everything is about *me*. Technology subtly increases this belief that my opinion is important, my preferences should be honored, and my desires should instantly be fulfilled. Church services require sitting in quiet contemplation and being reminded that life isn't primarily about *me* after all!

In an age of social media bombardment and political whiplash, commitment to the local church is stabilizing. It is a place where we listen to ideas we disagree with, endure individuals who rub us the wrong way, and even submit to decisions which seem illogical. None of this is easy for the natural man. But the wise, godly discerner understands that there is no better training ground for intellectual character than the local church. The church leader who is intent on developing his people and preparing them to wisely sort through conflicting information through the week will encourage vibrant church life and facilitate times of healthy discussion. He will look for peaceful, respectful formats where members in his congregation can learn from each other. He will also be alert to the individual who carelessly consumes the sensational but avoids a deep perusal of the Word of God, fails to immerse himself in good reading material, and avoids transparency within the brotherhood.

Trust within the Brotherhood

A healthy brotherhood is one where trust exists between its members. Where trust exists, we feel safe asking others for their opinion about a particular medical claim, financial offer, or some questionable headline we recently wondered about. Healthy brotherhoods are an excellent filter, helping us to navigate challenging times. We will not always agree, but it is possible to disagree agreeably, and to learn from each other. Ron and Don, whose story is told in Part 1, saw the COVID situation from completely different perspectives and were unable to communicate. But if they had been able to trust and openly communicate, each could have learned from the other.

When trust is lost, candid conversations regarding controversial topics are difficult if not impossible. Fear that discussion might drive us further apart immobilizes us. So, afraid of increasing tension within the brotherhood, we stick to inconsequential, lighter topics. Controversial topics are set aside, and healthy dialogue occurs only with friends who share the same perspective. But so much is lost when we fail to engage with different viewpoints. Not only do we fail to learn, but a lack of trust within a brotherhood almost always leads people to unmerited confidence in other unverified, and many times dangerous, sources.

Purposefully Screening Consumption

Helping our people develop a personal foundation for discernment is a task each church leader should take seriously. Our Anabaptist churches are not doing well with discernment. Called by God to be truth bearers, we are in danger of becoming known as conspiracy sharers. But it doesn't need to be this way. Much of our failure is due to our casual approach to the information we consume and neglecting the hard work of developing vibrant trusting relationships within the brotherhood.

It is essential that we intentionally examine both the quality and quantity of our information intake. We cannot constantly consume the light and fluffy, the newest funny video, or the latest shocking headline, and expect to become godly discerners of truth. Just as a hopeful Olympic weightlifter cannot afford to diet on donuts and cotton candy, we cannot afford to consume the silly and sensational while expecting to develop into godly discerners. Good thinking is predicated on good information and on humbly understanding that we are incapable of handling unlimited information. We can retain only so much. It is much better to consume carefully than to assume the more material we imbibe the better.

It is time for our people to develop godly discernment. This will require regularly feeding deeply on the Word of God and considering nature, reading good books, frequently engaging thoughtfully as a brotherhood, and purposefully screening and limiting media consumption. This is a difficult task! Yet the discerning leader understands that the cost of neglecting this reality is much higher! With a desire to develop his people, he will frequently encourage his people to avoid the transient and invest in the transcendent.

But beyond developing a solid personal foundation for discernment, what steps can we take to determine the believability of the claims we encounter? How can we know which news is fake? We will look more closely at this in Part 4.

Part 4: Steps to Godly Discernment

We have looked at the importance of developing a solid Biblical foundation for truth. Let's assume we have been engaged in this. Now we read a news article and want to determine its accuracy. What should we do and where do we start?

Let's look at some steps we can take in determining the veracity of truth claims.

Steps to Discernment

Recognize that bias is inevitable.

Based on our knowledge, motives, and past experiences, all of us carry some bias. This is true individually and also true of organizations and companies. Consider news media. A wise person understands that a perfectly balanced news source, regardless of the claims, doesn't exist. News organizations are owned and staffed by biased people. Every article is composed by individuals who have certain prejudices, and this will be reflected in the content in subtle ways.

Imagine two reputable newspapers reporting on the progress of the Civil War in 1863. One is located in the North and the other in the South. Do you suppose their articles would be identical? Of course not. Even their headlines would probably differ. One might say, "The Northern Aggression Continues," and the other, "Southern Rebellion Lingers." They are reporting on the same war, yet the reader wouldn't have to be informed on which side of the Mason-Dixon line the headline originated. Both sides may desire objectivity, yet they can't avoid a bias.

The scientific community is no different. Scientists are people. They live real lives, have past experiences, and despite their goal to be objective, each carries some biases. In addition, academic credentials are no guarantee that a man or woman cares more about truth than they do about prestige or power. Educated people are biased, just like everyone else. The medical community also has its biases. Pharmaceutical companies, motivated by profit, may encourage more drugs than needed. Every human, including medical practitioners, is susceptible to human greed. But, of course, so is the natural herb salesman who insists you need his products. Be suspicious of those who insist they only have your good in mind or claim they have exclusive understanding.

Yet, the fact that every human is biased doesn't mean the information they provide should be automatically dismissed. The prudent person understands that bias is universal and multiple informational inputs are essential. We listen to, and learn from, the used car salesman. But we also understand that he might be concerned with more than just our family's transportation needs. So we get additional information from others and then make the best decision we can by weighing all the input we have received.

Respect accumulated knowledge.

While understanding that everyone has biases, it is dangerous to conclude that suspicion alone is the solution. I would be foolish to take my car to an auto mechanic and then doubt everything

he tells me. Accumulated knowledge still counts. The mechanic is skilled in his field, has years of experience, and is much better qualified to work under the hood than I am. Assuming I know more than experts is just as irrational as blindly believing everything I am told. I am foolish if I believe I am an expert in medicine because I read a well written article, or that I can beat the financial markets because my friend told me about a good deal. When faced with a question, we should have enough humility to admit that years of experience and/or education in a given field demand some respect and credibility. Years of experience or letters behind a person's name do not ensure they are always right, but there is still great value in accumulated knowledge. We are foolish to dismiss it.

If it sounds too good... look for the catch.

Most of us have grown up hearing the maxim, "If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is." The reason that saying has been passed down through the years is because we have a human tendency to look for easy solutions, ignoring the ratio between risk and reward. We tend to assume there is some easy way to circumvent the curse on our world brought on by Adam's sin. So when someone shows up offering high returns and little risk, we think this must be the solution we have been searching for. But the brokenness of our world runs deep, and whenever you find an offer with high reward, you can generally assume there is high risk as well. Men and women of discernment understand this is a rule in our material world. We should be reminding our people, especially in the area of financial offers, "If it sounds too good to be true—it probably is."

Be wary of widespread conspiracies that rest on self-sacrificing people.

Most false narratives seem to rest on a group of people (doctors, scientists, government officials, researchers, etc.) who have united with a common desire to deceive the masses. As addressed earlier, governments and marketers have always attempted to persuade the public for their own purposes. But the larger the group of people purported to be involved and the less each has to gain from it, the less credible the report. Let's look at an example.

Leukemia is a dreaded type of cancer which impacts the lives of many each year. The treatment is expensive, and the results are not guaranteed. But let's assume that a simple cure was found, maybe some common natural herb, that would effectively cure the disease. Keeping this reality from the public so pharmaceutical companies could continue to profit from their drugs would mean persuading many thousands of researchers, doctors, lab technicians, and university professors (many of whom have nothing to gain from this untruth) from sharing the truth. Any one of them could bring this simple herb to market, demonstrate its efficacy, and make a fortune. Or even (in the interest of helping humanity) post an anonymous YouTube video, share the potential of this herb, and allow others to try for themselves. Instead, many thousands of people selfishly remain silent, some even watching their own children die, so a few owners of a pharmaceutical companies can make a good return on their investment. Does this sound reasonable?

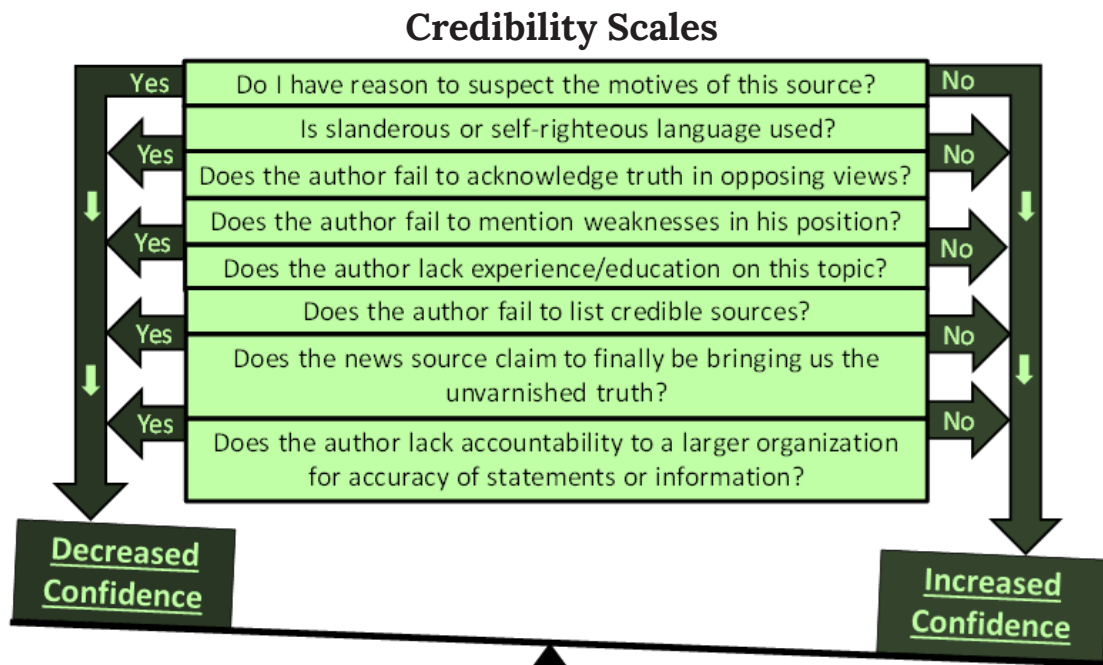
If you have been faithfully reading your Bible, you will understand the extreme improbability. This scheme does not fit God's description of humanity. Man is self-centered at his core, his heart

is “deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked” (Jer. 17:9), and our tendency is to seek our own selfish interests (Phi. 2:21). We struggle to give up potential personal gain for a larger good. When you hear that a large group of people have united with evil intentions, be careful. The larger the scheme and the more people involved, the less plausible the theory.

Search for clues of credibility.

Discerning what to believe in today’s news isn’t easy, and a headline, regardless how bold the font, doesn’t ensure accuracy. Headlines are dramatic by design, and sources which rely on advertisements for revenue profit from the sensational. That’s what sells. As one writer has said, “Nothing brings us back for more headlines (and therefore ads) like anger and fear. They get rich, and we get mad.”² Some prefer subscribing and paying for news rather than relying on sources funded by advertisements, and in our current climate this is worth considering. But regardless, if you care about truth, it is essential that you draw from multiple sources and different perspectives. Ironically, our tendency is to dismiss the mainstream media while immediately accepting a lone voice who claims to see the world’s problems quite clearly. While the majority isn’t always correct, there is still safety in a multitude of counselors (Pro. 24:6).

The Credibility Scales chart below provides some questions you should ask when evaluating the believability of written material. Discerning truth while sorting through the massive amount of information coming at us isn’t easy, and it is unlikely that one question will singlehandedly prove its accuracy. But a wise person considers multiple aspects including a writing’s source, potential motive, credibility of content, and the spirit in which it is written. Be very suspicious of articles that defame those with a different perspective, or who fail to list credible sources for their



2 Earley, Justin Whitmel. *The Common Rule: Habits of Purpose for an Age of Distraction*. Downers Grove, IL, IVP Books, 2019, p. 85.

claims. Much of the “news” being presented today is more opinion than an accurate portrayal of reality, and many times there is another motivation beyond providing accurate information. Be suspicious of news sources that keep reminding you that while other sources are not accurate, they are. A source with a history of accuracy doesn’t need to waste print defending its integrity or speaking disparagingly of other sources. Straightforwardness with the message, fairness with facts, and transparency with sources tell much about a writer’s commitment to truthfulness.

At the far ends of the political spectrum of news reporting (both right and left), bias increases and consequently, credibility decreases. We need to reckon with this reality whether or not they promote Biblical values or claim to share news from a Christian perspective. We must not assume, for example, that just because a news source is anti-abortion it is automatically credible. Sometimes, unfortunately, some secular sources show less bias than those proclaiming Christian values. These realities increase the need for careful and prayerful discernment.

The Great Need for Humility

God is very particular about the type of individual He is willing to guide and inhabit. “For thus says the High and Lofty One Who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: ‘I dwell in the high and holy place, With him who has a contrite and humble spirit’” (Isa. 57:15). If we are going to properly discern and sort through the massive amount of confusing information we are currently confronting, humility is essential. No one is capable of being an expert on every subject or of seeing our world with complete accuracy, and there are some things we can know only by degrees. We need to confess that there are many things we cannot know with absolute certainty and have enough humility to listen to others who do. C.S. Lewis once said: “A society where the simple many obey the seers can live: a society where all were seers could live even more fully. But a society where the mass is still simple and the seers are no longer attended to can achieve only superficiality, baseness, ugliness, and in the end extinction.”³ In other words, a society where the masses of unlearned are willing to listen to the few who studiously research subjects can survive. A culture where everyone studies and becomes wise sages would be even better. But a society where people neither dig deeply, nor humbly listen to those who do, is doomed.

America has become a nation of self-proclaimed sages. Anyone with access to Google, or even information received from a trustworthy friend, feels confident challenging the experts. But our people should stand out as different. We should be a people who insist on truth, not a titillating mixture of fact and falsehood. Most false narratives contain some truth. But as Charles Spurgeon is reported to have said, “Discernment is not knowing the difference between right and wrong. It is knowing the difference between right and almost right.”⁴

Wise, discerning people are humble, willing to have their own perspectives challenged. Their passion for truth is greater than their ego, and they understand their limitations. People of discernment have confidence that God “gives [wisdom] to all liberally” (Jm. 1:5), they are

3 Lewis, Clive S. *Miracles*. San Francisco, HarperCollins, 1947, p. 67.

4 Attributed to Charles Spurgeon (<https://apologetics315.com/2013/02/charles-spurgeon-on-discernment/>); we were unable to locate the original source.

constantly seeking that wisdom, and are humble enough to receive it regardless how God chooses to deliver it. “God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (Jm. 4:6).

The Bottom Line

If our churches are going to be the pillar and ground of truth God desires, demonstrating wisdom and discernment, we must take a closer look at ourselves. Is it possible that much of our problem stems from forgetting who we are and why God has placed us in this world? Has greed and a love of material things drawn us to get-rich-schemes and involvement in financial scams? Have we been attracted to health fads and frauds due to an improper emphasis on our physical well-being? Are we easily stirred over political fiascos because we are focusing on the wrong kingdom?

Understand, there is nothing wrong with earning an income, caring for our bodies, or attempting to understand issues that face our national leaders, when our priorities are aligned with Jesus and His kingdom. But can you imagine the Apostle Paul getting involved in a get-rich-quick scheme, obsessing over the latest health craze, or getting upset about some scandal in Nero’s palace? Of course not! People who have surrendered themselves to the Lordship of Jesus Christ have a completely different vision and focus. Paul’s overriding goal wasn’t to live his best life now, or to ensure everyone knew what was “really going on” in Rome. He was focused on the glorious kingdom of God! His passion was seeing God at work, lives redeemed, and Jesus making all things new! Paul knew that the worst situation this world could throw at him was redeemable, and he was excited about the opportunity to be a co-laborer with God. Yet, even early in the church, there were times he had to call followers of Jesus back to their vocation. Paul reminded the church at Rome that “the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost” (Rom. 14:17). There is nothing wrong with discussing meats and herbs, but let’s keep our focus on what really matters, and on the work Jesus has given us to do!

As leaders, we may have members in our churches who easily become ensnared by misinformation. Perhaps we have tried to reason with them, and they have an answer for every question. People who are prone to false narratives rarely abandon them when confronted with facts or logic. Debate (however well intended) may simply further entrench erroneous thought patterns. But we can listen to their perspective and then lovingly challenge them to turn their focus to building the kingdom of God. Inspire them to abandon the questionable and embrace the absolute. God is at work in our world. He has a grand vision for humanity, and there is nothing more important or exciting than working together with Him! Encourage them to pour their energy into advancing the kingdom of God, concerning themselves with things that really matter not only now, but throughout eternity!

This paper was prepared by ViewPoint: Anabaptists working together on current issues.

We welcome your response.

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Addendum 1

Practices that Nurture Growth in Personal Discernment

Evaluate the foundation	Periodically, compare the amount of time you spend browsing online or reading news with the time you spend meditating on God’s word, observing creation, and learning from other thoughtful reading. Prioritize hearing from God and loving Him with your mind (Ps. 1).
Visit with wise people	Identify people who are discerning, have a breadth of perspective, are not reactionary, and have a reputation as being wise. Spend time with them or make an occasion to converse. Prepare questions to ask, and then listen carefully (Pro. 13:20).
Ask good questions	Exercise some healthy skepticism when encountering new information, ideas, and truth claims. Are the assumptions correct? Where did this writer or speaker get his “facts?” What is the goal or agenda of the writer? Strive to become astute without being cynical (Mt. 10:16).
Seek broad counsel	When trying to understand an issue or current event, purposefully read or listen to reputable people on both (or various) sides of the issue (Pro. 15:22).
Practice humility	Look for flaws in your own thinking instead of focusing on proving yourself right. Assume that others you meet (especially fellow believers) are people you can learn from. Demonstrate love for truth by eagerly embracing it even when that means letting go of previous views (Jm. 1:19; 3:13–18).
Read news carefully	Familiarize yourself with the background and possible biases of the sources you frequently use. Ask wise brothers and sisters about their news and information sources. Draw from a variety of news sources with differing perspectives. Intentionally avoid those from extreme ends of the political spectrum (Pro. 18:13).
Identify personal biases	Acknowledge the “lenses” that shape your perspective of the world—biases based on life situations or experiences. How may these biases distort your view of reality? Seek out people whose perspective may offer a corrective lens (Pro. 3:5–7).

Addendum 2

Ideas for Nurturing Discernment in the Brotherhood

Model listening	As a leader, model being a good listener. Demonstrate by example a willingness to have your own perspectives challenged without becoming defensive.
Encourage dialogue	Encourage those with differing perspectives to sit down and carefully listen to each other without immediately providing a counterargument. After listening, each should restate the other person's opinion making sure they accurately and fairly articulate the other's position.
Nurture trust	Create opportunities for fellowship. Social time together as a local church body can help foster relational trust and broaden perspectives. "Barn raisings" and potlucks also provide space for church people to engage informally with the issues of the day in a context of caring for one another.
Teach foundational truths	Share fitting messages: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The value and blessing of openness and honesty in the brotherhood and how to be able to disagree agreeably (Eph. 4; Phil. 2). 2. The importance of being able to lovingly communicate and live with differences of opinions (the meat and herbs in Rom. 14).
Foster discernment awareness	Be a change agent in your congregation regarding personal discernment. Some have found it helpful to use "descriptors," short, memorable phrases that capture a much bigger idea. Examples: "Sources matter" or "Overcoming personal bias." Introduce descriptors and what they mean in teaching or preaching opportunities, then use them regularly to reinforce truths. Hopefully, they will become part of your church's everyday language and help people think carefully.
Discuss important issues	Choose solid books or articles that deal with important issues. Distribute copies and discuss them in suitable segments in a midweek service or other meeting time. Consider having knowledgeable and godly laymen lead the discussion.
Pick your battles	Some current issues or hot topics do not need to be fully debated or resolved. Wisely choose to avoid fanning discussions that are peripheral to the church's core mission.
Enable patient discussions	When facing controversial issues, have a meeting to hear from everyone without the pressure of voting or arriving at a conclusion. At some point go around and ask each person (even the quiet ones) to share their perspective. When people can listen and talk without the pressure of an immediate resolution, they are likelier to appreciate the complexity of an issue and later come together around a solution.
Affirm valuable practices	Reaffirm and encourage church traditions or practices (testimony time after the sermon or discussion during Sunday school) that put a responsibility on the brotherhood to be discerning participants in finding and living truth.

