

Our Way, Our Truth And Our Life

A Sermon by Rev. J. Clark Echols, Jr.

"Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me'" (John 14:6).

Imagine yourself in a maze of corridors. There are many corners, and walking along, you quickly lose your sense of direction. You ask yourself, what is motivating me to walk at all? What gives me the ability to make the choices as to which hall to take, where to turn, where not to turn? Such a nightmare situation can leave only a sense of desperation, helplessness and even terror.

Now imagine a person living just before the Lord was born on earth. People lived such a nightmare in their spiritual lives. The hells could easily enter and confuse their thoughts about truth. Was hardly moving at all on the sabbath really helpful? Did the invisible, vengeful God really smell the odors of their sacrifices? Were blatantly dishonest fellow Jews nonetheless one's neighbor over and above honest gentiles? The maze of regulations for the ancient Jew often led to confusion, doubt and an inner frustration.

And then Jesus came to the earth--God incarnate. Seeing what He did, believing what He said, had unbelievable effects. Confessing a belief in Him, and repenting and beginning a new life actually changed a person's life. The maze was gone. It was as if a new light was in the heavens: not a light for the eyes, but a light for the mind that enlightened so many things that were then obviously true. And with the light came a warmth: not from the sun but from within, as if the heart could feel it rising from deep within.

The Lord's redemption of all mankind has saved us from the anguish of the ancient Jews. But the turmoil and conflict still go on in our spirit. In fact, it was His redemption that makes possible our spiritual journey to heavenly happiness. For He opened men's minds--all men's minds, then and forever--to a new depth of understanding and feeling. A new light actually could reach into men's minds. Our Creator's love could be felt in a new way. Immanuel--God with us--walked the earth, and then rose from the tomb and established His Divine Human, whom we can all see with our mind's eye, feel with our spiritual heart, and so know and truly love.

Our text proclaims that this redemption was the Lord's sole objective in coming to earth. He, in Himself and by Himself alone, is the way, the truth and the life for us. We cannot come to know the Father--our Creator and Sustainer--except through His glorified Divine Human. "No one comes to the Father except through Me." Our text contains in a summary the whole process of our regeneration: to go the way of the Lord; to come to a true vision of that way by means of His truth; and thereby to receive His spiritual life.

The Lord called Himself the "way" because only His Human, established by His life on earth, can lead us to heaven. The Divine Human is a concept the finite human mind can fathom. He makes plain, before our sense as we read the New Testament, Jehovah the Father. The Divine Human communicates the Lord's love and wisdom in a new way, reaching to our limited minds. This is how the Lord is the Word, for the Word is the principal means by which we come to know the Divine Human. It is our only source for our knowledge of the Lord and heavenly things, and the things of our own spirit.

To go the Lord's way is to use the truth we discover. The Lord has done us a great favor in revealing Himself to us. It is up to us, however, to rely on His revelation of truth as a guide to our way. So we must find the doctrines that the Word teaches: the doctrine concerning the Lord, concerning true faith, concerning spiritual charity, and concerning the work we must do. Then, with an understanding of what the doctrines are--an understanding provided by the Lord, actually--we work to compel ourselves to obey them. Imagine again that maze of corridors. Any sense of desperation, all feeling of helplessness, will disappear when we realize that in our hands is a map--a detailed map setting forth the configuration of our spirit, the dead ends of selfishness, the darkened halls of falsity, the pitfalls of merely worldly advice. And the map, in a bold way, shows the right path, the path out to our promised land.

The Lord, then, has provided us with a revelation, and has given us the ability to use it. As with everything in His creation, there are levels of understanding, and practice is needed. The child begins with the literal sense of the Word alone. The rules are simple, almost black and white. As the child's mind develops, however, he is able to make interpretations and see the fine lines. Indeed, the literal sense, as understood by adults, is very flexible. The adult is able to interpret it according to preconceived notions. We can even look for wanted results

and explanations that will cover for our weaknesses and our sins. The letter of the Word, we are told, can even be twisted by an evil person to confirm whatever he wants to believe.

And so the adult must turn to the internal sense of the Word for guidance in obeying the literal sense, as we are commanded to do. It is as if our map was so good that the maze, even though very complex, becomes ordered. The internal sense will do nothing for us if we don't see it and feel it guiding our spirit to a certain external way of living. But as we do that, we become less dependent upon the things of our senses. We become less susceptible to external things ruling our spirit. We learn better, with more clarity, just what the Word is teaching us. We learn that we can handle the things that happen to us in this early life from a new perspective. What is truly God's order for our individual life can be discovered. This is what is meant by discovering the Lord in our life. For the light, warmth, order and delight we feel are all His in us. As the Writings say, the doctrine we draw from the literal sense of the Word by means of the internal sense becomes living, active in every smallest part of our life.

The purpose of doctrine, then, is to lead us to a vision of the Lord that will prompt us to change our ways. Thus, He is the way. We are not born with this vision; we must work to acquire it. While the Lord created us all for heaven, to reach the finish of the maze successfully, hereditary evil and the influences of the hells lead us into dead ends and inescapable pits.

There is one warning the Word gives us about doctrine. Doctrine is drawn from the Word by people who prayerfully are trying to apply the Word to their situation, their age. And so there must be some assurance that whether the doctrine has been developed by oneself or by the church for its members to apply, it is genuine. It must promote our sight of the Lord. It must give us a clear and rational vision of our Creator and Ruler. A false or confused doctrine will destroy our vision of God so necessary to our salvation. The doctrinal confusion in the Christian world today is an example of what happens when the genuine doctrine is not known. In an effort to explain the incarnation and glorification in a politically expedient way, the priest of the Christian Church separated the persons of Father and Son. They left behind the picture given in the New Testament, as well as the experiences and beliefs of the early church leaders. The literal sense says that the Son must lead to the Father. How can the doctrine of separate persons agree with this?

Doctrine is to be drawn from the letter in accordance with the internal sense. Doctrine is thus really spiritual. It is matter of our understanding, not simply the written Word. Look what happens spiritually to the people and life of the church when such a false doctrine is believed. With the Son and Father separated, the visible God is separated from the essential God. Thus the knowable, lovable God given to us through the Divine Human is destroyed. Without a rational and concrete concept of what and who God is, there is no tangible, real foundation of truth for civil and moral law, much less spiritual law. This lack of a clear standard of truth is behind all the confusion we see in the Christian world today. Even good people are in darkness; they have lost their way, and the doctrine of the church provides no guidance. Doctrine may be apparently drawn from the Word, but it is no longer true.

The Writings make clear the distinction between the Divine truth and doctrine drawn from the Word by men. It is the Divine truth that gives doctrine its power in us. This is why the Lord said He is the truth. Not only does He show us the way, but His truth in us is His power to cast out evil spirits from us, reform our minds, enlighten us as to the truth, and judge us as to evil. It is the Lord who saves us. Not only does He show us the way through the maze, but He established the original path.

Ever since the spiritual fall of mankind we have been adding paths, dead ends, quagmires and deep pits to the original straight and even way to heaven. Our evil has even made the road to hell look broad and smooth and the road to heaven narrow and rocky. To realize that we have the power to make the truth seem harsh, demanding, judgmental and condemning is to see that the Lord did not create it that way. The Lord's Divine truth, His order, the means of the creation of all things, did not make life a maze. Merely worldly interests and desires are a very broad and easy road to follow. The only way to see it for what it is to use the Word as our guide. And while we are, in a sense, cursed with this situation from our birth, it need not remain that way.

The Lord is the truth. His order, taught us in the literal and internal senses of the Word, defines the straight path to happiness forever. This must be simply an article of faith with us at first. But as we experience it, we will discover that the truth can give us an idea of what the Lord wants us to be. The whole purpose and end to which truth looks is the revealing of what is evil and what is good so that we can learn the distinction. To be in the truth is to be part of the Lord's stream of Providence, always carrying us through the maze of conflicting ideas

and desires. The truth's work in our spirit is to order and mold us into vessels receptive of the Lord's love. That is the truth's real job, not to be a harsh taskmaster or source of guilt and condemnation. The Divine truth shows us the Lord's love. It is the Son through whom we can come to see the Father: the Lord's love and constant care for our spiritual progress.

This leads us to see why the Lord called Himself "the life." Yet this proclamation runs right against all appearances. Don't we have life? Are we not in control of our life? We never feel it coming into us from somewhere. However, we must ask, what is the source of this appearance, this feeling of ours? Is it to be trusted? In fact, the feeling that we have life in ourselves is manufactured by our senses. As science has shown us, our senses can be easily fooled. What is more important, our senses cannot see around the corners of life. They are blind to spiritual con-sequences of our actions. Their view of our life is full of fallacies and mere appearances.

The whole Word urges us to cast off all belief that we live from ourselves. Certainly the appearance is there: the Lord created the human that way! This is why we are totally free and able, of ourselves, to really choose whether we will love and follow the Lord or not. The Word further tells us--exhorts us--to believe that all life is from the Lord, and that we are totally dependent upon Him. Our benefit will be true freedom. No longer will selfishness, greed and external things enslave us; no longer will low self-esteem and guilt incapacitate us. The Lord is in us, and we have all in Him! The way becomes clear, the truth living, and His love a warmth deep within us. There is little we can know about how the Lord flows into us and gives us life. It is a miracle. Yet our faith in that miracle becomes a living faith when we live our lives in accordance with it. And then, because it is part of us, this hardest of all truths to believe will bless us in unforeseen and greatly delightful ways. That He gives us life means that we don't have to save ourselves, a task we have found impossible. And it means that we have found the motivating force in our walk through the maze. We have found that the Lord gives us the ability to make the choices before us, to decide which way to turn. What a relief! What a burden off our shoulders! The fact that we have many hard choices to make in our life is no longer depressing. The Lord has provided for our eternal happiness. The choices, though difficult and sometimes painful, are for our progress,

and are not Divinely provided roadblocks, dead ends or trap doors created for the sake of our frustration.

Our goal of seeing our way through the confusing, conflicting choices we have to make is reached when the way, the truth and the life are established in our minds. The Lord will dwell in us. When we acknowledge the doctrines of the Word as the rules for our life, the Divine truth is revealed to us and we come to know our God. He is then visible before us, directing our steps to heaven. When we love the Lord, when we wish to do His truth, He can come into us with spiritual life, opening our minds to an ever-deepening understanding of Him and love for Him. Then the Lord is our way, our truth, and our life. Amen.

Lessons: Psalm 25, John 14:1-20, AC 2531:21 3