

# Q&A: On current political and ethical issues, why do we not hear God in the same way?

Anonymous asks:

*I read with interest the series of Facebook posts sparked off by your post of the Christianity Today article. I think it is fascinating to see how Christians come to opposing conclusions from the same set of "facts".*

*For me, one of the biggest problems not just in the specific case of the USA but generally, is what we mean by "discerning the mind of Christ" or "listening to the Holy Spirit". I am fully in agreement with the article and your counter-arguments against the pro-Trump people. However, how do I know that this really is what God is saying to us?*

*The same can be said of other major issues on which the church is split. Each side is sure that they are listening to God. I think this conundrum is something that has got increasingly difficult over the 40 odd years of my Christian life. For example, in the early 70s, I think the evangelical world was pretty unified on the sexuality issue. We could dismiss pro-gay views as being part of the liberal wing. Now, I suspect that even the evangelical wing is probably in a minority in holding to traditional views.*

*Why does God not speak to everyone in the same way or rather why do we not hear God in the same way?*

The Christianity Today article referenced is: We Worship with the Magi, not MAGA

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***can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: <http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/>***

Thank you for this question. This was sent in a while ago, and the delay in my response comes from the fact that this is my second attempt at answering!



At the heart of it, your question is about *disagreement*. In particular, it's about Christians disagreeing on how to discern what God wants, what God wills, or simply what he is doing. In my first attempted answer I wanted to talk about epistemological differences – i.e. our understanding of how we *know* things – and then set our feet on the solid rock of God's revelation in Scripture and analyse our disagreements from there.

It wasn't a bad place to begin. From that perspective of Biblical truth we can form an opinion on whether people (including ourselves) are correct or incorrect with regard to doctrine or fact. We can also discern whether people (including ourselves) are wrong or right in terms of the spirit or character of our engagement. We can also reach for some conclusions about what things are *essential* or *primary*, and what things are secondary *adiaphora* on which we can disagree in unity.

On the matters you raise – Trumpism and sexuality – there has been much that has been written and said and I'm not going to rehearse it all again here. If our intention is to *disagree*

well while holding to a robust epistemology, there are some good examples. A number of years ago I wrote a lengthy multi-part review of a book called *Good Disagreement?*. One of that book's contributors, Andrew Goddard, has written very recently on the same topic of sexuality on the Psephizo blog. With regards to US politics, a recent podcast from Premier Christian Radio, *Unbelievable? Is the US Church in the grip of political idolatry?* with Shane Claiborne & Johnnie Moore, is useful.

The reason for my second attempt at an answer is that I think your question might be pushing a little deeper. **It is a good thing to analyse the *nature* of disagreement. But you are asking *why* it happens.** Why does it seem that God is not speaking clearly? If God's truth is real and foundational, why do Christians differ so significantly on what we think that truth is? And if that clarity is not there, *how* can I truly know anything?

Conflict and disagreement about God's will amongst God's people is self-evident, biblically, historically, and in our present moment. Our trust in God cannot depend on their being a lack of disagreement. So we must find the right place for it in our thinking. To that end, I discern two types of conflict, which I will tentatively call *unfaithful* disagreement, and *faithful* disagreement.

The first category of **unfaithful disagreement** is needed because sometimes God's truth *is* clear. The conflict arises simply because there are those who wish to be faithful to what God says, and those who wish to dismiss it, disobey it, or harden themselves to it in some way.

Many of the conflicts in the Bible are of this sort, which makes perfect sense when viewing Biblical history from the perspective of hindsight and a greater awareness of the grand scheme of things. There is story after story of various people whose eyes are open to God's truth being opposed by those who

are hardened or spiritually blinded in some way: from Cain & Abel and those who opposed Noah, through the mumbling moans of the Israelites against Moses, to Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who killed the prophets and stoned those sent to her (Matthew 23:37). This is truly the conflict of light vs darkness, truth vs lie.

These conflicts cannot be truly resolved by compromise or finding the balance of things. In such conflicts even if an "agree to disagree" can be found it resolves to a *diminishment* of unity, rather than an *increase*.

Take the issue of state authorities, for instance. With regards to Trump the normal "common ground" issues of how God ordains secular and civil leadership (e.g .in Romans 13) are not really the issues at hand. What is under dispute is whether some particular anointing, even of a Messianic kind, attaches to Trump, the nature and extent of spiritual warfare and prophetic utterances about Trump, and the intertwining of gospel proclamation with the ascendancy of one man, and the violent actions of a mob in Washington. These are matters of right and wrong, light and dark.

With regard to the issue of human sexuality; there is a lot of complexity and nuance, and things to understand and embrace in the middle of it all. Nevertheless, sometimes the dispute *does* encroach onto matters of fundamental clarity, and we do face (on both sides of the politics, to be honest) fundamental matters of idolatry and grossly negligent handling of the Scriptures.

To some extent, then, this answers something of your *why* question. Why do we disagree? Why do we claim God's support on different sides of various debates? It is simply the human predicament: We long to stand in the light and truth of God, and at the same time our rebellious self-centred hearts oppose it. That essential conflict is therefore within society, within church communities, and even within our own

souls. In our sin, we do not hear him as we should, therefore we disagree. This should not surprise us.

The response to it is *hope*. One day the Father of Lies will be defeated, and the One who is the Way, Truth, and Life, will shine and all will be revealed.

However, there is also a form of **faithful disagreement**. It rests on the reality that God made us good, and he also made us *finite*. There is *goodness* in our epistemological finitude; it is part of God's good design that we are limited in our knowledge of the truth. Those limits are a dynamic part of us that *draw* us towards a deeper knowledge of God, a deeper *worship*.

It's one of the reasons I am wary of Trumpist-like prophets who sometimes speak of getting a "downloaded" word from God. Biblical and personal experience, rather, indicates that God's truth is something that we have to *learn*. After all, Jesus had *disciples*; i.e. he had *students*! He promised that the Spirit would *lead* them into all truth (John 16:13). And through the various modes of ministry and gifts within the church, a process of *maturity* is expected (Ephesians 4:11-13).

Some of us will know certain aspects of God's truth differently than others. Some of us will be better versed in the Scriptures. Some of us will have had different experiences to bring alongside those Scriptures. In our learning there will be *difference of opinion*. But that doesn't mean that that *process* of learning is flawed.

Consider the ideal: Adam & Eve walked and talked with God in their innocence; their growth and maturation sprung, in all goodness, from that relationship. (Interestingly, the fall is portrayed as an attempt to seek knowledge on their own terms). Similarly, Jesus gathers his disciples and they sit at his feet where they receive the words of eternal life (John 6:68) – and that was good! It was good when they first started

being taught by him, and it was good after three years of walking and talking. And, we might note, it didn't stop them having disputes – some of them painful – which were, in themselves, opportunities for Jesus to teach them, yet again.

At our best, this is what we see in the “disputes” of the church. They lead to greater understanding, and deeper worship. Paul talks to the Bereans and they run to the Scriptures with *eagerness*, (Acts 17:11), to test what they have heard. The leaders of the church come together in the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 and they ponder together Peter's experience with Cornelius, and the truths of the Law, and their own eyewitness learning from Christ himself, and they resolve the dispute about the inclusion of the Gentiles. They don't pitch these things against each other to find some shallow overlap; they wrestled *in their faithfulness* to Scripture and the direct teaching of Jesus, in order to grasp what was happening in their experience. From this wrestle came a greater fathoming and proclamation of the gospel!

This isn't some mystical magical thing; it's the ordinary experience of the gospel. Personally, I remember how one of the greatest joys of my theological training was the lunchtimes debates of one topic or another – well-hearted differences of opinion that forced me back to the word of God, to wrestle, to learn, and, in the end, it led to greater worship.

Why do we not hear God the same way? Because, in his divine wisdom, our ignorance is a call to worship, as we bring each other to sit at his feet.

How, then, do we know, with the issues that are rising in our own time now, **what sort of conflict we're dealing with?**

I will always do my best to take heed of the disputes around me – even the matters of Trump and sexuality. I may learn something from them, you see. Here's the framework I use to

parse that:

1. **Is this dispute a matter of fundamentals?** Are we seeing, here, a matter of spiritual *opposition* to God and his word. Have we slipped from asking “What does our Lord say?” to “What am I going to say anyway?” In this case, I either call out the error as constructively as I can, or I walk from the dispute; it cannot lead me to greater worship.
2. **Is this dispute a secondary matter?** That is, does what I have learned from God’s word stay the same on either side of the debate? I will enter into the matters if I have the inclination or energy to clarify my own opinion, but only if it’s edifying. Paul warns us away from needless controversies (Titus 3:9) and about needlessly offending our brother or sister (1 Corinthians 8:9).
3. **Is this dispute taking me to sit at God’s feet once more, to learn from his word, and explore his heart?** At this point I will attempt to receive the dispute as a gift, even if have to expend some energy and suck up some humility. In this moment it can be a great joy and delight that we do not all hear God in the same way; there’s something more to learn from his Word.

The difficulty with the matters that you raise – Trumpism and sexuality – is that in different ways, with different people, on different particular topics, I have found that all three parts apply. Sometimes it’s a matter of opposing what is blatantly wrong. Sometimes it’s needless controversy. Occasionally it is edifying dialogue. You will see all three aspects at work simultaneously, and because of that, much wisdom is needed.

Thanks for the question.

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# Q&A: How do you distinguish between your feelings and what God is saying?

**Anonymous** asks (in response to a teaching time from one of our recent livestreams):

*How would you distinguish between the words in your head and what God is saying?*

*I'm sure the Bible says not to act in feelings but if it's a feeling God is giving you how can you know it's from him?*

**[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog or asked of me elsewhere and posted with permission. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: <http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/>]**

I really appreciate this question. It's an honest question. I think many of us ask (and answer it) without noticing, particularly when we are uncomfortable. It's when we find ourselves *confronted* by or *disagreeing* with something we read in the Bible, for instance, that these questions arise: What is wrong here? What doesn't sit right with me? Why doesn't it sit right? How do I wrestle with it?



Too often, rather than wrestle with it, we put the niggly thing aside so that we can simply feel comfortable again. It



is rarely the best way forward.

So how might we explore your question?

**Firstly, let's look at things in general:**

Your question is what we call an *epistemological* question. *Epistemology* is how we think about *knowing* stuff, particularly how we know what is right and what is wrong.

It the words in my head say something is true, is that enough or do I need something else? If it *feels* right, does that make it right? That's the sort of thing we're talking about here.

Our answer is affected by historical and cultural differences:

- Some cultures emphasise *tradition* as more important than individual feelings or realisations. If you *feel* something is wrong, but the cultural tradition says it's right, then the individual gives way to the collective wisdom. The internal process is like this: "I recognise that my experience is limited. Our tradition reflects the shared experience of generations of people, and is therefore less limited. Besides, I want to continue to fit in, so it is therefore more likely that I am wrong and the tradition is right."
- Some times in history have emphasised *reason* as more important than feelings or individual intuitions. The so-called "Age of Enlightenment" from the 1600's through to the 20th Century picked up on this. "Truth" is determined by logic, and science, and cold hard calculations. This is an aspect of what we call *modernism*.
- In the "post-modern" era (20th Century into the present day) we have elevated the value of individual feelings and thoughts. "Truth is experience" is our catch-cry; if we can't feel it, it is not true. There's value in this.

Cold, hard, abstract theory, is not enough to guide and shape our lives. Our lives are also full of creativity, mystery, and the delights of the senses. We are also aware that beneath traditions and logical frameworks there are often hidden emotions and prejudices and unspoken power dynamics; we *deconstruct* these so-called truths as the self-serving assertions they actually are. “Going with your gut” rather than arguing yourself into subservience is a virtue in this worldview.

What does this tell us? That the “words in your head” and your “feelings” are not without value, but neither do they solely determine what is true and what is right. I know from my own experience, that my emotions are often broken. For instance, I have had a break down and depression; during that time my feelings about myself did not match the reality about myself and I had to learn to realise that. There have also been plenty of times when I held a view fervently that I subsequently came to realise was *wrong*. It is impossible to learn or grow without agreeing with the possibility that I’ve got something to learn.

### **Secondly, how do we approach this from a Christian perspective?**

Our faith in God introduces something else into our epistemology. We believe in a God who is not distant and aloof, but is *involved*, not only in the history of the world, but in our lives. We therefore believe in a God who *speaks*, through word and action. What he says is a *revelation*; it reveals truth about who he is, about who we are, and about what this world is like.

So how do we know what that truth is? How do we know what is being revealed? What is God’s revelation to us?

**The beauty of it is that God’s revelation is *objective* and *external* to us.** God’s truth doesn’t depend on us. This is a

good thing! If it did, our sense of truth and of right and wrong would be self-defined. The truth is that God loves the world, and loves *me*, whether or not I feel it or “know” it. The truth is that there is right and wrong in God’s perfect justice, even if my heart has been hardened and my mind has been dulled, and I am either justifying myself or falsely tearing myself down.

This sense of God’s revelation is found in two forms:

It is found in what we call “general revelation”; there is truth to be found within creation and from looking at what is in front of us. “The heavens declare the glory of God”, the psalmist says. “Since the creation of the world”, Paul says, “God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made.” This is how Christian belief embraces and recognises the value of the sciences; it is a study of creation and of humanity that reveals much truth.

It is also found in what we call “special revelation.” That is, if God is close, and interacts with his creation, then God reveals himself in *history*. The written accounts of that history will then also reveal him. From looking at that written history we also see how God speaks through *inspiration*. He *speaks* to his people. Sometimes (but not often, it usually freaks people out), this is a direct “voice from heaven” (Exodus 20:18-19, Matthew 17:5). Often it is through the inspiration of a *prophet* who is set apart by God to speak to the people on God’s behalf. It is also through the giving of the Law, and in the inspiration of songs and poetry. The Bible is full of these things: history, law, prophetic writings, wisdom and creative writings, the accounts of Jesus’ life, and letters from his followers.

When we say “The Bible says” what we mean is that “God has revealed himself, in history, saying.” God has even spoken about how he speaks. “All Scripture is God-breathed and is

useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). The Bible is therefore an *authoritative objective revelation* for us.

**The beauty of it is also that God's revelation is subjective and personal to us.** God isn't relegated to speak to us in dry and dusty texts with dogmatic formulae; he whispers deeply and personally into the deepest parts of our heart. He calls us by name. He *knows* us. Jesus revealed himself to others in this way. Jesus sends the Holy Spirit who is our Advocate and Counsellor. Sometimes the whispers in my head are prompts by the Spirit of Jesus. Sometimes my feelings are the way in which God is waking me up to his truth, a light in the darkness around me.

### **So how , then, do we know?**

We can be certain of something when it all lines up and there is agreement in our epistemology. When our own feelings and logical thoughts agree with the traditions around us... when those things line up with what we read in the Bible and how we feel the Spirit is speaking deeply into our souls... then all is well and good. We have a sense of being *sure*.

When there is disagreement between these epistemological sources, however, we have some wrestling to do.

In particular, when I find myself wrestling with a part of the Bible that doesn't "sit well" with me, I churn it over.

1. **I look to myself.** What I'm trying to do is to work out what is happening within me. I name up the feeling: Am I feeling angry, guilty, annoyed, fired up and frustrated? What's going on in me? Are those feelings associated with experiences in my life that I haven't resolved yet; is there some pain and trauma that is getting poked? **How is this Scripture offending me or moving me?** I don't pass judgement and soothe the feeling, I consider myself and work out what the problem is. I recognise that my

heart is often fickle, I don't quickly agree with it, but I acknowledge the reality of my feelings.

2. **I apply some reason and look to logic and tradition.** Am I reading this part of Scripture correctly? Do I actually understand what is being said? Have I properly got into the world of those who first read it, and understood what they were hearing? Have I shoved my situation into the text and reacted to something that was never intended in the first place? How have other people understood it over the years? How have they applied it? What can I learn from them?
3. **In all this, I pray for the Holy Spirit to help me.** I ask for the Spirit to *illuminate* my wrestle – to give me insight into the Scripture, or an insight into myself. I trust that the Lord has something for me in the revelation of himself. Sometimes I've had a sense of words "jumping out at me" from the page, or stuck in my mind while I dwell on them. Sometimes the Spirit of God works through these things. But! Just because I feel it, doesn't mean that it's the Spirit at work. In particular, the **personal revelation of God to my spirit will never be at odds with his objective truth in Scripture.**
4. **I do it in community.** I share all this wrestling with others, even it's just one person like my wife or a friend. I explain to them what I'm feeling, and how that's colliding with the words in the Bible. We pray together. We reflect on it together. We wrestle together. And sometimes there's a prophetic word within that community that sheds light and makes things clear.
5. **I allow God to be God.** In the end, I entrust myself to God. It's nice to have our feelings resolved, and to be comfortable with the Bible and God's word, but it's not always the way that leads to growth. Sometimes God is drawing us deeper, and we need to give it time. **I can avoid the pain of that growth by setting God's word aside** by either judging it to be wrong, or subjectifying

it as irrelevant to me. But, if I want to grow, I need to allow the wrestle to remain. I fall back in confidence on the things that are sure – e.g. God’s love and truth and the beauty of Jesus – and trust God with the rest. Even, and especially, when we cannot see, we acknowledge our blindness, and reach out for God even more.

I hope that answers the question. How we wrestle with our feelings and our own understandings is key to our discipleship and our caring for one another. Thanks for asking. Hope these thoughts help.

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## **Q&A: Do you believe that there are contradictions or errors in the Bible?**

**Antionin** asks: *Do you believe that there are contradictions or errors in the Bible*

Hi Antionin,

Thanks for the question. It depends what you mean by “contradictions” or “errors.” Your question interacts with the nature and communication of truth, which is not always simplistically propositional.

For instance in Job 38:4-7 we read

*“Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation?  
Tell me, if you understand.  
Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!  
Who stretched a measuring line across it?*

*On what were its footings set,  
or who laid its cornerstone –  
while the morning stars sang together  
and all the angels shouted for joy?*

I assert that this paragraph is true. Yet it is 'false' and "in error" in some literal sense: Surely the earth does not have literal cornerstones and foundations; surely God did not use an actual measuring line! Yet the intention of this passage is clear and it is achieved – Job's finitude in comparison to God's magnitude is thoroughly and effectively communicated.

It is for this reason that I personally prefer to use the term "infallibility" when referring to the veracity of the Bible. It's an imprecise term which some use to water things down to mean that Scripture is only true when it needs to be. I don't mean it like that. I mean that Scripture always communicates truth, it achieves what it needs to be achieved, and this is infallibly true.

As for contradictions, it is hard to respond without specific examples to consider. Most of those that I have googled for usually end up at imprecision in language (or translation), different-perspectives on the same thing that aren't actually contradictory, or forcing one part of the Bible to speak to the context of another part. Even the most famous "contradiction" of the supposedly irreconcilable resurrection accounts can be analysed using these sorts of concepts. (I've had a quick look at this page and it seems to be a good example)

So to answer your question, in the sense that I've outlined, I do not believe that there are errors or contradictions in the Bible.