

“Choose Your Ruler”: The Standard for Measuring Truth

I inherited some wood-working tools from my grandfather when he died. The tools came with a special, hand-carved board made out of hickory wood. With just a little work, I could make a nice shelf out of it, so I've kept it around, hoping it'll fit in my kitchen. I know that before I actually stain it, I'll have to find out how long it is.

There might be several ways to find out how long it is. I could find 10 people and ask them to guess the board's length. (I have, in fact, done this several times!) We would most likely get 5 or 6 or even 10 different guesses. But as you know, all 10 guesses may be wrong! And there would be different reasoning behind the various guesses. One time, a girl simply went along with her boyfriend's guess. The guy two seats down made a different guess, because he just wanted to be different! Now, having so many different guesses would *not* mean that we could *never* find out the length of the board, but I've actually seen people shrug and decide it can't be known.

Now what if 8 of the people guessed the same length? *Would the board, then, be that length?* The **majority** guess would not change the length of the board, and the guess of the **minority** would not automatically be right just because only a few people guessed the same rare number.

What if the President of the United States were here, and he guessed a different number? Would the board then be the length he guessed because of how **important** he is? Or would it *not* be the length he guessed because you may not agree with his politics?

What if I have believed it to be four feet long for 23 years? Does it eventually *become* that length because of **how long** I've held my belief?

What if I believe it to be four feet long because my **grandfather** told me that he thought it was that long before he gave it to me?

Or, what if I just really, honestly and sincerely believe that four feet is the length of the board? My **sincerity** would not change the length of the board, would it? I would simply be *sincerely wrong*.

Naturally, the way to end all this confusion is to simply go get a tape measure or a ruler and measure the silly board. Once, when I took a piece of paper and made my own marks on it and then tried to use it as a “ruler”, everyone in the group immediately rejected my measurement. (And rightly so! Imagine what would happen at a lumber yard with everyone using their own homemade measures!)

So can I take out a tape measure or ruler, and hand it to *you* to measure for me? Do you think I should trust your measurement before I cut the board and stain it? Maybe. But what if I knew it was likely to be a tight fit? Or, what if the stakes were really high? As a group exercise, I've had people pretend their lives were on the line. Naturally, no one has ever been willing to let someone else measure for them!

This illustration helps explain why there are so many churches. In the first place, people are willing to guess, and they make their different guesses for a wide variety of different reasons. We also find people who are willing to listen to preachers and priests explain God's will from a "ruler" (that is, a standard) that is not even God's book! And they're even willing to bet their *souls* on it!

Some of us are easily confused, and we don't know that a spiritual ruler exists. So some of us, when we hear various answers to spiritual questions, decide that the truth cannot be known! That's understandable, but misled. We have an inherent, fundamental curiosity about spiritual things because of our nature. Once we acknowledge the existence of God and realize that we have a spiritual nature yearning for answers, it follows that **God has provided answers** to those questions. And His truth is true no matter who finds it or who doesn't find it – even my grandfather! God's truth doesn't change to fit the majority opinion, and even the President of the United States can't change God's revealed truth by Executive Decree.

God has indeed communicated with us. He has given us a ruler, and we can all learn to read it for ourselves.

Many people claim to be using the Bible to measure the truth and answer questions. Indeed they are using the right standard, so why do they come up with so many different answers to basic questions, such as: How is one saved? What is the nature and work of the church? and, How should we worship God? The reasons for there being many different answers are hard to accept at first, but think about the board. Sadly, some people who don't know the truth will make something up so they'll sound smart. They might even tell you wrong information (usually what you want to hear!) just so you'll agree with them. Some people will lie to you for personal gain, and some will lie to you because they've been lying to themselves in order to justify their lifestyle. Some good and honest people will tell you only part of the answer because that's all they know! The Bible gives examples and warnings of all these kinds of people. The same Bible is itself the standard of truth because it is the only inspired book of God. It provides answers to basic spiritual and religious questions. In fact, the apostle Peter said that God "has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness" (2 Peter 1:3), and the apostle Paul taught that "all Scripture" is able to make "the man of God complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work". (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

Did you notice in our illustration how we assumed that the board has a certain length and that only one measurement can be right? However, when it comes to matters of spiritual truth, most people do not want to "condemn" anyone else. So, some people decide that, unlike a piece of wood, spiritual truth can have several right answers. They may decide that the sum of religious thought in the world is the truth, in spite of obvious and sometimes unexplainable contradictions. Others decide that some common thread among all the various religions is the essence of spiritual truth. (They fail to see that not all religions even acknowledge the existence of one God or an immortal human soul, and that no common thread has ever been identified **because it doesn't exist!**) Ironically, people who hope to be so *broad-minded* as to accept all religious ideas (and thereby avoid condemning anyone) have already condemned countless numbers of people! How? Because millions of people are not religious at all! So in our search for spiritual truth, we're going to have to accept the fact that any answer we come to will go against ("condemn") somebody else, maybe even our spouse or best friend.

Perhaps the only impulse stronger than not wanting to condemn others is the desire not to condemn ourselves! With a hickory board, no one gets upset when s/he finds out the true answer and then learns that his or her own guess was wrong, but questions about life and godliness are somehow very different. Sometimes, at least partly out of fear of having the wrong answer, people try to avoid the question altogether. But denying the existence of spiritual questions doesn't make them go away, and avoiding them does not mean that the answers are not important. You can make yourself so busy that you don't have time to "make shelves." And you can even lean the board up against the kitchen wall in order to satisfy yourself that you've addressed the issue.

In order to be at peace, though, we need solid answers to life's difficult questions. We must acknowledge the standard for truth and then keep looking at that standard until we can understand how to use it. The Bible is the standard, and it can give you all the answers you need.

So, keep asking. *Ask everyone*, and then compare all of their answers to what the Book says. (Acts 17:11) Realize that learning is a life-long process (2 Peter 3:18) and that truth is worth finding, no matter the sacrifice (Proverbs 23:23; Matthew 13:44-46). There is no disgrace in being wrong – we are all wrong once in a while – the only disgrace comes from stubbornly holding on to old mistakes and wrong information. (2 Corinthians 10:4-5)

As with many illustrations, the analogy between the hickory board and spiritual truth eventually breaks down. For example, if a board is a little too long, we can just cut it down to size to make it fit. Similarly, many people attempt to resize the truth, but the reality is that God expects us to remodel our whole kitchen so that the board will fit into it! At any rate, this illustration hopefully helps us deal with some basic spiritual questions and helps us learn to *measure the truth*. May God bless us as we seek His will.