AN ESSAY ON TRUTH AND DISCIPLESHIP

WHEN TRUTH IS ALLOWED TO CORRECT US

Truth, Correction, and the Culture We Create

A considered treatment of personal and religious responsibility in families, quorums, wards, stakes, churches, workplaces, and other communities.

> *"Prove all things; hold fast that which is good."*
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> **1 Thessalonians 5:21**

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In Brief

Most people would say that they care about truth. The more revealing question is what happens when truth threatens something they also care about: reputation, belonging, authority, comfort, or the belief that they have judged correctly.

When a concern is raised, there are two very different ways to respond. We can examine the claim, weigh the evidence, and answer the reasoning. Or we can turn our attention toward the person who spoke. We can describe him as angry, wounded, disloyal, difficult, proud, or disrespectful. Some of those descriptions may even contain truth. Yet none of them, by themselves, establish that his claim is false.

This distinction matters because attacking the person does more than make a conversation unpleasant. It protects the disputed idea or conduct from examination. It can also teach everyone watching that correction carries a personal cost. Once that lesson becomes part of a group's culture, silence may be mistaken for agreement and outward peace may conceal unresolved wrongs.

Scripture repeatedly warns covenant communities about this danger. In John 9, religious leaders answer a healed man's evidence by attacking his standing and casting him out. Helaman 13 describes people who honor earlier prophets while rejecting a prophet who confronts their present conduct. Isaiah speaks of people who prefer smooth messages, and Nephi warns of those who become angry because of the truth of God.

These warnings belong to communities, but they also belong to the individual soul. A quorum, ward, stake, church, family, workplace, or other institution cannot credibly claim to seek truth while making truthful correction personally dangerous. Neither can I call myself a seeker of truth if I demand that my concerns be heard on their merits while refusing the same discipline when correction is directed toward me.

The test is not whether we are always right. The test is whether truth is allowed to reach us, correct us, and alter what we do.

1. What Truth Seeking Requires

Truth seeking is often spoken of as an attitude of openness. It is more than that. It is a discipline that requires us to distinguish between what we hope is true, what we have assumed is true, and what the available evidence actually supports.

There is little difficulty in receiving truth that confirms us. We welcome facts that show our judgment was sound or our side was right. The more meaningful test comes when evidence requires us to revise a conclusion, withdraw an accusation, reconsider a decision, or admit that a practice we defended has caused harm.

At that point, truth competes with self-protection. We may follow the evidence, or we may search for reasons the evidence should not count. We may acknowledge that another person saw something we did not, or we may make his supposed defects the subject of the conversation.

Paul instructed the Saints to “prove all things” and “hold fast that which is good.” That counsel requires examination rather than automatic acceptance, but it also forbids automatic dismissal. We are not asked to believe every accusation or surrender every settled conviction. We are asked to test what comes before us honestly, retain what is true, and reject what is not. (1 Thessalonians 5:19–21.)

Teachability does not mean permanent uncertainty. A person may hold a conclusion firmly after careful examination. The danger begins when no evidence, no witness, and no consequence is permitted to question it. A conclusion protected from every possible correction is no longer being held because it is true. It is being held because it has become part of the person or group that believes it.

2. The Argument and the Person

To answer an argument on its merits is to ask whether its facts are accurate, its reasoning is sound, and its conclusion follows. To answer the person is to treat something about the speaker as sufficient reason not to examine what he said.

The personal answer often sounds persuasive because character and credibility sometimes do matter. A witness who repeatedly lies may deserve closer scrutiny. A person’s motive may help explain why he selected certain facts or omitted others. Yet credibility is not a universal substitute for analysis. Even an imperfect witness may possess reliable evidence, and even a person with mixed motives may identify a genuine wrong.

A wounded person can be correct. An angry person can make a valid argument. A difficult person can know something that a more agreeable person does not. Even someone who has behaved poorly in one

respect may speak truthfully about another. The relevant question is whether the alleged defect changes the reliability of the particular evidence before us.

Tone must be treated with the same care. Harshness may need correction. It may obscure meaning or inflict unnecessary injury. But poor delivery does not prove that the substance is false. Two judgments may be required at the same time: the speaker may need to change how he speaks, and the listener may still need to answer what he said.

When those questions are confused, the exchange becomes structurally unfair. The person raising the concern must defend both his claim and his character. The person or practice being questioned is relieved from defending either. Attention has been transferred from the possible error to the supposed unworthiness of the person who noticed it.

3. When Personal Cost Replaces an Answer

Every community teaches its members what may be questioned and what questioning will cost. That teaching occurs not only through written rules but through repeated consequences.

If a concern receives a fair hearing, people learn that honest disagreement can belong within the community. If a concern is met with suspicion, loss of standing, exclusion, or an attack upon the speaker's motives, people learn that silence is safer. No one has to issue an order forbidding questions. The treatment of the first few people who ask them can accomplish the same result.

This pattern often begins with small matters. A quorum member asks whether an activity meets an actual need and is treated as unsupportive. A ward member reports that someone has been overlooked and is told to stop being negative. A family explains the burden created by a decision and is made to feel selfish. A person describes an injury and is told that his pain proves he cannot judge clearly.

Over time, people adapt. Some stop speaking. Some weaken their concerns until the meaning disappears. Some leave the room or withdraw from the community. Those who remain agreeable may be trusted more because they cause less discomfort. Leaders can then mistake the absence of expressed disagreement for unity.

Silence, however, is not reliable evidence of agreement. It may indicate fear, exhaustion, resignation, or the belief that speaking will change nothing. A quiet room can still contain unresolved truth.

This is why making correction personally costly is not merely a failure of kindness. It alters what the group is able to know. It removes information from consideration and makes error harder to detect. When that pattern becomes the normal response, the question "Are we interested in truth?" is not rhetorical. It is an assessment of what the community repeatedly chooses when truth and self-protection compete.

4. What John 9 Shows Us

John 9 offers a particularly clear account of this failure. Jesus heals a man who had been blind from birth. The religious leaders investigate the event because it conflicts with their settled judgment of Jesus. They question the man, question his parents, and divide among themselves over what the healing means.

The man's parents confirm two essential facts: this is their son, and he was born blind. Yet they avoid explaining how he received his sight because they fear being put out of the synagogue. The threatened consequence has already shaped their testimony. Punishment does not affect only the person who receives it; it instructs everyone who observes it. (John 9:18–23.)

The healed man continues to speak with unusual clarity. He does not pretend to know everything about Jesus. He anchors his testimony in what he knows directly: "One thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see." He then reasons from the miracle toward its source. (John 9:24–33.)

The leaders do not finally answer his reasoning. They answer his standing: "Thou wast altogether born in sins, and dost thou teach us?" Then they cast him out. Their response turns the witness into the accused. The man who was once blind is declared unworthy to teach those whose certainty prevents them from seeing what stands before them. (John 9:34–41.)

The account is pertinent wherever position is allowed to decide what may be known. Someone with less authority may possess a fact that someone with more authority lacks. Someone who suffered the consequence of a decision may understand something unavailable to those who made it. The central question is whether the evidence can correct the judgment. If rank becomes sufficient reason not to hear, truth has been made dependent upon rank.

5. Prophets, "the Prophet," and Present Correction

Helaman 13 describes people who honor the prophets of former times while rejecting a prophet who comes among them and speaks against their sins. If a man tells them that all is well and gives them permission to continue in pride, they receive him. If he calls them to repentance, they become angry and seek to destroy him. (Helaman 13:24–29.)

The pattern is easy to condemn when it belongs to the past. We admire Samuel the Lamanite upon the wall and Abinadi before King Noah. We honor those who spoke truth when doing so was costly. The harder question is whether we welcome correction when it is present, uncomfortable, and spoken by someone we do not admire.

Isaiah described people who asked their seers to speak "smooth things." Nephi warned of those who "tremble, and are angry because of the truth of God." Such people need not announce that they oppose

truth. Their treatment of unwelcome correction reveals that comfort, pride, or belonging has been placed above it. (Isaiah 30:8–11; 2 Nephi 28:28.)

Within modern Latter-day Saint speech, “the Prophet” commonly refers to the President of the Church. That usage should not be imposed upon every ancient passage that speaks of prophets. Helaman 13 refers to “the prophets” and then to “a prophet” who comes among the people. The warning is not limited by its wording to the rejection of one presiding officer. It concerns the rejection of the Lord’s word when that word exposes present conduct.

John 9 broadens the principle further. The healed man is not presented as a presiding leader. He is a witness who knows what happened to him and gives reasons for his conclusion. His lack of office does not make his evidence false.

This does not turn every critic into a prophet, nor does opposition establish inspiration. Every claim remains subject to examination. It means that office and truth are different questions. We may sustain the President of the Church while still refusing a valid correction from a spouse, a child, a quorum member, or a person whose manner we dislike. Honoring prophetic authority does not remove the obligation to receive truth through less exalted messengers.

6. From a Quorum to a Church

The same governing principle applies across different kinds of communities, though its consequences expand with the reach of the group.

In a quorum, a member may question whether a familiar activity meets an actual need. A fair response considers the need, the available options, and the reasons for the decision. The proposal may remain unchanged, yet the quorum can still learn. If the member instead becomes suspect merely for asking, the lesson concerns the danger of questioning rather than the merits of the activity.

In a ward, the issue may concern a person who was overlooked, a burden placed upon a family, or a recurring practice that has caused injury. A truthful culture asks what happened and what responsibility follows. It does not require the person reporting harm to prove that he feels no hurt before his account may be considered. Pain may explain urgency; it is not, by itself, proof of unreliability.

In a stake, leaders make decisions whose consequences they cannot experience directly in every ward or family. Agreement among decision makers cannot supply every fact known to those affected. The ability to receive a reasoned objection from someone nearer the consequence can preserve sound judgment across that distance.

Within a church, religious language gives the matter added weight. A question about human judgment may be treated as a challenge to God, and a request for reasons may be turned into a test of

faithfulness. Careful distinctions are therefore essential. Revelation and stewardship deserve serious respect, but the invocation of sacred office cannot establish every factual claim made by its holder. Sacred responsibility increases, rather than decreases, the duty to judge truthfully.

The principle applies in families, workplaces, and other institutions as well. A person may expose a defect while remaining devoted to the group's legitimate purpose. Labels such as disloyal, difficult, or negative cannot do the work of evidence. Dishonest accusations must be rejected, but they must be rejected because they are dishonest, not because they are inconvenient.

7. Authority That Can Be Corrected

Authority includes the duty to decide. Hearing an objection does not require a leader to agree with it, and listening does not surrender stewardship. A concern may be examined and rejected when the facts or reasoning fail.

Yet an honorable exercise of authority should be capable of explaining why. Reasons demonstrate that the concern was understood and weighed. Reliance mainly upon position, loyalty, or personal pressure teaches that the leader's standing matters more than the substance before him.

Doctrine and Covenants 1 describes the Lord giving commandments to His servants "in their weakness" so that errors might be made known, wisdom sought, understanding gained, and those who sinned chastened unto repentance. The servants were called, yet still capable of error and still expected to learn. Sacred service did not place them beyond correction. (Doctrine and Covenants 1:24–28.)

Doctrine and Covenants 121 warns that even a little authority can awaken unrighteous dominion. It therefore locates enduring influence in persuasion, long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, love, kindness, and pure knowledge. It also joins necessary reproof with an increase of love. Authority is not protected by compulsion; it is disciplined by truth and charity. (Doctrine and Covenants 121:34–44.)

A leader who admits a demonstrated mistake does not thereby weaken honorable authority, but admission alone is insufficient. Honorable authority requires that the admission produce correction, repair, and changed conduct. Where possible, the leader must restore what was damaged, including trust, standing, opportunity, or reputation. An acknowledged wrong that is allowed to continue remains an operative wrong. Authority is strengthened not merely when a leader says, "I was wrong," but when he accepts the cost of making the matter right.

That cost may include reversing a decision, correcting a public account, returning an opportunity, apologizing without qualification, or ending a practice that continues to injure. Words matter because they name the wrong. Conduct matters because it shows whether the wrong has truly been surrendered.

8. Contempt and Shared Responsibility

Identifying a wrong does not authorize contempt toward the wrongdoer. Contempt can deform the soul of the injured person and make repair more difficult. Each person remains responsible for what he permits resentment to become.

That responsibility, however, does not erase causation. Leaders should understand that repeatedly contending with the person rather than the merits can turn trust into resentment and resentment into contempt. When a person brings a concern and is answered with attacks upon his motives, character, or faithfulness, the relationship itself is being altered.

The injured person remains accountable for contempt, but the leader whose conduct helped produce it is not relieved of responsibility. He cannot fairly use the resulting contempt to discredit the original concern while refusing to examine his own contribution and its foreseeable effects.

Repair therefore requires more than instructing the injured person to improve his attitude. The person who dismissed, accused, or attacked him must acknowledge that treatment and correct it. Both parties may have duties of repentance. One person's obligation does not cancel the other's.

This is another reason to answer concerns on their merits. Personal dismissal does not merely leave a question unanswered. It can train a person who once trusted a leader to expect injury from him. Wise leadership takes responsibility for that possibility before the damage becomes settled and deep.

At the same time, correction must preserve the possibility of return. If every admission becomes an occasion for permanent humiliation, people learn to conceal mistakes. Accountability and mercy belong together. The wrong must be named and repaired, and the wrongdoer must have a meaningful opportunity to demonstrate change.

9. The Culture of Self

It is easier to recognize these failures in a community than within myself. I may immediately see when another person attacks me instead of answering my argument, yet remain slow to notice when I do the same thing to someone else.

The culture of self consists of the habits by which I govern my own mind. Which evidence do I admit? Which facts do I explain away? Do I demand exact proof from people I distrust while accepting weak inferences from those who agree with me? Do I interpret my own anger as moral seriousness and another person's anger as evidence that he is unreasonable?

Seeing error around me does not lessen this responsibility. In fact, the more clearly I claim to perceive a harmful pattern, the more carefully I must examine whether the same pattern operates within me. "I am

a truth teller" can become another protected identity. Repeatedly seeing what others miss can make it especially difficult to admit that I have missed something.

Several questions help test genuine openness. Can I state the other person's argument in terms he would recognize? Can I identify evidence that would change my conclusion? Can I preserve a valid point made by someone whose behavior I otherwise judge severely? Can I correct one part of my account without pretending that every part was wrong?

An invitation to self-examination must not become a device for avoiding the original concern. My inward duty does not excuse another person's outward conduct, just as his conduct does not excuse mine. The obligations are concurrent. I remain answerable for my reasoning and behavior; others remain answerable for theirs.

Being open to correction does not require me to abandon a supported conclusion about a harmful culture. It requires that the conclusion remain answerable to evidence. I may ask others to examine what they have done while maintaining the same willingness to examine what I have done.

10. Giving Truth Effect

The phrase "I might be wrong" is only a beginning. It has moral substance when we investigate the possibility and accept what follows.

Sometimes the cost is small: correcting a date, withdrawing an inference, or acknowledging that we misunderstood a conversation. Sometimes the correction reaches deeply into identity and relationship: admitting an injustice, apologizing without excuses, revising a cherished practice, or restoring someone's reputation after helping to damage it.

Correction should reach as far as the consequences of the error reasonably require. If a mistaken accusation was shared with others, a private change of mind may leave the injured person carrying its public burden. Where possible, the correction should reach those who received the accusation. If a decision created continuing harm, acknowledgment should lead to reconsideration and practical repair.

The person raising a concern also bears a price. He must be accurate, avoid embellishment, distinguish what he knows from what he suspects, and relinquish any part of the claim whose support fails. He cannot demand a hearing on the merits while exempting his own statements from the same standard.

The evidence of reform is concrete. The concern is heard accurately. Reasons are offered. Error is acknowledged. Harmful conduct stops. A damaged name or opportunity is restored where possible. The person who corrected the group can remain a respected participant. These actions give visible meaning to the claim that truth matters.

No one's willingness to endure mistreatment is the measure of an argument's validity. A person may set limits or leave an unproductive exchange without surrendering a supported conclusion. The duty to seek truth requires honesty and courage, but it does not give others an unlimited claim upon the speaker's endurance.

11. A Person and a Community Willing to Be Taught

The deepest commitments of a person or community become visible when they compete. It is easy to honor both truth and belonging when they call for the same response. The harder moment comes when truthful acknowledgment threatens comfort, reputation, friendship, or position.

What is protected then? Is the judgment corrected, or is the challenge punished? Is the argument answered, or is the person placed on trial?

The scriptural accounts deny covenant communities the comfort of assuming that religious knowledge makes this failure impossible. Ancient Israel could resist present truth while retaining religious confidence. The Nephites could praise earlier prophets while attacking the messenger before them. We can repeat the pattern while sincerely believing that we would never do what they did.

The way forward is neither endless doubt nor passive acceptance. It is humility joined with courage. We listen, examine, and distinguish. We hold fast to what is good. We correct what is false. When the correction belongs to us, we repent and repair.

We need not claim perfect understanding. We must allow truth to correct the understanding we have and give that correction effect in the lives we lead together. Only then can a person, a quorum, a ward, a stake, a church, or another community say with meaningful accuracy that it seeks truth.

Scripture References

John 9:13–41

The healed man's evidence, his parents' fear, the attack upon his standing, and his expulsion.

Helaman 13:24–29

Honoring earlier prophets while rejecting present correction and rewarding flattery.

2 Nephi 28:28

Anger at the truth of God and what that response reveals about the heart.

Isaiah 30:8–11

A people who prefer smooth and agreeable messages to unwelcome truth.

1 Thessalonians 5:19–21

Examining what we hear and holding fast to what is good.

Doctrine and Covenants 1:24–28

Error made known, instruction, repentance, humility, and greater knowledge.

Doctrine and Covenants 121:34–44

Righteous influence, the danger of compulsion, persuasion, correction, and increased love.