

Podcast Episode 43: Gathering Truth

QUESTION: How does the gospel of Jesus Christ encompass and include all truth?

DENVER: Christ made a comment about those that would be able to enter into the Kingdom of God, and he said that, “Except you become as a little child, you shall not be able to enter into that Kingdom.” And that thought about what it means to be “as a little child” is one worth considering. It’s one worth puzzling over.

Hold that thought for a moment, because I want to talk about a related subject, and that’s perfection. Every one of us, if I say the word *perfection*, every one of us have something that comes to mind. In the course of your life, my guess is that every one of you have had moments that you could point to and say, That moment was absolutely perfect. There’s nothing about it that I would have changed.

When you ride a motorcycle, roads have a design that is, for safety reasons, capable of handling traffic at speeds that are called the design speed, which means that a vehicle can operate up to that design speed, on that road, safely. But the speed limit is never the design speed. Because they build in this margin of safety, so they tell you to drive 5 or 10 or 15 miles below the design speed of the road so that there’s a margin of safety built into it. If you’re riding a motorcycle on a road, particularly a rural, winding road, like Idaho 5 that goes from the Montana border to the Washington border, and you go the posted speed limit, the motorcycle does not cooperate with you. It doesn’t like that speed. It’s hard to handle. But if you speed up, the motorcycle and the road and you are in syncopation with one another, and you’re riding at the design speed; everything is easier. In fact, it is almost thoughtless as you go. The rhythm of the road, the design of the road, the pace the motorcycle is at, everything about that.

On Idaho 5, there are places where the banking—they call it *super elevation*—of the road is 25 or 30 miles an hour above the posted speed limit. We were returning from the Black Hills of South Dakota, coming through northern Idaho on Idaho 5, going the design speed. It was a moment of absolute perfection, when the joy of the experience—the feel of the humidity, the pace of the road, everything about that moment was perfect—until it was interrupted by an Idaho state patrolman, who fortunately was pointed in the opposite direction as we went by at the design speed of the road. Well, he had a lot of recovery to do to reorient himself, and to start from zero to get to where we were. And we happened into, fortunately, a little village and went a block off the road, found a gas station, hopped off, and there was a fellow there who owned... he owned a Moto Guzzi, which in northern Idaho is a pretty rare motorcycle to be driving. (It’s a V-twin, but unlike a Harley Davidson, which is an inline V-twin with a front and a back, this one has V’s that go out either side. It’s still a V. It’s not like a BMW; that’s a Boxster, horizontally opposed.) So we acted like we’d

been there all week. And the police came through, making their noise, and they went on their happily way. And he said, "They looking for you?" We said, "That's possible, but...."

There are moments where, because you can't be planning next week or regretting last month, you can't be doing anything other than that moment. If you're on the bike and your mind is elsewhere—and you're going the design speed and your mind is elsewhere—you can kill yourself, or you can badly injure yourself. You can do extraordinarily stupid, haphazard, dangerous things if you're not absolutely in the moment. Perfection is one of those things which occurs absolutely in the moment. Think back over your lifetime at those moments when you would not change a thing. You were so content, there was nothing else that you would want or change about that moment.

There's a character, a samurai, that an American struggled to try and understand in the movie *The Last Samurai*. And although they grew to have this friendship with one another, Katsumoto was always looking for the perfect cherry blossom. He would study the cherry tree as it blossomed in the Spring at his—outside his own temple, always looking for the perfect cherry blossom and never finding—there was always a problem with it. Well, as he lay dying on the battlefield, at the end of his life, one of his last breaths, he's looking up and seeing in the distance the cherry trees blooming, and he observes, "Perfect, they are all perfect." And it didn't matter what flaws they had. The fact is, they were all perfect.

I can remember sometime... the scene presents itself vividly in my mind. I can't tell you how old I was or what grade I was in, but during recess, playing marbles with friends—recess was maybe 15 minutes—but it was timeless. Out, playing marbles with a friend, in the dirt with your marble, all eternity could come and go in that moment of such profound contentment.

I have dogs. And dogs are always content, and we're told that dogs do not have any sense of time. They may live only 10 to 12 years, but as far they're concerned, they've lived for all eternity, because there's a timelessness to the experience of being a dog. They're not in a hurry to get somewhere—unless, of course, you've got the leash, and you're going to take them out; in which event, they'll anticipate that moment. But there's a timelessness to the idea of perfection.

I can recall an afternoon: I had come out of my house, and I was sitting on the front porch. And I was all alone. The temperature that day must have been exactly the same temperature as the temperature of my skin, so that I could not tell where outside of me and inside of me began and ended by feeling the breeze. The temperature was exactly the same temperature as I felt. And it was so calm an afternoon, so calm a moment sitting there, that I was taken in by the moment itself. A bird flew by, and I could feel—I could feel the movement of the bird's wings through the vibration of the air because it was just that calm. I thought, as I sat there, this is Heaven. This, this moment, this experience—this is Heaven. Because it, at that moment, was perfect, something that I would not change.

I was out walking, and I came upon this songbird that was just singing the happiest little tune you could ever imagine. I don't know what kind of bird it was, but it was sparrow-sized and small and very happy and singing its tune and doing all that God endowed it to do. And I came upon it abruptly, and—because of where it had situated itself and because of where I came upon it from—it was trapped. And it was singing loudly. And when I got there, it was so loud and so startling that I stopped and looked at it, and it immediately stopped singing. And it knew, it was like the bird realized, if I wanted to, I could catch it; if I wanted to, I could kill it; if I wanted to, I could exercise whatever control I wanted over the bird. And it looked frightened, less than an arm's length away. Foolish to let a human get that close to you, in that vulnerable a spot. And the stopping of the singing was so abrupt. It's like the last notes still hung in the air as this frightened little creature looked at me. And I thought, "Hey, I'm harmless," but it doesn't know that. So I thought, "What's the best way to communicate to this trapped little animal that I'm harmless?" I turned, and I walked away, and I tried to whistle a little like what the bird had been whistling like. Miserable imitation. I mean, it was probably screeching to that poor thing, but I whistled as I'm walking away. And within a few steps, if there's anyway to describe it, I would say that the bird's tune resumed on a happier note than it had been before. That was a moment that was perfect.

I'm sure every one of you have had moments in your life that you can point to and recall and say, that moment, that incident, that was perfect. If we can conceive of perfection, or if we can experience it even for just a moment, that means perfection exists. It's real. It's attainable. It can be had, even in this place. And even with you and even with me, perfection is possible.

In this creation, there are two opposing forces that cause everything there is to be and to exist. Those two opposing forces are not good and evil, although we tend to call them "good" and call them "evil". The two opposing forces are, in fact, love and fear. Everything that is generative or creative comes about as a consequence of love. If you think about all the problems that people have with one another and what would solve them, the one thing that could solve every problem is love—if we loved one another enough. And all of those vices—all of the suffering, the anger, the pride, the envy, the impatience, the greed—have their root in fear: "I fear I will not have enough, and therefore, I envy. I fear for my own inability, and therefore, I resent your ability." Everything that produces negativity comes about as a consequence of fear.

The apostle Paul, in a letter to the Ephesians, wrote "*that in the dispensation of the fulness of times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth, ...in Him*" (Ephesians 1:10). The entire history of Christianity is plagued with disunity. Christianity was born inside the crucible of disunity. When Christ sent twelve messengers out as missionaries to deliver the message, calling them apostles (which simply means someone with a message), he sent these twelve out, and they brought twelve different versions of what they learned from Jesus. And there was no attempt at having a unified message.

The earliest studies of the Christian faith focus not upon Christianity in aggregate but the various forms that Christianity took, as a consequence of which one of the apostles happened to be teaching their particular view. And then the apostle Paul comes along and teaches yet another view. And so you have such strong disunity among Christians in the first generations, that by the time you get to the third century, Christians are killing Christians over Christianity because they harbor that much resentment at the different views that were held. I don't know if the word *fortunately* or if the word *unfortunately* should be applied, but fortuitously, as it turns out, when Constantine wanted to unite his Roman empire, one of the features of the unification of that empire (that he recognized he needed to incorporate) was religious unity. And so he chose Christianity to become the new state religion of a unified Roman empire that he was trying to hold on to and manage as a single intercontinental empire; only to learn, after he had made Christianity the official state religion, that that would not do the empire any good because Christians within his empire were killing other Christians within his empire over Christianity. And so he convened, under house arrest, a group of bishops at Nicaea, which in hindsight (in order to portray it as something really good and inspired), the house arrest of all the bishops to force them into a unified statement is now called the first, great, ecumenical council of Nicaea—which is a fancy way of putting a positive spin on a very ugly moment, in which the emperor didn't give a crap what they agreed on; he just wanted an agreement. "If I'm going to make this infernal Christianity the Roman state religion, by damn, it better be a religion in which I can have peace!" It's practical, it's pragmatic. But it certainly doesn't guarantee you a form of Christianity that bears anything other than the hallmarks of compromise in order to solve the violence.

And so we get the state religion of Rome, which evolves over time from being the Roman empire and Catholic (meaning *universal*) church to the *Holy* Roman Empire, which is Catholicism. And you had a period of relative Christian unity—unity marked by the absence of killing one another, not necessarily the absence of a Christian spirit. Because Christianity itself became a political power broker, in which there were really only a couple of professions that had the status that would allow you to enjoy a good life, and one of them was being in the clergy. And so the clergy became politically—and it became economically—a source of power. And the Holy Roman Empire, in the form of the Catholic church, exercised all of the abuses and excesses that you would expect from any kind of dictatorial government that has power over people.

People that have power tend not to be respectful of those that lack power. And if you can treat people as your servants, your slaves, your serfs, then you treat them accordingly. And so Christianity developed into a monolithic and very abusive control, centered in the Roman clergy, headquartered in Rome. For a whole variety of reasons—including ambitious, local kings who wanted to declare their own independence from the Roman hegemony and who wanted their own ability to waylay the money that was being aggregated through the church and getting exported (they wanted to keep that money locally and get their own hands on it)—A moment came in 1517, when it was possible for Martin Luther, pricked as he was in his conscience because he believed what Paul had written; he believed what Matthew, Mark, and Luke had recorded. He believed in the faith.

And he saw that what was acting itself out on the stage of life bore no resemblance to the lofty perfection that is spoken of in the teachings of the New Testament. He simply had had enough, but his life was spared because politically there was a political leader who saw some advantage in providing protection to Martin Luther. And so Martin Luther was spared from what had happened to others who had rebelled against Rome. He wasn't burned at the stake. He was, instead, allowed to post his disagreement and ultimately found a new brand of Christianity, in which he believed it would be more authentically Christian and less inauthentically autocratic and authoritarian. But just like what happened in the New Testament, with the twelve apostles, immediately upon the emergence of Lutheranism, we get, in the same generation—these people met and spoke with one another—John Knox, John Calvin, Zwingli, Martin Luther.

Not only did the fracturing of Roman hegemony cause Protestantism, but Protestantism immediately began to say, "We disagree with you about... (choose your topic)," and you have multiple Protestant denominations immediately springing into existence. And what had been coercive unity (through Roman dictatorship) and artificial unification of Christianity for a millenium and a half, immediately upon the first fissure showing up, you have fracture after fracture and disunity after disunity, because Christianity simply disagreed about so many things. And it was inconceivable—inconceivable to them that Christianity did not require you to divide up into mutually exclusive camps, in which your brand of Christianity ought to be (at least claimed to be) superior to their brand of Christianity. And if heaven is only for those who have the truest form of Christianity, then those people really need to go to hell because they aren't quite Christian enough in the truest way, in the most meaningful way, in the most correct way.

So let's go back and read that verse again: *"That in the dispensation of the fulness of times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth, ...in Him."* All things. I don't know how many of you sitting here today—hearing those who have spoken about Buddhism or speaking about the Native American tradition or speaking about Messianic Judaism—I don't know how many of you sitting here today have thought, "That speaker has said something true, and I believe that." Whether you think that may be part of Christianity or the teachings of Christ or not, when you hear truth—the dispensation of the fulness of times, which has to occur before the return of the Lord, has to gather together in one all things. If that thing to be gathered has been fractured and lost to Christianity but preserved in Hinduism; if that thing to be gathered is a truth lost to Christianity, broken away, and preserved in Buddhism; if that thing to be gathered into one appears anywhere, then in the dispensation of the fulness of times, it all must be brought back and gathered into one.

If you take a piece of art—sculpture—and you fracture the sculpture into bits, and then you gather the bits, and you reassemble them, you will not have the unity and the perfection of the original until every piece has been found, every piece has been gathered, and every piece has been put into its proper perspective—only when they've all been gathered and only when they've all been put in their proper place, because the sculpture ought not look like Picasso and the cubists; it ought to look like what it was when originally formed. When

that happens, so that you can now see the beauty that's there, then you've completed the gathering. But the prediction is that it will gathered together in one *in Christ*, so it doesn't matter if you're a Hindu, and you think Christ is outside—he is other than—our tradition. Your tradition must be gathered home also into Christ because it fits there. And if you're Buddhist, and you say, "Ours is not a religion but a philosophy, a way of thinking, a way of disciplining the mind," that way of thinking, that way of disciplining the mind must be gathered together in Christ for it to find its home. For the purpose is the salvation and eternal life of every being, of every person. Until we gather all the parts, it is not possible to gather in one all things that belong with Christ. The search must be global, the search and the invitation must cross cultures, traditions, religions.

You see, the philosophy that motivated Constantine in coercing Christian unity was the desire to see Christians not fight with one another. If you say fighting with one another is the evil end to be avoided, there are really only two ways to approach conquering that evil end to be avoided. One of them is to do what Constantine and the Popes have attempted and what some other centrally-controlled religious organizations likewise attempt today—and that is by coercion and exclusion and punishment to discipline the adherents so that they fall in line. That is a compressive, coercive, and dictatorial way of trying to achieve the Christian unity that we seek after.

Another more benign way of attempting exactly the same thing is to say, "You are free in all your thinking, in all your beliefs." We require very little of you. We believe in the doctrine of Christ, which was read to us here today. It's very short: belief in Christ, belief in His Father, acceptance of the Holy Ghost, being baptized in faith, and then allowing that Holy Spirit (that Holy Ghost) to animate you in your search for truth. And if we begin with diversity, then we begin with appreciation for that diversity, because coming together in the unity that Paul speaks of, in the dispensation of the fulness of times, is not because someone beat you into submission. It's because someone had something to say that resonated as truth to you in such a compelling way that you found yourself persuaded, you found yourself enticed to accept it, you found yourself prizing it, and you welcomed it, and you embraced it. And if someone has not yet embraced it, you explain to them why it's delicious to you. And if they reject it for a season, that's okay, too.

Joseph Smith had a revelation that was actually dictated from beyond the veil and then recorded by a scribe, read back, and then once the transcript was read back and it was correct, Joseph and Sidney Rigdon (who shared in the vision with him) said, "Yes, that's correct," and then it would move on. This is part of that revelation. It's talking about people who, at the end of this experience in this world, find themselves disappointed by what they did not accomplish while they were here. They did not accomplish what they wanted because they "*received not the gospel, neither the testimony of Jesus, neither the prophets, neither the everlasting covenant[s]*" (D&C 76:101).

When he [Gary Gibson] spoke of the Book of Mormon earlier today, the whole text of the Book of Mormon comes down to experience after experience being retold by people who, during their lifetime, they had this opening up of the heavens to them, and they came into

contact with Jesus Christ, having the heavens open to them and recognizing who He is and what His role was. It's an experience that they tell over and over again, throughout the entirety of the Book of Mormon, because the people that wrote the accounts in the Book of Mormon had had that experience.

The testimony of Jesus is not something that comes from you. "I have this, and let me tell it to you." The testimony of Jesus is something that He gives to you as His confirmation to you that you have part in His kingdom. To receive the testimony of Jesus is to receive, from Him, the promise that He will give you eternal life. The Book of Mormon is filled with accounts of people that had had that experience. And that's, at one point, an expected and normal part of the Christian experience. It became very rare, unexpected, and in fact, is denounced by many denominations as something that doesn't happen, can't happen, ought not happen—and if you think you've come into contact with a divine being, then you've been misled because, well, "Jesus is busy, and He can't be troubled with your lot. He's getting ready for the second coming. He's got a lot of wicked to burn. He's got stuff to do. And so don't think that you're going to have an encounter with Jesus." However, my view is that Christian salvation is based upon the testimony of Jesus to you of your salvation.

I also think that it doesn't matter when you live or what the circumstances were, if you are true and faithful to Him, you will have that experience. In the case of Stephen, in the book of Acts, he was in the process of being stoned to death, and it was in the last moments of his life that the heavens opened up to him. He saw Christ. He forgave the people who were in the act of killing him because he was filled with a devotion that comes from having Christ Jesus confirm and testify to Stephen of his salvation. And he parted this life, rejoicing.

Joseph Smith had an older brother, whose name was Alvin, who died when Joseph was still a young man. In the last moments of his older brother Alvin's life, Alvin said that there were angels in the room and that the angels were talking to him and that he was conversing with them. Many years later, Joseph Smith had a vision of the celestial kingdom, and in the celestial kingdom he saw his brother Alvin, and he wondered, "Why is it that Alvin got to be in the glorious afterlife when he died before the gospel had been fully restored?" And he was told: anyone—*anyone*—who would have accepted the truth, the gospel, the testimony of Jesus, the prophets and the everlasting covenants—anyone who would have done that, even if they die when it's unavailable—they will be saved.

St. Francis believed in and practiced the Sermon on the Mount. St. Francis lived at a time when Catholic hegemony made Catholicism *IT*: the only religion, the only brand of Christianity. He went to the pope, and he said he wanted to found an order (the Franciscan order), and they would take a vow of poverty, and they would practice the Sermon on the Mount. And the pope told him, "Well, that's ridiculous; no one can do that. And if you can find people who will do this, come back, and ask me again. But this can't be." St. Francis was known—if you saw him in winter—cold, without a coat, and you gave him a coat, he'd accept the coat. And he'd wear it until he met the next person that needed it more than he, and then he would give it away. So he was always needing coats and always giving away what little he had. St. Francis found twelve men who would practice that order. And the

pope gave him the Franciscan Order. In the last days of St. Francis' life, at a time when the only brand of Christianity was corrupt, St. Francis said that angels were coming and ministering to him. I believe it to be an authentic part of every Christian's life.

I believe there's a revelation that talks about how there are those people who will not taste death because it shall be sweet unto them. Why do they not taste death? Because death means *bitterness*. And if, in the authentic Christian's life, the final moments that they spend here are caught up with the testimony of Jesus, confirming that they have part with Him in his Kingdom—like Stephen, in the very act of being stoned to death—they part this life rejoicing, because whatever they're going through, it doesn't matter; it's joyful to be reunited with that person who represents perfection itself.

The highest aspirations, the highest ideals of Buddhism are present in the gospel of Christ. The highest ideals of Hinduism are present in the gospel of Christ. The problem is—that in that disunity, in the fracturing—some of the bits of the sculpture that left Christian awareness and departed into the East (but were retained by the Hindus, are understood by them, are practiced and accepted by them), but they're outside of the typical Christian awareness—you will not understand the sayings of Jesus the same if you could put on Hindu eyes for a moment and read what is in the sayings and the teachings of Jesus Christ and of His followers. You'll not understand the teachings of Christ as well until you've put on Buddhist eyes and you've relooked at the gospel of Christ through that prism. Because part of the picture will be missing. Christianity may be disciplined and had its story down, but it lacks the depth, the richness, the kindness, the texture—it lacks the meditative power that you find in Buddhism and Hinduism. As you heard from the people practicing those philosophies, religions, viewpoints today, the fact is that they're fractured, too. Part of reunifying everything in Christ is going to reunify the Hindu world, as well; reunify the Buddhist world, as well.

The title that my talk was given is: *What is God up to Today?* He's up to the work and the challenge of reuniting all things in one, in Christ; not by exclusion and subtraction and coercion, but by openness and by addition and by tolerance.

Thank you.

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The foregoing comments by Denver Snuffer were recorded on November 3, 2018, in Boise ID.