

Title: **Truth by Consensus?**

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Imagine several people standing next to the ark. From inside the huge structure comes the sound of hammers. “What does he think he is doing?” asks one person. “Don’t you know,” the man next to him says, as he rolls his eyes, “there’s going to be a flood which will cover the whole earth!” Everybody has a good laugh at silly Noah and his three sons.

A flood did come, however, and only eight people were saved – Noah and his family (Genesis 7:13, 23; 1 Peter 3:20). Lots of people undoubtedly laughed at Noah and mocked his obedience to God’s command to build an ark; in fact, you could say that the consensus of public opinion was that there was no danger of a global flood. Despite whatever widespread agreement there was about the unlikelihood of the flood or the silliness of Noah, the rains did come and the fountains of the great deep were opened up and every last one of those unbelievers died.

### **What Everybody Thinks**

During one of his programs this week, Rush Limbaugh discussed an email he had received from a scientist. Although the scientist claimed that he was a fan, he chastised Rush for his comments about manmade global warming. For those who may not know, Rush is an avowed unbeliever when it comes to the theory of manmade global warming! As I recall the conversation from memory, the scientist informed Rush that science is just the process of learning about the world. He said that the same body of data collected by scientists can be interpreted in different ways, but when a large group of scientists agree regarding the meaning of the data, it is likely that their view is the correct one, although not always.

Rush disagreed vehemently with the content of the email, noting that the truth about the world around us is not determined by the consensus (a word which can mean the majority opinion or even unanimity of opinion) of scientists. A caller to the program made the point that Galileo believed the earth revolved around the sun at a time when the consensus of opinion among scientists (and supported by the Roman Catholic Church) was that the sun revolved around the earth. The truth about the relationship between the earth and the sun, in terms of their movement, was not determined by the number of people who believed one way or the other in Galileo’s day...nor is it now. Some folks may not like Rush’s views on politics or economics, but he is absolutely correct about the relationship between truth and public consensus!

### **Getting It...Wrong**

Rush wasn’t bashing true science and neither am I. Science is certainly a good thing, but it is the undeniable truth that human consensus, even that among scientists, is often wrong. There was a time when everybody just knew that the world was flat. Did our earth become a sphere at the point when the consensus of humans swung in that direction? The earth was always round (the protests of the Flat Earth Society notwithstanding!); it was the consensus of humans that changed.

I am often amused at the change of consensus regarding dietary health. For example, not too many years ago, eggs were to be avoided by those who wished to preserve their health. The consensus of nutritionists now seems to be that eggs are beneficial to our diet. The truth about eggs, i.e., their effect on the human body, didn’t change; the consensus of nutritionists did.

The consensus of educators at the university level seems to be that the general theory of evolution is

true. Those who disagree are often ridiculed as being unfit to teach others. Should we accept the general theory of evolution in light of its support by the consensus of scientists and educators in general? Can we trust this atheistic theory to be true because of consensus?

It is not just in the realm of science that human consensus has been inaccurate regarding truth. Determining truth by human consensus has been shown to be an unreliable way of charting one's path in other areas. For example, twelve spies were sent into Canaan by Moses to "see what the land was like" (Numbers 13:17-20). Of the twelve, only two returned after the 40-day period of observation and claimed that the nation of Israel could take the land. The consensus among the spies was that the land of Canaan could not be taken by Israel; it was a land that "devours its inhabitants" (vs. 32). The consensus of the spies was wrong and Israel followed their error, receiving great suffering as a consequence.

### **Standing With The Few**

It can be difficult to stand opposed to the consensus of others, but true disciples of Jesus must expect to frequently be in that position. For example, those who believe that water baptism is necessary for salvation are admittedly relatively few in number, but Scripture proclaims that truth (e.g., Acts 2:38; 1 Peter 3:21). It is certainly tempting to follow the crowd, i.e., accept the consensus of opinion in matters of doctrine and its application as being right and true, but it would be a fatal mistake (Matthew 7:21-23). We must never be afraid to be "one of the few" who subscribe to truth.

How can we know what is true? Since human consensus, even among educated people, is so often wrong, how can we know what is true? The psalmist claimed that God's word is truth (Psalm 119:160a - "the entirety of Your word is truth"). In His prayer on the night of His betrayal, Jesus acknowledged the same fact (John 17:17). If Scripture teaches something, it really makes no difference for the disciple of Jesus how many people don't believe it and hold a different view.

One could legitimately argue that Jesus taught the error of public consensus regarding religion. He said that the vast majority of people would take the broad way; only a few would find and take the narrow and difficult way (Matthew 7:13-14). Being one of few who holds a particular belief is no evidence of the error of that belief. Truth is not determined by consensus!