



What is Truth?

Truth must not only be known, but also lived

Aristotle believed that humankind is defined above all by truth, that human beings are made for seeking, finding and contemplating the truth. Pilate famously asked Jesus, what is truth? Experience and history teach us that nations and individuals cannot live on lies but must eventually confront the truth-question.

So, what is truth? Truth is what is real, objectively there, open to inspection; truth is the way things are, the way we are, objectively given; truth is what corresponds to reality, especially in our ideas and the words we speak. We may not be able to know anything exhaustively, because we are now agreed that the knower always enters into his act of knowing, but we can still know things truly. Absolute knowledge is not necessary for certainty but we can know that what we know corresponds to what there is.

If we are to know the truth we must have a framework for truth, since experience by itself is not self-interpreting. The God of revelation gives Himself to us as the one sure standpoint and starting-point for knowing truth. Someone may object that this is a nuanced starting-point, not value-free or neutral. The sociology of knowledge informs us that there is no such thing as impartial knowledge. It really is a matter of which starting-point corresponds best with the data of observation.

For this reason we may redefine truth by saying that it is what is objectively real and the way things are, and so trustworthy and reliable, because all truth is grounded in God's own being as the God of truth. God alone is the ultimate, final and absolute guarantor of truth in all its manifestations.

But once people give up the belief that there is an objectively personal and absolute God then truth is the first casualty and all things become possible in the realm of human belief and behaviour. This is the transition that is taking place across formerly Christian nations in the western world and explains so much that is volatile and vile in our societies today. But if there is such a God then truth matters and decides the way we live and what we think ultimately matters. In 1 Corinthians 15:13-19 and 29-34, Paul uses the truth or myth of a bodily resurrection to show how everyday life and final destiny are deeply affected for good or evil.

Western culture began with a rational, objective view of truth in classical, pre-Christian times. This view of truth was resurrected at the Renaissance and with the Enlightenment which taught people to go back to pre-Christian times and to think autonomously about the nature and sources of truth. The Enlightenment view of truth has been called "encyclopaedic" because of its belief in humankind's unaided ability to achieve universal knowledge of the world and of the human person. Through applying the scientific method of discovering truth to all fields of knowledge it was believed humankind would solve the ills of society and the planet. The Enlightenment experiment detached truth from its personal ground in the personal God of truth and narrowed it down to a single concept, empirical in nature.

Christianity brought forward its own notion of truth as ultimate, knowable reality grounded in an absolute God who is Himself ultimately reliable and knowable. This view of truth denies that humankind can ever know everything, or that humankind needs to know everything to resolve the perennial problems of the world. It is a religious view of truth that depends on revelation as well as reason. It includes a transcendent reference-point for knowing truth. It believes that truth is not just epistemic but moral. Truth can be known but it must also be lived. God presents Himself as the

Triune God, the Archimedean point of all knowledge and truth. Jesus is the Truth because he is God incarnated in history, full of grace and truth (John 1:14, 17; 14:6).

The postmodern view of truth is different again. It rejects the tenets of both the rational and religious positions on truth. It denies that objective, universal, absolute truth exists. There may be truths but there can be no truth, in the universal sense. Instead truth is now a matter of individual invention. Truth is not discovered, it is created. Each individual makes his own truth and truth may change from one situation to another in the lifetime of the same individual. This view of truth has been called "genealogical" because it traces so-called truths back to power-plays expressed through language. This is a cynical view of truth because it denies there is such a thing in any objective, fixed sense. Everything is subjective, nothing is objective.

This changing view of truth raises complex questions for evangelical Christians about how they should present the truth of the gospel in a world that denies the existence of metanarratives of truth or objective truths.

Some evangelical apologists want to hold on to the objectively-focused presentation of truth that was prevalent under modernity; newer evangelicals want to repackage the truth in more community-based, embodied and relational terms.

Basically this comes down to the choice between propositional or relational truth. But is it a real choice? Propositional truth establishes the facts of Christianity, such as the historical reliability of the Gospels or the bodily resurrection of Jesus; relational truth incarnates the gospel in the human form of friendship, group dynamics and openness to questioning. If it is true that former evangelicals may have reduced the Bible to a textbook of propositions, it is equally true that modern evangelicals may be in danger of losing its authority by reducing it to a set of stories.

Evangelical Christians must always start from the Bible. If they had done this consistently then some of the supposed disagreements at the present time might not have arisen. For example, a biblical book like John's Gospel is heavily into the nature of truth. A simple word-study quickly shows that truth for John is both propositional ("believing that..." Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God) and relational ("believing in..." the Lord Jesus Christ for eternal life).

Postmodernism has created a window of opportunity for evangelical Christians to re-examine the foundations of their faith and a fresh presentation of the truth of the gospel. A diversified presentation seems most in keeping with the spirit of the times. This means there is truth and value in different types of apologetics. Evidentialism is right to appeal to the facts of Christian theism and supernaturalism since Christianity will always be propositional; presuppositionalism is correct in disclosing the role of presuppositions in all human reasoning and the way they affect our conclusions and values; fideism is correct in showing that truth is subjective and existential, something more than mental concepts; reformed epistemology is correct in arguing a simple case for believing in God as a matter of basic truth.

No apologetic method has all the truth. In a multi-cultural world where people think relativistically our presentation of the gospel needs to be audience-specific and variable. This is called dialogical apologetics, a method that takes stock of the audience and its infinite variableness. Through dialogue we gauge the needs and assumptions of our audience and match our truth-telling accordingly. This seems close to the Gospels and Acts where personal, propositional, fideist and community-based presentations of the one truth of the gospel are in evidence.

Because Jesus Christ is absolute truth (John 14:6), knowing him brings release from the limiting and uncoordinated half-truths and untruths of postmodern relativism. The postmodern condition has been described as the view from nowhere since it lacks a single reference point. But if the Son makes you free, you will be truly free (John 8:36), which includes epistemic freedom from the windowless walls of an imprisoned self on the island of nowhere. There is a place to stand, a vantage-point, outside ourselves for knowing truth and being free. This is the gospel for postmoderns in their need for truth and their search for community. Unbelief and evil create false

worlds of reality and fantasy; it is the word of God alone that leads us back into the world as it really is through the grace and truth of Jesus.

Biblical Christians need to believe more in the epistemological ministry of the Holy Spirit (that is, conveying knowledge). He is the Spirit of truth (John 15:26; 16:13-14) who convinces and converts people to the truth, as the only sound basis for living the way God meant us to live. He takes the truth of the triune God in Jesus Christ and makes this objective truth subjectively believable.

There is truth in other religions that Christians should acknowledge, but because they rely on general revelation with fallen reason they cannot lead into saving truth. They lack Jesus who is the truth and the only way to the Father God (John 14:6). But these religions offer valuable points of contact for the truth, such as Buddhism's belief that greed is the root problem of the human predicament or Islam's belief in a single, sovereign God.

Finally, there is the matter of the practice of truth. It is not enough for truth to be believed theoretically and impersonally, as an intellectual concept. Only the highly educated few can appreciate the arguments about truth in its more speculative forms. Academics are trained and skilled at producing arguments that ensure that truth remains a mind-game that entertains but never a claim on a person's life, that transforms and liberates.

John speaks of "doing" the truth, not just believing it (1 John 1:6). For truth to survive it must be lived by its exponents and defenders. The moral influence of public figures like Alexander Solzhenitsyn (in Russia) and John Paul II (in Poland) under regimes dedicated to falsehood, were due to their conviction that ultimately the truth is greater than the lie. As Christians we know why this is true, because this world is divinely nuanced to truth, because God is true. As Sam Gangee says in *Lord of the Rings*, "*there is good in this world and it is worth fighting for*".

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