

“Developing a Christian Mind, How to Get One and Keep It”

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Session VI

“WHAT IS TRUTH AND WHERE DO WE FIND IT?”

“Jesus said, “You shall know the truth and the truth will set you free.” (John 8:38)

Introduction: The Search for Truth

“What is truth?” was the question that Pilate asked Jesus during his trial (John 18:38-39). In so doing Pilate joined the vast company of the cynical who thought of all truth as ‘relative.’ Today, like then, “truth” to many people is whatever the majority of the people agree with or whatever helps advance their own political power or personal goals. When there is no basis for truth, there is no basis for right and wrong. Justice becomes whatever works or whatever helps those in power (as in the case of Pilate). When truth becomes relative or even worse whatever powerful people say it is, then there is no longer a basis for law, morality, or ethics.

It has been said that the postmodern culture’s proclivity for tolerance, relativism, and pluralism places us in much the same circumstance as that of the early Christians in the Roman Empire. We can certainly draw confidence in what God has to say to us in the New Testament, since it was written during that time. Just how did the first century church define “truth”? What does the rest of the Bible have to teach us about “truth”? What does it mean when we hear someone say, “All truth is God’s truth?”

Before we can fully appreciate context in which we live today, particularly when it comes to a working definition of *truth*, there is some necessary background we need. Whoever it was that said: *“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder”* could well have said the same for the concept of *truth*. For what constitutes *truth*, is in the mind of the philosopher.

The Old Testament Definition of Truth

There were two main sources that determined the development of the concept of ‘truth’ in the philosophy of the West: the Old Testament and Greek philosophy.¹ The Old Testament word for truth, ‘*emeth*’ means “to be firm, reliable, faithful” and can be translated as “fidelity” So David says *“O Sovereign Lord, you are God. You are trustworthy, and you have promised these things to your servant.”* (II Samuel 7:28) Likewise, we read, *“Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, he is the (‘emeth’) faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands.”* (Deuteronomy 7:9) Here we see that God’s Word(s) are true because they are based on his character—his Word is *trustworthy* (‘*emeth*’) or *true* because it comes from One who is *trustworthy* (‘*emeth*’).

When truth (‘*emeth*’) is applied to people it means the *loyalty* of the people of God—**“To walk in the ‘truth’”—“Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness.”** (Joshua 24:14) and

¹ Joseph Moller, *“Truth” Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975) 1771-1782)

“to do the ‘truth’”—“*Now remember, O LORD, I have walked before you faithfully (‘emeth) and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes.*” (II Kings 20:3) Both mean to live a life of faithfulness to God and his Word, the law.²

Greek Philosophy’s Definition of Truth

The problem of defining truth is first explicitly considered in the didactic poem of Parmenides (αρμενίδης ὁ Ἐλεάτη) (520-450 BC) where the goddess teaches the way of truth in contrast with ‘the fallacious opinions of mortal men’³ For Plato⁴ (429–347 B.C.) whose mentor was Socrates and student was Aristotle, *truth* is considered an unveiling of self being. Plato affirms the connection between *logos* and reason and contrasts ordinary speech and opinion which, unlike the realm of truth, is liable to error (*pseudos*). Philosophical Realism, as it is associated with Plato holds that universals really exist, independently and somehow prior to the world. In this sense, both Plato and Aristotle worked in the area of metaphysics.⁵ Likewise, Realists such as Plato and Aristotle held that the world is a set of definite facts which exist independently of human perceptions.

Aristotle⁶ (384-322 BC), the teacher of Alexander the Great, defines truth as judgment when it comes to reality. He placed much more value on knowledge gained from the senses (than Plato), and would correspondingly better earn the modern label of empiricist.⁷

Augustine’s Influence

Among the first attempts to combine Greek thought (especially Plato) with the New Testament was that of Augustine (354-430 AD) who identifies the Son of Truth as the Word (*Logos*) who reveals the Father. He views truth as absolute, eternal, and changeless which requires illumination from God for the knowledge of God. Hence we can understand the writers of the New Testament who speak the truth from God under his inspiration (II Timothy 3:16-17) and illumination (II Peter 1:19-21) and who come to understand the ultimate revelation of the truth in

² Moller, 1771.

³ *The Poem of Parmenides*, Fragment I, 28ff. In the Way of Truth, change is impossible, and existence is timeless, uniform, and unchanging. In *The Way of Opinion*, he explains the world of appearances, which is false and deceitful. These thoughts strongly influenced Plato, and through him, the whole of western philosophy.

⁴ Alfred Whitehead once noted, with some exaggeration, “Western philosophy is just a series of footnotes to Plato.”

⁵ Metaphysics investigates principles of reality transcending those of any particular science. Traditionally, *metaphysics* refers to the branch of philosophy that attempts to understand the fundamental nature of all reality, whether visible or invisible. It seeks a description so basic, so essentially simple, and so all-inclusive that it applies to everything, whether divine or human or anything else. It attempts to tell what anything must be like in order to be at all.

⁶ Thus Aristotle set the stage for what would eventually develop into the scientific method centuries later. The works of Aristotle that still exist today appear in treatise form, mostly unpublished by their author. The most important include *Physics*, *Metaphysics*, (Nicomachean) *Ethics*, *Politics*, *De Anima* (On the Soul), *Poetics*, and many others. (Wikipedia)

⁷ In philosophy, empiricism is a theory of knowledge which asserts that knowledge arises from sense experience. In the philosophy of science, empiricism emphasizes those aspects of scientific knowledge that are closely related to evidence, especially as discovered in experiments. It is a fundamental part of the scientific method that all hypotheses and theories must be tested against observations of the natural world, rather than resting solely on a priori reasoning, intuition, or revelation. (Wikipedia)

the Word (*Logos*) in Jesus Christ (John 1:1-4, 14; I John 1:1-4, and the opportunity which is ours in I John 5:6-12).

Likewise, the Reformers followed Augustine in reclaiming the Word of God as the real authority in life and in the Church. In a very real sense, *Truth* is what God says in the Bible and through the preaching and teaching and appropriate life application of Holy Scripture. It is here and here alone (as we see in the life experience of Martin Luther) that we come to understand the watch words of the Reformation: *Christ Alone, Scripture Alone, Grace Alone, and Faith Alone!*

The New Testament Definition of Truth

In the New Testament, '*aletheia*', the primary word for *truth*, "suggests that something is open, uncovered, revealed for what it is, hence real or genuine rather than imaginary or spurious, true rather than false."⁸ God is described as "*the true God*" and Jesus describes *himself* as "*the true vine*," just as the Nicene Creed speaks of Jesus as "*very God of very God*." In this way, '*aletheia*' is related to knowledge and revelation. It is here that we realize that in the words of A.F. Holmes:

*"The Biblical writers shape the meanings they intend by their own careful use of language. Undoubtedly, writing for a Hellenized culture with its conflicting truth-claims, they keep cognitive truth in mind. But their thinking is more directly shaped by Old Testament concepts, and most of all by the belief in one true God, 'aletheia', is not hidden but acts and speaks with openness that is wholly trustworthy."*⁹

Moral truth

As such, 'truth' is an attribute of God and speaks of his integrity, trustworthiness, and faithfulness. The Psalmist writes: "*I will sing of the LORD'S great love forever; with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known through the generations. I will declare that your love stands forever, that you established your faithfulness in heaven itself...*"

Then in the book of Revelation Christ is acknowledged in the Letter to the church in Philadelphia: "*These are the words of him who is holy and true,...*" (Revelations 3:7). Then to the church at Laodicea: "*These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation...*" (Revelations 3:14). The souls under the alter in heaven of those who had been slain called out in a loud voice: "*How long sovereign LORD, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?*" (Revelation 6:10) Then in Revelations 16:4-7, their prayers are answered:

"The second angel poured out his bowl on the rivers and springs of water, and they became blood. Then I heard the angel in charge of the waters say:

⁸ A.F. Holmes, "Truth", in the *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Vol. V, edited by Merrill Tenney and Stephen Barabas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975) 827-829.

⁹ Holmes, 827.

“You are just in these judgments, you who are and who were, the Holy One, because you have so judged; for they have shed the blood of your saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink as they deserve.”

And I heard the alter respond: “Yes Lord God Almighty, true and just are your judgments.”

Speaking from the disciplines of theology and philosophy, the ontological¹⁰ truth about God then is as A.F. Holmes says: *“Arising from the concept of One who is wholly trustworthy is the further concept on one who is truly what he purports to be, rather than being a deceiver, living a fiction, or being an imperfect example.”*¹¹

The God whose very character is that of moral truth calls his people to be like him: ***“But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: “Be holy because I am holy.”*** (I Peter 1:15; Leviticus 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7). The truth of belonging to a moral God should change our lives and create in a the desire to live a moral life and to practice *truth* in all our relationships: ***“Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart...Therefore rid yourselves of all malice and deceit, hypocrisy, envy and slander of every kind. Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.”*** (I Peter 1:22-2:3)

Finding Truth in an Age of Skeptics

By 1970, the writings of Francis A. Schaeffer began to write and publish what would later be combined into five volumes¹² lamenting the loss of “a Christian consensus” in the Western culture and the Christian’s role of living in a “post-Christian” world. Several of the titles of his books (*The God Who is There, Escape From Reason, He is There and He is Not Silent, How Shall We Then Live?, and Whatever Happened to the Human Race?*) are illustrative of his work in facing the challenge of the loss of *truth* with the rise of the Age of Modernism following the Enlightenment that occurred as a result of the Renaissance. With the rise of Darwinism and the scientific method of proof by observation, all other concepts of truth were placed the category of subjective ‘socially constructed values’ rather than objective truth from a source other than ‘publically verified truth’. Science had indeed pushed Theology from the throne as the Queen of knowledge Schaeffer’s critique was that in the process, modern man no longer had a sufficient moral basis upon which to live.

As modernism began to wind down, often suffering from intellectual and ethical exhaustion, the Postmodern Age arose with a vengeance that began to sweep Modernism away at an alarming rate. By the 1980’s Postmodernism was in control, sporting a new set of values: *tolerance, relativism, and pluralism* and with it a vastly different way of viewing *truth*. The late theologian Stanley J. Grenz, explains:

¹⁰ Ontology is the branch of philosophy concerned with the nature of being.

¹¹ Holmes, 827.

¹² *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer* five volumes (Winchester IL: Crossway Books, 1982).

"Postmodernism refers to an intellectual mood and an array of cultural expressions that call into question the ideals, principles, and values that lay at the heart of the modern modern mindset. Postmodernity, in turn, refers to an emerging epoch, the era in which we are living, the time when postmodern outlook increasingly shapes our society."

"The postmodern consciousness has abandoned the Enlightenment of inevitable progress. Postmoderns have not sustained the optimism that characterized previous generations. To the contrary, they evidence a gnawing pessimism. For the first time in recent history, the emerging generation does not share the conviction of their parents that the world is becoming a better place in which to live. From widening holes in the ozone layer to teen-on-teen violence, they see our problems mounting. And they are no longer convinced that human ingenuity will solve these enormous problems or that their standard of living will be higher than their parents."

"The Postmodern generation is also convinced that life on earth is fragile. They believe that the Enlightenment model of the human conquest of nature, which dates to Francis Bacon, must quickly give way to a new attitude of cooperation with the earth. They believe that humankind is at stake."

"In addition to its dark pessimism, the postmodern consciousness operates with a view of truth different from what previous generations espoused. The modern understanding linked truth with rationality and made reason and logical argumentation the sole arbiters of right belief. Postmoderns question the concept of universal truth discovered and proved through rational endeavors. They are unwilling to allow the human intellect to serve as the sole determiner of what we should believe. Postmoderns look beyond reason to nonrational ways of knowing, conferring heightened status on the emotions and intuition..."

"The conviction that each person is embedded in a particular human community leads to a corporate understand of truth. Postmoderns believe that not only our specific beliefs but also our understanding of the truth itself is rooted in the community in which we participate. They reject the Enlightenment quest for universal, supracultural, timeless truth in favor of searching out truth as the expression of a specific community. They believe that truth consists in the ground rules that facilitate personal well-being in the community as a whole."

"In this sense, then, postmodern truth is relative to the community in which a person participates. And since there are many human communities, there are necessarily many different truths. Most postmoderns make a leap of believing this plurality of truths can exist alongside one another. The postmodern consciousness, therefore, entails a radical relativism and pluralism."

"Nor are postmoderns necessarily concerned to prove themselves 'right' and others 'wrong.' They believe that beliefs are ultimately a matter of social context, and hence

they are likely to conclude, 'What is right for us might not be right for you.' and 'what is wrong for our context might in your context be acceptable or even preferable.'"¹³

So where does swimming in the sea of Postmodernism leave us? Reformed theologian Alister McGrath says:

"How can Christianity's claims to truth be taken seriously, when there are so many rival alternatives and when truth itself has become a devalued notion? No-one can lay claim to possession of the truth. It is a question of perspective. The conclusion of this line of thought is as simple as it is devastating: 'the truth that there is no truth'."

*"All claims to truth are equally valid; there is no universal or privileged viewpoint that allows anyone to decide what is right and wrong. This situation has both significant advantages and drawbacks the Christian apologist. On the one hand apologetics no longer labors under the tedious limitations of the intensely restrictive Enlightenment worldview, fettered by the illusions and pretensions of pure reason. Christianity can no longer be dismissed as a degenerate form of rational religion. The severe limitations of the modern mentality are intellectually passé, and need no longer be a serious difficulty for the apologist."*¹⁴

The good news is as Princeton theologian, Diogenes Allen summarizes:

¹³ Stanley J. Grenz, *"A Primer on Postmodern"* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996) 12-14. For further thought, here is an excerpt taken from an article from Wikipedia on "Truth" – "The term *truth* has no single definition about which a majority of professional philosophers and scholars agree, and various theories of truth continue to be debated. Metaphysical objectivism holds that truths are independent of our beliefs; except for propositions that are actually about our beliefs or sensations, what is true or false is independent of what we think is true or false. According to some trends in philosophy, such as postmodernism/post-structuralism, *truth is subjective*. When two or more individuals agree upon the interpretation and experience of a particular event, a consensus about an event and its experience begins to be formed. This being common to a few individuals or a larger group, then becomes the "truth" as seen and agreed upon by a certain set of people — the consensus reality. Thus one particular group may have a certain set of agreed-upon truths, while another group might have a different set. This allows different communities and societies to have very different notions of reality and truth about the external world. The religion and beliefs of people or communities are one example of this level of socially constructed reality. Truth cannot simply be considered truth if one speaks and another hears because individual bias and fallibility challenge the idea that certainty or objectivity are easily grasped. For anti-realists, the inaccessibility of any final, objective truth means that there is no truth beyond the socially-accepted consensus. (*Although this means there are many truths, not a single truth.*)

¹⁴ Alister McGrath, *A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 189.

“In a postmodern world, Christianity is intellectually relevant. Is it relevant to the fundamental questions, Why does the world exist? and Why does it have its present order, rather than another? Is it relevant to the foundations of morality and society, especially on the significance of human beings? The recognition that Christianity is relevant to our entire society, and relevant not only to the heart but to the mind as well, is a major change in our cultural situation.”¹⁵

In the end, the real question is, ‘Just what did Jesus mean when he said: **“Jesus said, “You shall know the truth and the truth will set you free.”**’ (John 8:38)

Could it be that he meant that *truth* deals with more than just intellectual matters? What if he meant that in the end, *truth* is a person? If so, just who might he be talking about when you consider his statement in John 14:6 when he said, **“I am the way, the truth, and the life.”**

¹⁵ Diogenes Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World*, 5-6.