

Truth

While the world is sorely afflicted by suffering and death through fires, hurricanes, earthquakes, abortions, threats of nuclear war, and mass shootings, some may consider a paper discussing a topic so esoteric as the nature and function of truth to be insensitive at best and irrelevant at worst. What the world needs now, some may argue, is kindness, generosity, mercy, and heroic acts of human care. It is not necessary, however, to discount the need for mercy in order to demonstrate that the most effective answer to human suffering is something that transcends it. Suffering will always exist in a sinful world, from various sources and to varying degrees. We can and should seek to alleviate its physical impacts.

The value of physical acts of mercy should not be diminished by admitting that their effects are temporary. On the other hand, if there were something that endured forever, something that remained active for all people of all times and places, something that could provide answers beyond the temporal effects of suffering, something like... truth, then, perhaps every act of mercy could have an enduring foundation. Far from being esoteric, truth underlies all that we see, feel, think, and do.

What is truth?

The current debate is hardly over the nature of truth. Instead, a lively debate engages the very existence of truth.¹ Indeed, I have argued elsewhere that many of the latest generation seem to have expunged the category from their mind entirely.² Ambivalence regarding the existence of truth is nothing new. It may have been the rhetorical meaning behind Pilate's query of Jesus, "What is truth?"

Christians, on the other hand, while they may argue over the degree to which the two associate, generally find truth in the Scripture. Some even make the presentation of Christ depend on the existence of an "absolute truth."³ The fruit of this argument has yet to be seen.

The present offering will take another tack. It will assume the existence of truth as it treats a very practical, but much ignored question regarding its nature. Are there different kinds of truth? Christians believe that the Word of God delivers truth, indeed is truth. But how are Christians to understand the more mundane, everyday truths upon which we base much of our daily lives? Propositions like "two plus two equals four," or "gravity is the force that attracts a physical body toward any other body having physical mass," are truths we use without much consideration of their status as such. In fact, life would be very difficult were we not able to depend upon such truths. Is this a different kind of truth than the Word of God gives? If so, how are the two related? Finally, how can they be used in daily life?

¹ Feldman, David. "Does Truth Exist?" Psychology Today. January 2017 p. 1 (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/supersurvivors/201701/does-truth-still-exist-or-are-there-just-alternative-facts>)

²Forke, Terry. "Offending a Postmodern World" Concordia Theological Quarterly, Vol.80, January-April 2016. p. 155. In this article I argue that it is not necessary for Pastors to convince their hearers of the existence of truth. They are simply called to speak that truth into the world.

³ See, for example McDowell, Josh and Sean. Evidence That Demands a Verdict, Thomas Nelson. 2017.

While we very much rely on these “functional” truths, they do not much help us define the concept of truth.⁴ Whereas the truth provided by the Word of God creates its own definition, (“*Your Word is truth*”), such a definition may leave us in doubt regarding the benefit or nature of more functional truths. Can they be true if they are not found in the Word? Or, put more leadingly, can God reveal truth apart from His Word?

Recognizing truth.

We have now entered the study of thought called epistemology. Epistemology asks whether we can, and if so, how we can, know things. The fact that there are a number of theories concerning how we may search for truth, demonstrates the difficulty of defining, and recognizing truth. The following, while not exhaustive, will help us get a handle on how the world looks for truth.

1. Correspondence Theory

The correspondence theory of truth claims that truth is that which corresponds to the way things really are, or that truth conforms to fact, or to reality.⁵ This is likely the most common way of thinking about truth. It is functional, in the sense that humans must have an idea of reality in order to survive and accomplish anything in this world.

The first objection to this theory is that it assumes that someone knows fact, reality, or the way things really are. This theory puts humans in charge of judging truth by first determining reality. Christians will immediately reject this theory with respect to spiritual truths. The human mind is not able to conceive spiritual truths and therefore is not capable of judging whether a particular proposition corresponds to the way things really are.

The same objection may hold true with respect to functional truths. Humans want to believe that we can make accurate observations and thereby construct truths that correspond to reality. Such activity significantly contributes to life on earth, but it does not adequately consider the effects of sin. Christians will always find room to doubt the accuracy of all human observations, not only about God but also about the physical world. That doubt will cause all such functional truths to be considered transient, and subject to change.

2. Pragmatic Theory

The pragmatic theory is not concerned about correspondence to reality, nor the transience of human observations. The pragmatic theory declares that those propositions which effectively bring about the desired ends can be labeled truths.

Three things ought to be noted about this theory. First, it has no regard for morality. Thus, whether a thing is right or wrong has no bearing on whether or not it is truth. Immoral behavior can be justified as truth because it succeeds. Second, depending on the degree of quality control for the definition of success, it is possible that mutually exclusive propositions could be accepted as truths because they both work. Third, under this theory truth is very much subject to change because what worked yesterday may not work today.

⁴ Pardi, Paul. “What is Truth?” philosophynews. January 25, 2015.
<http://www.philosophynews.com/post/2015/01/29/What-is-Truth.aspx>

⁵ <http://www.theopedia.com/truth>

3. Scientific Theory

The scientific theory of finding truth can be thought of as a corollary of the correspondence theory. It provides a method of research, but is based on the principle that humans are capable of accurately recording observations and extracting truths, by looking for what corresponds to reality. Science, as distinct from “scientism” uses: hypothesis-test-theory-test-law, as the progression of study towards the extraction of truth from raw data. This method has provided many obvious benefits to human life in this world. Medicine, technology, anthropology, transportation; the list of scientific contributions to the easing of human life is quite long. The usefulness of its results has comfortably ensconced science as the go-to source for truth. “Where would we be without science?”

This attitude is the beginning of the problem with the scientific theory. It quickly devolves into scientism, that belief that science is the sole arbiter of truth, both spiritual and functional. There are, of course some “scientists” who do not want to go that far. “...As S. Joshua Swamidass explains, science is not so much concerned with ultimate truth (i.e., God and God’s activity) as it is focused on what works to explain the world as we find it.”⁶ Still, given the progress achieved by science this attitude seems to be in the minority.

Aside from its penchant to enter into the metaphysical arena with its claims of truth that counter what is revealed in Scripture, it should be noted that science itself is susceptible to the charge of ignoring the possibility of sin. In a lengthy article in the New Yorker, Jonah Lehrer asks whether there is something wrong with the scientific method. The evidence that drives him to ask that question is a phenomenon called the “decline effect.” The data demonstrates, in case after case, that the positive results of original scientific studies decline in subsequent studies. But the academic world exhibits a reluctance to recognize this.

Lehrer concludes that scientists look for what they want to find, and are rewarded for it. He says, “Our beliefs are a form of blindness... The decline effect is troubling because it reminds us how difficult it is to prove anything. We like to pretend that our experiments define the truth for us. But that’s often not the case.”⁷ From a Christian perspective he has just confirmed the problem of sin, and the very reason we need a different theory regarding the acquisition of truth.

4. Private Theory

What might be called the private theory of truth has been enshrined as legitimate by the rise of postmodernism. In brief, it suggests that truth is wholly subjective. Under this theory each individual is capable of discovering truth for himself. Since it is subjective, he need not be concerned about contradicting propositions of truth held by any other human. So strongly is this belief held that some have suggested that simply holding a proposition as truth in one’s mind, can in fact create its own reality.⁸

⁶ Arand, Charles, “The Scientist as a Theologian of the Cross” Concordia Journal, Vol 43 number 3 Summer 2017 p. 26.

⁷ Jonah Lehrer. “The Truth Wears Off,” The New Yorker. December 13, 2010.
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/12/13/the-truth-wears-off>

⁸ Gottberg, Kathy. “The Truth Behind You Create Your Own Reality,” Huffington Post March 3, 2015
https://www.huffingtonpost.com/kathy-gottberg/the-truth-behind-you-get-_b_6780858.html Apparently Oprah Winfrey is fond of saying, “Remember, you are co-creating your life with the energy of your own intentions.”

Christians will object to this theory because it makes a mockery of the concept of truth. Any private definition of truth would fail because there is no way to test whether a particular proposition is true. Like the other theories this one makes no room for admitting that humans are sinners who will create whatever truths most benefit them, even those that directly contradict the clear Word of God.

5. Mystical Theory

The four previous theories would all agree that truth is propositional, that is, truth is revealed through statements to which assent may be given or withheld. The mystical theory of truth is based on achieving a spiritual unity with God, the infinite, or the absolute, by which distinctly non-propositional truths are absorbed.

Mysticism deemphasizes the rational, by substituting a direct access to the divine in a mystical union. Since they believe that finite language is not able to contain the infinite, mystics are inclined to be dismissive of the concept of propositional truths, in favor of paradoxical statements that enhance devotion to the divine.

Christians will object to the idea that mutually exclusive statements can both be true. They will also hold to be problematic that truth can be absorbed from whatever one considers to be the divine, the infinite or the absolute. Under this theory all humans, and all religions, can gain access to this truth simply through devotion to the divine in the ecstatic experience.

The Christian Answer Regarding Recognizing Truth

Christians hold that truth cannot be attained or discovered. Truth must be revealed. The interference of sin, which is always an inclination toward that which is false, means that human beings can neither create, nor discover truth by their own reason or strength. Therefore, truth must be revealed to human beings by someone who is without sin.

God has revealed the truth in two ways. He has given us a direct revelation in His Word, which should in the first place be understood to be Jesus. He has also indirectly revealed His truth through His creation. The Word of God is clear and has power in itself to make the truth known. It transcends time, divisions and human activity. The revelation of truth through creation, however, must be observed, tested, and understood in order to extract truths. Since these human activities are subject to sin and the attack of satan, the truths extracted from observing creation should be considered transient, and subject to change.

Truth as revealed in God's Word.

The current debate regarding the existence of truth, and the various ways of searching for it, have a daily impact on the way our people think about truth. Rather than thinking of truth from a biblical perspective it is likely that most people function with an eclectic amalgam of their personal construction. In order to better serve them it will be good to take a closer look at the biblical usage. For this brief essay New Testament usage will be the primary focus.

The New Testament word most often used for truth is *ἀλεθεια*. Its cognates appear 173 times, (Adverb-18, Adjective- 50, Noun w/o article- 44, Noun with article- 59, Verb- 2).

Etymologically it distinguishes something that is not concealed. The use of this word, then, is believed to define the matter or state as it really is.⁹

The primary users of ἀλεθεια are John and Paul. John uses the term poetically and personally. For him the Word of God, (Jesus and written), is the truth. Paul has a more practical tendency. One of his themes is that the Gospel is the word of the truth. (Eph. 1:13, Col 1:5) This usage reflects his evangelizing mission. Both John and Paul convey that the Word of truth has power to bring about faith. A few specific texts ought to be examined more carefully.

Truth is a Divine prerogative

Truth is attributed to all three persons of the Trinity personally. The Father is truth. In John 3:33 while discussing the difference between the way He talks, and the way the world talks, Jesus says that God is true. *“He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all. He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony. Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true.”*¹⁰ Subsequently, Jesus twice says that He who sent Him is true. (John 7:28, 8:26)

Jesus is also truth. John says that Jesus came full of truth and the truth came to this world through Jesus. (John 1:14, 1:17) Jesus even calls Himself the truth in John 14:6.

Finally, the Spirit is truth. John uses the phrase *“Spirit of the truth”* three times. (14:17, 15:26, 16:13) and equates the Spirit with truth in I John 5:6, *“This is he who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not by the water only but by the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth.”*

One more remarkable text should be noted. Jesus prays, *“Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.”* John 17:17 The Greek reads, ἀγιάσον αὐτοὺς ἐν τῇ ἀληθείᾳ· ὁ λόγος ὁ σὸς ἀλήθειά ἐστιν.¹¹ We should note at least three interesting points in this text. First, the use of the article in the first phrase distinguishes a particular truth. Jesus is not talking about a general category of truth but, *“the truth.”* Second, the interesting Greek construction of the second phrase draws an intimate connection between God and the truth, literally rendered: *“The Word, the Your, is truth.”* Third, John works very hard to help us think of the Word as spoken, written and personal, (i.e. Jesus is the Word). John expects us to make the connection that Jesus is both, the Word and the Truth.

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are said to be true and the truth. This is a jarring revelation, so far from common usage that it requires a radical reorientation of thought. Truth is not out there floating around, a commodity for us to search and find. Truth is a Divine prerogative because God is truth. Truth is not just that which corresponds to the way it really is. Truth establishes the way it really is. God speaks this Word of truth into the world in Jesus.

⁹ Kittel, Gerhard and Friedrich, Gerhard. *“ἀλεθεια”* Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. Grand Rapids, Michigan. 1964.

¹⁰ All English Scripture texts: *English Standard Version*. (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001).

¹¹ Aland, K., Black, M., Martini, C. M., Metzger, B. M., Robinson, M. A., & Wikgren, A. (1993; 2006). *The Greek New Testament, Fourth Revised Edition (with Morphology)* (Jn 17:17). Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft.

Truth is revealed in Jesus

Jesus is, Himself the truth. He is the Word given by God to be and to reveal the truth. God wants the truth to be revealed. *“This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.”* 1 Timothy 2:3–5 God does not keep the truth to Himself.

God speaks the truth in two ways. He speaks the truth to us indirectly through the creative Word, *“Let there be...”* Creation, as God spoke it, is the truth, in the sense that it is “fact, reality, the way it is.” Since Jesus is that creative Word, we can say that God spoke the truth of creation through Jesus. (John 1:3) The truth of God is contained in creation, even if sinful human beings struggle to clearly state it.

God also speaks the truth directly in and through Jesus. (*“Your Word is truth.”*) The Word of Jesus that was necessary for us to know, God had written down in the Scripture. There is no indication that the truth referred to as the Word should be reduced to “the Gospel.” Since Jesus accepts that which “is written” to be the Word of God so do His followers.

Speaking the truth is how Jesus summarized His service when he spoke to Pilate during His trial. *“You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.”* John 18:37 Jesus says that He both is the truth and speaks the truth.

Truth is universal

The truth is for all time. One element of the Old Testament concept of truth that has an impact on New Testament usage is the sense of firmness, and reliability. The Hebrew word “emet” conveys a sense of dependability or faithfulness.¹² Both God and His Word inhabit this characteristic. God is dependable. His Word is dependable. *“The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.”* Isaiah 40:8 The dependability of God’s Word is indissolubly connected to the Word of Truth by John’s poetic equation of Jesus the Word and Jesus the Truth. God’s truth is every bit as dependable as His Word. It lasts forever.

The truth is for all people. It is not the truth for some and not for others. God does not speak truth to some and falsehood to others. He desires all men to come to the knowledge of the truth. 1 Tim 2:4

The truth is for all circumstances. There is nothing that can withstand the power of the truth. Jesus says, *“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”* John 8:31–32 Jesus’ Word is the truth that sets people free. Jesus sets no boundaries on this remarkable statement. Whatever the circumstance, whatever the bondage, the truth will set you free.

Truth is propositional

The concept that truth is something emotional, experiential, or mystically attained is not to be found in Scripture. Truth is consistently presented as propositions that are accessible primarily by the spoken word. Paul says that the servants of God commend themselves to

¹² Smith, John. “What is Truth?” Answers is Genesis. April 17, 2015. <https://answersingenesis.org/hermeneutics/shat-is-truth/>

everyone “...by truthful speech and the power of God...” II Cor. 6:7 He tells each Ephesian Christian to put away falsehood and “*speak the truth with his neighbor.*” Eph. 4:25 In order for truth to be truth it must state something that can be understood and believed.

So highly does Paul value the truth of the Word that he pledges not to tamper with it. God’s truth is not to be trifled. Notice also that the truth is given by an “open statement.” *“Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God.”* 2 Cor. 4:1–2 The truth is presented as an expression in human speech to which one may give or withhold assent.

Truth is contradicted by falsehood

The biblical understanding of truth also helps us understand the nature of falsehood. The popular notion seems to be that truth and falsehood are independently existing entities. The Scripture does not support this dualistic concept of truth and falsehood. Instead, it proposes that truth has an eternal existence in the Godhead, and that truth establishes the reality of the created world. Falsehood then, can only be understood as that which contradicts the truth of God, either as revealed in the Word or in creation.

In a revealing confrontation with the Jewish leadership Jesus says, that there is no truth in satan and that because He, Jesus, speaks the truth they refuse to believe him. *“You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me.”* John 8:44–45 There was no independent creation of falsehood. It came into existence when satan began to lie. It continues, to this day because people refuse to believe the truth.

The latter statement is supported by two notable texts from Romans. Surprisingly, the truth, of inexpressible power to change people’s lives, can be suppressed and/or traded away. *“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth...Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.”* Romans 1:18, 24-25 Whether it is the direct truth of the Word, or the indirect truth as revealed in creation, sinful humans have the power to falsify it.

Transcendent and transient truths

The division of transcendent and transient truths proposed in this essay is roughly equivalent to the well-known classifications of special and natural revelation. These categories are humbly presented as a means of helping our people recognize that truth has one source. There are truths touching our spiritual lives, revealed by God, through Jesus, in His Word, that transcend everything in this world which is passing away. There are also truths, revealed by God, through Jesus, in His creation, that are transient in our dim understanding of them.

Conclusion

God has revealed truth to mankind. This one truth appears to us in two facets. The one is essential, in that it bears life. It is the only truth by which we may live rightly in this world and forever in the next. It is transcendent in that it is not available to man unless it is revealed in the Word of God that is Jesus. This truth is not separate from daily life, as if it only holds for a few hours on Sunday. It is given that we may live long on the earth and longer in heaven. It is a gift that is solely revealed by faith in Jesus.

The second facet of truth is functional. It is transient. But it is also a gift of God, given through the combination of His revelation in creation and His gift of reason. It is available to believers and unbelievers alike. It is not essential. Its bearing on spiritual life is that it may direct us to the Word of God, and may be used to help our neighbor. While we use this transient truth we do not put our trust in it.

Christians ought to be skeptical of this transient truth for a number of reasons. First our powers of observation are damaged by sin, second our reason is damaged by sin, third, we have not received a promise of God that we will be able to know His creation as it really is, fourth, it is particularly susceptible to the attacks of Satan.

These two facets of truth ought not to be considered antithetical. They are both founded on the Word of God. The nature of one, we say, is perspicuous, that is clear. The nature of the other is as if we were seeing through a glass dimly. The variables of God's creative revelation cannot be controlled in order to produce transcendent truth. At best we can harvest truths that can help us manage life. Still the remarkable, variety, complexity and beauty of the creation ought to attract Christians to pursue transient truth as a tool to serve our neighbor, and point us and him to the transcendent truth found in Jesus.

Here we find an ample conclusion to the introduction of this brief essay. When it comes to treating the human condition of suffering, transient truths can only go so far. Being dependent on human interpretation, their effectiveness is very much subject to the "decline effect." The transcendent truth, far from being esoteric, envelops all of human nature and answers with an eternal Word, Jesus, who loved you so much that He came, both to carry you through, and redeem you from, this sinful world.

Therefore:

Dear brothers and sisters, the truth has been graciously revealed to you. You have received it in faith. More than that, you have been called to proclaim it. *"Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth."* 2 Timothy 2:15 The word translated "rightly handling" (ορθοτομew) literally refers to a "correct sharpness." The sharpness of the Word of the Truth is not a characteristic of our teaching. It is a characteristic of the Word of the Truth itself. We cannot sharpen it, but we may dull it by improper teaching. We are called to present it in its correct sharpness, both in word and in deed. But do not fear. Truth has the power to establish its own reality. This truth is at work in you through faith in Jesus. When you open your mouth to speak God's Word, a powerful truth exits to comfort and to confront the world.