

# What is Truth?

## A right attitude

Before we even start to work out what's true, we need to ask ourselves if our hearts are in the right place because biased attitudes often lead to biased conclusions. For example, when Jesus stood before Pilate prior to his crucifixion, Pilate began the conversation by asking Jesus if he was really a king, Jesus replied, *"Are you asking out of your own interest, or did others say it to you about me?"* In effect, Jesus was asking Pilate if his question was genuine or simply academic. He was revealing to Pilate the motive of his heart. In the pursuit of truth, *"intent is prior to content."*

Let me illustrate the point with a story: a British man once stole a nice fortune from some incredibly wealthy individuals in South America, and once caught by a contracted investigator, was brought before these wealthy individuals and was offered two choices. The first was to confess where all the money he had stolen was hidden, in which he could go away as a free man, the second choice is that if he did not reveal where the treasure was hidden, he would be instantly shot. The contracted investigator translated between them. The thief said to the translator, *"tell these men to go north from here, and when they see the old factory, turn left, follow the road, and you will eventually come across an old ship container in a field, there you will find the riches."* The translator turned to the wealthy South Americans, saw an opportunity for himself, paused, thought a little and then spoke *"he basically said shoot me!"*

Something was lost in translation wasn't it? It was not the absence of knowledge that evoked ignorance, it was the suppression of truth. So I ask, does anyone need to tell arms dealers that the weapons they sell will be used to kill innocent civilians? Does anyone need to convince peddlers of pornography that their trade is turning women and men into products, replacing intimacy with self-centred consumerism and warping views of sexuality, encouraging abuse? When it comes down to it, we rarely dictate our life by the truth but by every desire of our self-driven will. The truth will never lead until the human heart is made right. The love of truth and the willingness to submit to its demands should be our first step.

So ask yourself, do you pursue the truth with the resolute intention of living it out? Feelings, appeals to emotion and personal belief appear to have more influence on shaping public opinion than objective facts. We seem to acknowledge that objective truth does exist, but we often subordinate this to our preferences, feelings, desires and goals. So that if a view for a subject fits our preferences and opinions, then all is well and good, if it doesn't, then the view can even be deemed offensive. We turn to the sources which support our preference and disregard all others, putting ourselves above the truth. This is a human tendency innate in all of us. Our demand for truth is so often selective - we want the truth when it's convenient for our lifestyle or when it supports our point of view. So we really do have a choice to make: We either seek to obey the truth or live a lie as if the truth obeys us. Either I dictate my life or the truth does. One starts with your apparent freedom, the other with your submission. One ends in confusion, the other ends in liberation. Jesus said, *"You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free."*

## Living a lie

We live as if we are the centre of the universe. We see the world in relation to the self, and so treat the truth secondary to self. In doing so, the truth often becomes used and twisted for power. I can remember when I was a child I would catch my brother misbehaving and I'd use this against him to

get what I wanted, otherwise I'd 'tell on him', but we don't really grow up. We live in a culture in which we're often caught in a power play with truth, using it for our advantage and often someone's disadvantage.

Many companies will use privileged knowledge about our fears, insecurities and desires to make money by selling a product or idea which will apparently solve all that, but instead just deliberately fuels it. In some relationships, when an argument occurs between a couple, they will call out shameful truths about the other person's life irrelevant to the discussion, to give themselves a hedge in that argument. As truth has often been used as a weapon to manipulate, control, and make opportunity from one another, many have stopped valuing truth altogether. We fear truth being used against us and so we don't trust people with the truth and often fear the truth itself. How then do we escape this vicious cycle of fear? We *must* address fear. A worldview of pure materialism led to the most fearful century in all human history. Relativism can't even identify our fears and hedonism merely distracts us from our fears.

If truth at its most fundamental level is merely cold dead fact, we cannot be held accountable, so there's nothing to stop us putting ourselves at the centre of our pursuit for truth. This leads to bias, which blurs the truth. However, truth founded in a personal God means we have accountability beyond ourselves. The implications are massive.

## Living out the truth

1 John 4:18 says, "*perfect love drives out fear.*" Not my love or your love, not just amicable feeling, but perfect love. The writer constantly defines love by pointing to how God has given His life for us through Jesus' crucifixion. "*God is love,*" as he writes just before. We love because we're made in God's image, but the definition, paragon and summit of love is God Himself, just as he is the definition and ground of truth.

This suggests that to practically live and submit to truth, love and truth must coincide. To be called a lover of truth is a great compliment. Yet if we looked at certain truths, propositions, sentences, beliefs or facts, when was the last time you loved one of those? You may find a passion for that truth but not love in the sense that it is substantial enough to direct your entire life. Love is relational. Jesus said, "*I am the way, the truth and the life.*" According to the Christian view, at the end of our desperate pursuit of truth lies a Person, God. Not just an ideology as taught in most eastern religions, or impersonal reality as taught in atheistic and naturalistic worldviews. Christ made the bold statement that "*everyone who is of truth listens to me.*" Jesus was not merely establishing the existence of truth but was also affirming his embodiment of it. Therefore, to reject him is to choose to govern oneself with a lie. Truth can only exist if there is an objective standard by which to measure it. That objective, unchanging absolute is God, further revealed to us in the person of Christ. Again, Jesus said, "*I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me.*" Two deductions come from this - firstly, truth is absolute, secondly, truth is knowable. If it is true that the foundational pursuit of life is meaning, then that meaning must be within the confines of truth, and that truth is in Jesus Christ. So we can never really know our purpose until we know him. To know Him is to know not only the ultimate reality but also ourselves since we are derived from God and God is revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

Now I can live out the truth with confidence because the truth is love, and loves us. This is what makes the Christian faith so intriguing because truth is not an enemy but is instead a God of love who calls us to love one another sacrificially in turn. If the truth is impersonal, it cannot be loved in the deepest sense, and if not, then it cannot overcome fear because we cannot trust its goodness. In a secular age where God is increasingly deemed irrelevant to truth, we fear the truth and abuse it

because truth and love are *disconnected*, but in the Christian view, I am to be a lover of the truth because the *truth first loved us*.

## Belief, knowledge and faith

The Christian claim is that Jesus, also known as Yeshua, is *THE* truth. The following question for you and me, is do you really believe it? And what does Christian faith/belief actually mean?

Knowledge is the subject of truth, and ideally, knowledge is the basis of belief. To believe something involves a readiness to act, in appropriate circumstances, as if what is believed were so. Belief goes beyond cold, abstract knowledge, into the realm of trust and also into action. For something to be true it must be true universally, otherwise it is no more than an opinion, which could be objectively false. But as we believe a truth we appropriate, appreciate, trust and start to live accordingly to it.

For example, if I believe I am low on fuel, I will have an eye out for a fuel station and will be ready to drive in and fill up when I spot one. If I believe I have plenty of fuel, on the other hand, my thoughts, feelings, tendencies, and behaviours will be different. Or to give another analogy, say you're in a burning aeroplane speeding towards the ground. You give a parachute to your friend explaining that it will save them, and you put one on yourself. They nod in agreement before jumping, leaving the parachute behind. You would conclude that they didn't really believe the parachute could save them because when it came down to it they acted as if it wouldn't. Similarly, if I really do believe in God as the truth, I will tend to act as if He exists and this will influence the entire direction of my life. If you want to know whether you truly believe in God just ask yourself what you really trust. It is contradictory to profess you believe in God, yet act from disbelief. Your lifestyle and actions are a follow up of your honest beliefs.

The central teachings of the Christian faith were from the beginning presented and accepted as knowledge of what is real and what is right. That is why the Christian teachings had the transforming effect they did on a dead world dead set against them. Over and over in the Old Testament the explanation of events in human history is that we may know that Yahweh is the living God. For this reason an act of faith in the Judeo-Christian framework is always undertaken in an environment of knowledge and is inseparable from it. We drop the idea of faith as a "*blind leap*", the biblical stories know absolutely nothing of blind "*leaps of faith*," as that phrase is often understood. To say that the "*righteous shall live by faith*" does not mean that they live by blind and irresponsible leaps in total absence, or even in defiance, of knowledge. Faith is *not* the absence of evidence. It does not mean that they just live in a state of ignorance. They do on occasion act in specific ways beyond what they know, but only within the framework of knowledge that makes such action reasonable. Knowledge is an essential element of the Christian faith, and just as Christianity dismisses the common assumption that knowing is enough without belief, it also dismisses the idea that one can only believe that God exists without truly knowing it. For now we recall the ringing declarations of Paul: "*I want to **know** Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings*", and "*I **know** the one in whom I have put my trust.*" Or consider the carefully laid out passage of scripture: "*May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the **knowledge** of God and of Jesus our Lord. His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the **true knowledge** of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.*"

The Christian faith is not divorced from the realm of knowledge and it is not belief without proof, but trust without reservations. Faith has to do with engagement of the will, and not with the absence of knowledge. Reason functions as a basis of responsibility before God precisely because of its ability to serve in this instigation, nurture, and correction of faith. The activity of reasoning is an indispensable part of the foundation of our faith. It is a primary instrument in our hands as we work

along with God in the creation of faith in the heart of unbelievers and as we correct faith in the hearts of believers. With this we develop the practice of what is called apologetics.

## Apologetics

Apologetics is the art of thinking and reasoning to assist earnest inquiries in relinquishing disbelief and mistrust in God and God's good purpose for humanity. Apologetics involves bringing your mind into God's service and thinking seriously about God and the implications of the truth. When knowledge comes, a certain authority comes with it. If you have knowledge, you are authorized to act and to teach. People acting on knowledge have a unique way of interacting with reality. They have eliminated doubt and double-mindedness.

*"Always be prepared to make a defence to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you"* (1 Peter 3:15). This passage is often used to support the practice of apologetics, the term 'apologetics' refers to a set of reasoned arguments in justification of one's hope. In this sense, a hope found from a deep and passionate immersion in the realities of the faith and the person of Jesus Christ. The transformation that occurs in a person when they imbed their life in the gospel happens not by some sort of brain-dismissing self-delusion, but by *"the renewing of the mind."* The Acts of the Apostles includes reasoning, arguing, persuading, examining, debating, disputing, explaining, defending, refuting, convincing and *proving*. The most frequent description used in the New Testament to refer to someone's conversion to Christianity is to say that they were persuaded. If you commit to the intellectual case for Christianity, I am confident you will find the case of Christ strong enough to meet the demands of truth.

## Tolerance

What troubles some about the Christian claim to truth has to do with tolerance. There has arisen the idea that if you think you know what your religion holds to be is true, as distinct from merely believing, being committed to, or professing it, you will be certain and will have no doubt about what your religion teaches. That, in turn, will supposedly make you a bigot; you will be closed-minded, dogmatic and arrogant. Those who know they are right are said to be intolerant and when in a position of power, they are dangerous. There is some apparent historical warrant to this view, but is the problem really knowledge or is it possibly the lack of appropriate knowledge or even how we choose to use the knowledge? And can the solution to the problem of intolerance really lie in denying knowledge, especially with respect to the things that matter most to us: morals, purpose and value? It is a pretty shallow analysis of the problem of intolerance. It is true that intolerant people often claim *"absolute"* knowledge, but that does not mean you can get rid of intolerance by disallowing knowledge.

The recommended solution is to make all *"knowledge"* tentative, that is, to hold it only if it is open to further reflection. Now I think that's wise; as the apostle Paul suggested, knowledge is never complete, as he once wrote, *"we know in part."* Genuine tolerance is not indifference, but a generous regard and even provision for those who differ from us on points we deeply care about. We must care about people. Tolerance itself must be based upon assured knowledge of what is real and what is right. Tolerance has been historically based upon the knowledge that all human beings are equally valuable, but that can only be so if we have an equal purpose and equally loved by God who ordained our purpose. There is absolutely no way you can *objectively* justify the equality of human value on secular grounds, not at all. The call to tolerance was based on this Christian knowledge. It was this type of vision, regarded as knowledge, that led to the abolition of slavery and legal segregation, for example. Therefore undermining confidence in knowledge is actually what undermines tolerance.

# The Heart of Apologetics

Here is the heart of apologetics, to discuss, challenge and answer people's questions and doubts with a heart of compassion and care. The ultimate intention is to drive people with the desire for the truth and that God is the truth which grounds and acts as the reference for all life's absolutes, including love.

In doing apologetics we would be wise to remind ourselves of an obvious truth, that behind every question is a person, a person with their own concerns, interests and most often preconceived judgments. So whatever worldview we have, dialogue and debate should take place with civility and courteous listening. Otherwise like many debaters, we fall to the trap of merely 'clever' arguments fuelled by pride, sooner or later this is repulsive. In a public speech by Richard Dawkins in Washington DC he preached to this crowd to address all those who hold a religion and I quote, *"mock them, ridicule them, ridicule them with contempt!"* Christopher Hitchens said, *"Mockery of religion is one of the most essential things."* Honestly, is this how we ought to reason? There is no rationality in that. So for the Christian, let us present ourselves as thoughtful people to be taken seriously while maintaining a heart of compassion and character. We must take people's objections very seriously, and take the people themselves very seriously. I've never seen a person helped or 'convinced' by being belittled. Never. Meet one another as heart to heart. Apologetics isn't intellectual bullying, it isn't belittling, it's to relieve the burden of doubt from someones heart.

*This article contains references from material by RZIM and Dallas Willard.*