

Truth

Introduction: Winston Churchill said, *“Men occasionally stumble over the truth, but most of them pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing had happened.”* What is truth? What is the relationship of truth to the world around us? Is there value in being able to determine truth?

C.S. Lewis: *“If you look for truth, you may find comfort in the end; if you look for comfort you will not get either comfort or truth only soft soap and wishful thinking to begin, and in the end, despair.”* What is his point?

Four key questions: (1.) Is it possible for two conflicting statements about something or someone to both be true at the same time in the same relationship? (2.) Is truth immutable (unchanging) or is it relative to circumstances? (3.) Can truth be conveyed by different methods? (4.) Can the validity of truth claims be tested?

The Virtue of Truthfulness: Is it possible to determine if a statement is true or false? Can truth be the same for all people? Or is the commonly heard statement “that may be true for you – but it isn’t true for me” the way things really are?

Statements implying the ability of each person to choose their own “truth” imply the existence of a plurality of truth from which one can choose what they will consider to be their truth. Is that the case? You can no doubt choose what you will consider to be true, but does that mean your choice is genuinely true? How do you know? What happens when your “truth” conflicts with your friends “truth?”

Diversity and tolerance are often treated as though they are such desirable values they should not be subject to restrictions or qualifications. Is that a good thing? What is the role of truth in diversity and tolerance?

In the past most people accepted some concept of absolute truth. Today, that is not the case. To many people no possibility of absolute truth is acceptable. Why? What implications does all this have for me? For you? Is pluralism desirable and appropriate in some situations but not in others? If so, which is which?

Two Presuppositions: Two presuppositions make it possible to define “truth.”
(1.) Reality exists on its own, independent of what anyone thinks about it.

(2.) Reality is determinate. Nothing can both “be” and “not be” at the same time in the same relationship. Anything that does exist cannot both “have” and “not have” an attribute at one and the same time. This is called the principle of noncontradiction. Truth must obey this principle. Other tests must also be passed to validate truth.

Two Categories of Propositions (Statements): Descriptive and prescriptive.

(1.) **Descriptive propositions** take the form of “is” and “is not” statements. Examples include: (a.) The sky is clear today. (b.) Jesus lived on earth about 2000 years ago. (c.) I’m tired, wet, and dirty! (d.) That dish is not clean.

(2.) **Prescriptive propositions** take the form of “ought” and “ought not” statements. Examples include: (a.) You ought to wash your hands carefully. (b.) **“Be imitators of God.”** (c.) Exercise is good. (d.) The Bible ought always to be recognized as truth.

Definition of Truth: Given the two presuppositions we have stated, plus the meanings of descriptive and prescriptive, truth is defined as follows.

(1.) **Descriptive propositions** are true if they conform to reality.

(2.) **Prescriptive propositions** are true if they conform to “right desire.” Right desire is desire which conforms to the reality of being genuinely good, in contrast to desire which seems good but is in reality bad. A standard of “right desire” must be used to test the truth of prescriptive propositions. For Christians, that standard is desire conforming to God’s revealed moral character, principles, and precepts. Non-Christians must choose the standard of “right desire” they will live by.

A Confusion to Avoid: Consider the following two descriptive statements about God. (1.) God objectively exists. (2.) God does not objectively exist. Both cannot be true. The one accepted as true drastically affects everything in the area of knowledge, morals, and the whole of life. The issue represented by these two statements is critical to life and which everyone should want to get right!

Soren Kierkegaard: *“There are two ways to be fooled. One is to believe what isn't true; the other is to refuse to believe what is true.”*

What is a “lie” or “falsehood”? Communication between people takes many forms, verbal and nonverbal. In every form of communication, **“Communicating something different from what is thought to be true is a lie.”** The intended lie could inadvertently be true. What makes it a lie is deliberately communicating

something different from what is thought to be the case. Non-verbal communication (like “body-language”) tends to conform to actual thoughts and emotions and may not convey the same message as a verbal communication. Differences between a verbal message and accompanying non-verbal signals can be used to detect a lie.

Joseph A. Schumpeter: *“The first thing a man will do for his ideals is lie.”*

Mark Twain: *“A lie can travel half way around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes.”*

Using Words Deceptively: Words can be used to deceive as well as to inform. Here is neat Abraham Lincoln story about deceptive use of words: In talking to a man, Lincoln asked, how many legs does a dog have? The man answered four. Then Lincoln said, if I call the dog’s tail a leg, how many legs does he have? The man answered five. Lincoln responded, No! Calling a dog’s tail a leg doesn’t make it true. A dog has four legs no matter what you call its tail. Calling something good, true, or beautiful doesn’t make it so. Don’t be gullible.

William Blake: *“A truth that's told with bad intent beats all the lies you can invent.”*

What Constitutes “False Thought”? Thought is self-communication. **False thought (whether descriptive or prescriptive) is thought which does not conform to reality.** Checking validity of thoughts can be done in many ways. Most common is checking with an authority (a person, book, or online). The question then becomes, how reliable is the authority?

When is Pluralism Appropriate? Pluralism obviously cannot work in all situations. For example, a peaceful society cannot exist with two or more competing governments unless there is a defined order of sovereignty. The United States government is structured with sovereignty divided between the national government, subordinate state governments, and subordinate local governments. The defined sovereignty restricts pluralism of government with the intent of avoiding conflict. On the other hand, pluralism is unrestricted for political parties, each vying for the dominant role in running government entities.

Pluralism is appropriate in areas of taste, such as preferences with regard to cuisine, dress, social manners, and artistic styles. These raise no questions of truth. But in matters subject to individual thought and decision, when truth is at issue,

pluralism is not desirable and may not be tolerable. Pluralism is acceptable in areas of disputed truth until dispute can be resolved. Agreement, not diversity, is the goal in matters of truth. We will look at this issue as “validating truth claims.”

The Unity of Truth: All parts of the whole of truth must be compatible with one another regardless of how or when each was attained or received.

Truth versus Being Judged to be True: A “true proposition” is true regardless of what people think about it. For example, the proposition that you can’t divide an atom was judged to be true by all concerned from the ancient Greeks to modern people. But, in spite of that widespread, long lasting agreement, it turned out to be a false proposition. People’s judgment on the proposition that atoms cannot be divided necessarily changed from true to false when atoms were split in the 20th century.

The statement that atoms cannot be divided was always false even when everyone believed it was true. Agreement with a proposition does not make it true. Truth is conformity to reality, not to what the majority of people think.

Categories of Truth: Four common categories of truth are (1.) Factual or logical truth. (2.) Poetical Truth. (3.) Objective truth. (4.) Subjective truth.

Factual or Logical Truth versus Poetical Truth: There is a distinction between truths of reason and truths of imagination. “Logical” signifies a “truth of reason,” the kind of truth which belongs to descriptive or prescriptive propositions subject to contradiction. That means, the propositions can be tested and either pass or fail the “judgment of truth claim” process. Factual means concerned with facts rather than theories or personal interpretations.

Poetical truth is of a different nature. Poetical truth is found in works of imagination such as stories, plays, and poems. Poetical truth often concerns generalized principles (or the essence of reality) related to human character and behavior. In a novel, true principles may be depicted through the thoughts and actions of a fictional individual. Truth claim tests based on strict conformity to reality do not apply to poetical truth. Fables and proverbs carry poetical truth. They provide valuable insight into character and behavior. While, such writings may be clearly true to human nature, the insights are not necessarily true of any particular real individual.

Poetical truth is true. Poetical truth does not in any way signify false or without value. Profound insight into human character is often most easily expressed through imaginative teaching stories, proverbs and parables.

Objective versus Subjective Truth: The realm of the “**objective**” in human life is the realm of matters subject to the principle of noncontradiction and other criteria of truth and falsity. In sharp contrast, the realm of the “**subjective**” in human life is the realm of feeling and personal predilection. The subjective realm includes matters of taste. There is no disputing and no adjudication of the subjective by logical means. If you “feel” something is right, that is your “subjective truth” at that moment. It may be different ten minutes later.

Truth, Knowledge, and Opinion: To know implies possessing “truth.” To err implies mistaking “the false” for truth. Opinions are conclusions held with confidence but not substantiated by positive knowledge or proof. Christian faith is based on the factual and poetical truths of Scripture, particularly the promises of God and the salvation work of Christ. Christian faith is not based on opinion.

Opinion is a proper description for conclusions believed likely to be true but remaining subject to the possibility of debate. As we saw it took many centuries for the opinion that atoms could not be divided to arrive at the truth that atoms could be split. Inability to divide an atom was speculative and subject to debate. Physicists of the 20th century were convinced atoms could be split. They successfully did so and knowledge that atoms could be split replaced the opinion atoms could not be split.

In comparison to knowledge, opinion lacks stability and permanence. Opinion is not anchored in the mind by compelling reasons. It is possible to logically hold the opposite of a given opinion, whereas the opposite of validated knowledge must be error or falsehood.

Science and Truth: The Scientific Method is a powerful methodology for discovering and validating truth. However, science can only establish truth in the natural realm. The Scientific Method works only for things which can be tested. Science has nothing to say about the Spiritual realm. That limits science’s ability to discover truth. Some philosophers and scientists, rather than admit to a limit on science’s ability to discover truth, say that reality is limited. Their conclusion is that

only the physical material world exists. There is no supernatural world, no God, and nothing that science cannot discover.

If there is no supernatural world, no God, then there is no fixed, unchanging, supernatural standard for morals. That is a significant problem. What is to be the basis for making moral decisions? If the only acceptable source of truth is, reason, science, and facts about the natural world, the standard for moral decisions must come from those same sources. That thinking produces tenuous and possibly dangerous moral standards. Such standards can change with every consideration of “what does our reason say is best for humanity today?”

Different Methods of Conveying Truth: How could one communicate the truth that touching a very hot object leads to pain and bodily damage? Here are six methods. (1.) Demonstration – Have the person touch hot objects, each with a higher temperature than the preceding one. (2.) Description – Describe a true life experience in which hot objects caused pain and bodily damage. The language of description might be every day terms, medical terminology, or dramatic language. (3.) Imaginative story – Tell an imaginative story of pain and bodily damage from heat. (4.) Poetic expression – Convey in poetic language the essence of experiencing pain and bodily damage from burns. (5.) Proverbial expression – Capture the essence of the pain of burns in a pithy short statement. (6.) Authoritative command – Have an appropriate authority command to not touch hot objects for fear of burns.

Abusing the Truth of God’s Promises: Enticing believers to “exploit God’s promises” is a powerful (but subtle) ploy of our spiritual enemy. Satan tested our Lord Jesus in just that manner. Matthew 4:5-7, *Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple⁶ and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, “He will command his angels concerning you,’ and “On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.”*

Satan’s challenge to Jesus was to use God’s promise of protection to produce publicity to benefit His ministry. That was an enticement to spiritual presumption. Since God promised to protect Jesus in all circumstances (Psalm 91:11-12), Jesus could cause a miracle of great power to occur by casting Himself from the pinnacle of the Temple (about 189 feet high). As promised, Angels would save Him. All who

witnessed or heard about the miracle would recognize His divinity. In one easy step Jesus could acquire a following of many believers – instantly becoming a “superstar.”

Just as Satan invited Jesus to become a superstar by misusing God’s promise, so today he tempts would-be spiritual leaders to exploit people’s spiritual gullibility. They hope to make a quick impression on great multitudes of people. TV and other modern communication methodologies provide the opportunity – just need the right message to attract people. Promotion of self has become king, even in work billed as work of the Lord. No one should forget Psalm 75:6-7 (NIV), “*No one from the east or the west or from the desert can exalt themselves. ⁷It is God who judges: He brings one down, he exalts another.*”

Jesus answered Satan’s suggestion in plain terms that remain sound doctrine. Matthew 4:7b, Jesus said, “*it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’*” There is often temptation to put God to the test, to find out if His promises are really true. Believers are to resist as our Lord resisted.

God’s Promises Given for a Purpose: Peter gives us a wonderful truth in 2 Peter 1:3-4: “*His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, ⁴by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.*”

To believers, God has granted His precious and very great promises. As Christians we rest in these promises, but the promises can be abused. Consider Philippians 4:19, “*And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.*” If this promise is taken as unconditional, it could be interpreted to mean that no matter how irresponsible or lazy we might choose to be, God will meet our needs. Countering that idea, Paul says in 1Thessalonians 3:10, “*For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.*” God’s promises are usually conditional. The minimum condition is belief and regeneration.

As another example, someone might be tempted to do a dangerous “act of faith” in which survival is only possible if God works a miracle. Unless God commanded the “act of faith,” that action puts God to the test, which is forbidden. The intended

“act of faith” has become an act of “presumption.” Presumption rather than faith is always a risk and a temptation. God is sovereign. We are not.

Our understanding of God, of ourselves, of other people, and of circumstances is so limited we should be careful about instructing someone they are protected by God’s promise, or by telling God what His promise means. Believing God’s promises must not become a substitute for faith in God. Interpretation of the meaning of a promise and its limits must be consistent with all Scripture. Claiming a promise must not cause us to violate God’s moral principles.

What is Next? More on truth.