

Introduction: This lesson continues the discussion about Truth. It begins with methods for validating truth claims. Some validity tests are common sense, others are more formal. The required degree of assurance that the truth claim is true determines the method to be used.

Validating Truth: To be true means to conform to reality or be in accordance with the actual state of affairs. Synonyms for true include genuine, real, correct, authentic, and factual. To be effective in thinking and action, one must be able to determine what is true and what is not.

Truth, as that which conforms to reality, assumes human reasoning to be valid. C.S. Lewis in **Miracles** said, *“All possible knowledge, then, depends on the validity of reasoning. If the feelings of certainty which we express by words like must be and therefore and since is a real perception of how things outside our own minds really ‘must’ be, well and good. But if this certainty is merely a feeling in our own minds and not a genuine insight into realities beyond them – if it merely represents the way our minds happen to work – then we can have no knowledge. Unless human reasoning is valid no science can be true.”*

Conceptually, verifying a truth claim by showing it conforms to reality is simple. In practice, verification is operationally difficult and time consuming. For that reason, judgments about truthfulness are often made by comparison to personal experience, intuition, or by consulting an authority perceived to be trustworthy.

Every Day Truth Validity Checks: We instinctively use the touch test to verify the truth of a “Wet Paint” sign. In more complex situations, validating truth claims is not so easy. The process used to verify a truth claim depends on the level of assurance required, the time which can be devoted to the process, and the degree of difficulty involved. In many situations, such as a fighter pilot engaged in a “dogfight” or a fireman reacting to an unanticipated burst of flames, decisions must be made so quickly there is no time for analysis. People who must make decisions in that kind of environment prepare through extensive training to prepare them to react instinctively to perceived situations.

In daily life we constantly hear truth claims. A truth claim that I weigh 172 pounds is easily checked with a good pair of scales. If I say I have read 6 books this week, that is much more difficult to verify or disprove.

We frequently interact with professionals – doctors, nurses, veterinarians, lawyers, accountants, financial advisors – to name a few. How can we verify they are what they claim to be and have the knowledge and skills associated with their profession?

To a large degree, we depend on professional school diplomas and licensing by appropriate authorities. Licensing is a truth validity check which tests candidates to insure they meet specified ability and degree requirements.

We perform many other truth validity checks every day. The old adage for carpenters is to “measure twice and cut once.” Similar self-check concepts are valid for most activities. We make “to do” lists and check off items as we do them. We keep calendars of future appointments and activities so we can verify “what I have to do today.” We check to see if our children did their homework before they play.

“Authorities” are often used to verify a truth claim. We usually accept as true, things heard from people believed to be “trustworthy.” We trust (probably more than we should) experts to tell us what is true in their field of expertise. Examples of trusted experts include scientists, physicians, pastors, lawyers, bible translators, accountants, plumbers, electricians, and often our favorite sources of news. We accept information in dictionaries, encyclopedias, and various online sources as authoritative.

Methodologies for Validating Truth Claims: Proofs of truth in mathematics follow precise rules. Personalities have no influence in the process. In science, truth claim rules are summed up in the Scientific Method. In general, the method produces reliable results. However, personalities can and do influence what gets studied, the testing process, and judgment of what the test results mean. The protection against influence by personalities is the requirement that results be independently repeatable by others.

Rules evaluating truth claims in courts of law are relatively precise, but results can be dramatically influenced by personalities. Organizations exist for establishing the competency of professionals like doctors, lawyers, accountants, and engineers. Government organizations exist to establish the safety food, medicines, and various consumer goods. Many areas do not have rules for establishing truth.

Courts of Law: We will consider criminal courts of law and civil courts of law. In a criminal court of law, truth is established by presentation of testimony and physical evidence to a jury with participation by prosecution and defense attorneys

and oversight by a judge. Jury members are tasked to determine what is true “beyond reasonable doubt.” Jury members jointly make the final decision as to what is believed true.

Civil Courts of Law seek to determine what is true by “a preponderance of evidence,” a lesser requirement than “beyond reasonable doubt.”

Scientific Method: The methodology proceeds by observing the phenomena of reality, devising hypotheses to explain the observations, and then designing and carrying out experiments to test the hypotheses. The hypotheses and corresponding verification experiments are revised and repeated as many times as necessary. Hypotheses may be proven to be true or false. The entire process must be independently repeatable. This protects against the influence of personalities in choosing what to observe, how to carry out observations, what experiments to do, and how to interpret the results of the experiments.

Standards for Establishing Acceptable Levels of Validation: No matter what process is used for validating truth, some doubt always remains. The one exception is mathematical proof. For this reason, each intended formal use of truth has standards for judging when an acceptable level of truth assurance has been reached. Here are four commonly used standards for assuring truth has been obtained.

- (1.) Proof beyond a shadow of doubt (the standard in mathematics).
- (2.) Proof beyond reasonable doubt (the standard for criminal courts of law, for science, and many other fields of inquiry. “Reasonable doubt” must be defined.)
- (3.) Proof by preponderance of available evidence (the standard for civil courts).
- (4.) Proof by convincing evidence (the standard used in situations where there is no time to analyze or wait for more evidence. Accidents, an ongoing civil disaster, or military attacks are examples).

Doubt and Decisions: We know little that is beyond a shadow of doubt. We know more that is beyond reasonable doubt. Most of what we know falls into the categories of preponderance of evidence or convincing evidence. That means almost everything we think we know has doubt associated with it. Nonetheless, decisions must be made, and actions taken in spite of some level of doubt. Often decisions must be made when doubt is high, due to insufficient information of unknown accuracy.

Even “beyond reasonable doubt” decisions may be wrong. In a criminal jury trial, juries sometimes convict innocent persons. A bridge designed for “beyond reasonable doubt” safety may fail. That happened to the Tacoma Narrows Suspension Bridge when it collapsed due to a sustained strong wind. Aerodynamic effects had not been properly accounted for in the design.

The integrity of O-rings on the Shuttle booster rockets was judged safe beyond reasonable doubt at anticipated operating temperatures, but they failed and caused a horrible disaster.

Undue focus on such tragedies can cause doubts to overwhelm and hinder making necessary decisions or taking essential actions. Since the very best we can expect to do is achieve assurance “beyond reasonable doubt,” some other factor is needed to overcome doubt and enable action.

Faith as a Factor in Decisions and Actions: That other factor is faith. In decision making, faith and reason are closely coupled. Apart from faith, reason may, and often does, lead to futility. Without reason, faith may cause a blind leap which embraces contradictions. That happen when people accept contradictory interpretations of a Scripture verse as being equally true.

Faith involves trust. As observed earlier, all living requires natural faith. Natural faith is the persuasion of the mind that something is true even though no proof is available. Faith and truth, or to say it another way, faith and knowledge are intertwined. Faith (belief) that the booster O-rings might have a problem at the low anticipated launch temperature should have resulted in tests. You may recall that at the hearings on that disaster, Richard Feynman did exactly that. He performed a simple test in which he dropped an O-ring into a glass of water mixed with ice and demonstrated that the O-rings hardened and lost strength at 32 degrees Fahrenheit.

Frequently, faith that something is true causes work to be done which enables it to be proven true. A bit of knowledge, an educated guess that something might be true, plus faith that it is true has repeatedly led to great achievements. Edison persevered in developing a practical incandescent light bulb in spite of tens of hundreds of failures. He persevered, not based on knowing a long-lasting bulb was possible, but partial successes gave him faith it was possible. Faith sustains activity until “truth” can be validated.

“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see” (Hebrews 11:1). The basis of faith is often reasonable but incomplete evidence. Of course, the more evidence the better. Faith (whether natural or God’s saving faith) is definitely not, as it is often described, a “leap in the dark.” Faith provides a logical extension of what we know into the realm of the yet to be known.

How Does God Communicate His Truth to Us? Isaiah 55:8-9, *“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. ⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”*

God is infinite, omnipotent, and omniscient. His thoughts cannot be fully communicated to finite creatures whose capacity for knowing is limited. We can see the truth of that statement by considering some more ordinary examples of “a higher” communicating with “a lower.”

Translating from a Rich Alphabet to a Poorer One: Consider the task of translating from a language having 32 alphabetic characters and no special number symbols to one having 26 alphabetic characters plus special number symbols. Think of the difficulty caused by having fewer symbols in the target language than in the original language. For now, ignore the problem of preserving meaning.

Some characters in the 26 character alphabet must represent more than one character from the 32 character alphabet thereby suppressing the information carried by the two independent characters that get assigned to a single character in the target language. Likewise, the lack of number symbols in the original 32 alphabet character language means numbers will have been represented by alphabet characters. If, as is typical with many ancient languages, there is no space between words, it will be easy to confuse numbers with portions of words or vice versa.

The point is that something must be lost in going from a “richer” to a “poorer” alphabet system. We know nothing about God’s native language except it is much more complex and intricate in meaning than earthly languages. God’s must communicate with humans must take the form of a kind of “baby-talk” in which some complexity in His native language is suppressed. This means that inevitably there will be some loss of content and clarity.

Transcribing Music for Orchestra to Solo Piano: Consider a piano player who has no knowledge of any instrument except the piano. He receives the score of

a piece originally composed for full orchestra but now transcribed for piano. Knowing no other instruments, as he plays the piece, he has no notion that the notes he plays on the piano represent and replace the notes of the many instruments of the orchestra. How can the piano player ever understand the richness of the piece in variety of tone and texture as it was when played by the full orchestra? That is precisely the kind of problem which must be overcome to enable us to understand heavenly things. We have not seen nor heard that which constitutes heaven's rich reality. Human language appears to be incapable of conveying the full meaning of heaven. So, God uses earthly things to convey an analogy of heavenly things. The analogy is helpful, but it can never fully reveal the richness and variety of heaven.

Representing a 3-Dimensional Scene on a Flat Sheet of Paper: The solution devised to make 2-dimensional drawings of 3-dimensional scenes "look right" to the eye is a technique called "perspective." It works, but perspective creates a new set of problems of its own. Consider an image containing a railroad track and a house correctly drawn to look right to the eye using perspective. An angle must be used to represent the appearance of convergence as the parallel railroad tracks recede into the distance. On paper that angle looks just like the genuine angle formed by the apex of the roof of the house.

Since we know what the 3-dimensional world is really like, we avoid confusing such images and can separate the genuine angles from the "perspective angles." But suppose we had no knowledge of the 3-dimensional world and knew only the world of 2-dimensional images. How then could we distinguish between the "apparent angle of the receding railroad track" and the "genuine angle of the roof apex?" After all they appear the same to our eyes.

A literal interpretation, according to what is seen, could only conclude "they are the same," but they are not. Similar issues arise in moving from God's "higher thoughts and ways" to our "lower thoughts and ways." Has God used a technique like "perspective" to represent heavenly truths in earthly language? Scripture is understandable, but caution in interpretation is necessary. If possible we should always use "clear, easy to understand, passages" to interpret passages more difficult to understand.

How Does God Communicate with Us? God communicates to us through Natural Revelation (His creation and the sustaining of that creation), and through the Bible (His written verbal Special Revelation). God's vocabulary is infinite and

includes all human languages plus the language native to Him, whatever that is. His thoughts extend far above our capability to understand. How does God verbally communicate with humans? To communicate with us, as mentioned before, He uses a kind of “baby talk,” plus demonstrations showing what He means. Sometimes, the demonstrations are visions. Sometimes, they are real events. He patiently, lovingly teaches the same lesson repeatedly. When needed, He applies corrective discipline.

Think about it. God does for us what good parents routinely do for their children. Parents have a much larger vocabulary and experience base than small children. Despite obvious limitations, parents do effectively communicate and meet the needs of their small children. They use a combination of verbal and non-verbal means. Verbally they use whatever vocabulary the child has. In the beginning, that is at most a few words. New words are gradually added through the use of pictures, songs, and demonstrations help. “This is my eye,” “this is my ear” kinds of demonstrations come first. More complex things later. Patient, loving repetition increases understanding and makes lasting memories. God uses the same techniques. He established a commemorative meal, to be repeated every year, to help the Jews remember how He rescued them from slavery in Egypt.

God chose a man, Abraham, and set him apart to father a nation of people who would learn from God enough to be prepared for the coming of the Savior. It took many generations for people to understand God’s Law and His instructions for worship. When Christ came, it took many more generations to develop an understanding of the true significance of Christ’s salvation work. The meaning of the Trinity, how Christ could be one person with both a divine and a human nature, the meaning and significance of grace, faith, regeneration, justification, sanctification, and glorification.

Transposition: C.S. Lewis called communication between higher and lower domains “transposition.” Grave errors can arise in interpreting a transposition if it is not recognized as a transposition. To transfer meaning from “higher-to-lower,” the higher must convey (reveal) some understandable knowledge of the “higher realm” to the “lower.” Otherwise, from the point of view of the “lower,” they may have all the facts, but the genuine meaning be totally missed.

God has revealed facts about His nature and His higher realm. He is the highest of all “communicators.” God communicates with His human creatures in their limited vocabulary within the limits of their context and understanding. As you would expect,

God does this beautifully. He meets our needs for knowledge of Himself and His realm, but does not necessarily satisfy our yearnings to know.

Summary: When God communicates things from His “higher realm” to our “lower realm,” they must be transposed into our limited language and context. Realities from God’s higher realm must be represented in terms of earthly things by assigning them new meanings and significance. For example, our sacraments are “eating, drinking, and washing with water.” These common earthly things are infused with new and richer meaning.

As we come to the Bible we should recognize that it is communication from the infinite “Most High” to His lowly finite human creatures. His thoughts are of a higher form than our thoughts. We should anticipate there will be concepts where earthly principles and things are inadequate to convey heavenly concepts and meaning. If we insist on being excessively literal in our interpretation, we may get all the facts correct, but entirely miss the meaning God intends. We must pay close attention to the information God provides about His “higher realm.” He gives it to enable us to meaningfully interpret His transpositions from the higher to lower realm.

Through His Word, God reveals His nature and moral character, His role as creator, the problem of the fallen human race, and His plan of salvation to correct that problem. He sends His Spirit to dwell in each believer. The Spirit works to transform believers into a moral image of Christ. As part of His transforming work, The Spirit inspired and now illuminates God’s Word in the Bible. God communicates clearly and sufficiently. But He is infinite God and we are finite creatures. He communicates with us within our limitations using a “kind of baby talk.”

What is next? Completing discussion on truth and beginning discussion on character.