

Critical Issues Commentary

A Biblically based commentary on current issues that impact you

God's Truth in an Age of Lies - part One

Written by Bob DeWaay

“For we can do nothing against the truth, but only for the truth.” (2Corinthians 13:8)

“Sanctify them in the truth; Thy word is truth.” (John 17:17)

We live in a day in which commonly believed lies have colored the beliefs of most of society. Ironically, the one lie that may be doing the most damage is the one that says that it is impossible for anyone to know for sure that anything is true. “Truth” for many is relative -- “my truth, my reality” -- and need have no solid relationship with anything outside the self. It is not surprising that as we approach the end of the age that the battle is about the truth since the Bible predicted that this would be the case (2Thessalonians 2:10-12).

Truth and the means of distinguishing truth from error must be a central concern for churches that believe in the authority of Scripture. Sadly, that has sometimes not been the case in recent years. One evidence of this is that a theology professor from an important evangelical seminary has written a book entitled No Place For Truth that explores the reasons why truth has been pushed to the side in modern evangelicalism.¹ Many of the reasons concern the contemporary, cultural climate that has no tolerance for absolute truth claims.

The possibility of knowing the truth without doubt or equivocation and the content of Biblical truth need to be essential and primary for Christians. Even if the world continues to claim that universally applicable truth either does not exist or cannot be known, we must still maintain our commitment to preaching the claims of the gospel which presents God's truth to all people. This article will deal with the relationship of truth to the nature of God, modern doubts about the possibility of knowing the truth, the

nature of truth itself (the answer to Pilate's question -- “What is truth?”), and the objectivity of truth.

Truth and the Nature of God

When Jesus appeared before Pilate, He was questioned about His intentions concerning setting up a kingdom. Of primary concern for Pilate was the possible existence of a nationalistic movement to overturn Roman rule and set up an independent kingdom with Jesus as king. Jesus answered Pilate's inquiry about His status as king of the Jews as follows:

“My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting, that I might not be delivered up to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm.” Pilate therefore said to Him, “So You are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say correctly that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice” (John 18:36,37).

This prompted Pilate's famous rhetorical question -- “What is truth?” His question was rhetorical in that the implied answer was, “it is nothing for me to be concerned about.” Truth was not seen as a threat to his “turf.”

Jesus said that the reason for the Incarnation was to “bear witness to the truth.” This elevates truth from a seemingly unimportant philosophical abstraction to that which is central to the purposes of God. Truth was more of a threat to the kingdoms of this world than Pilate could have realized. When matters such as one's eternal destiny are at stake, armed troops can do nothing to settle the issue. Jesus is a king and one must submit to His kingship to be saved. The truth in this sense is not merely any particular fact or facts, but the truth of God as specifically revealed in the person and

teachings of Jesus Christ.

Dana and Mantey in their Grammar of the Greek New Testament discuss the term “truth” as used in its general and specific senses:

But in Greek, when it is desired to apply the sense of an abstract noun in some special and distinct way the article accompanies it. Thus *alētheia*, *truth*, means anything in general which presents a character of reality and genuineness, but *ē alētheia* [the truth] as used in the New Testament means that which may be relied upon as really in accord with God's revelation in Christ.²

Truth with the definite article appears many times in the New Testament in this sense. It is “the truth” that one learns in believing and submitting to Jesus Christ that brings freedom (John 8:32).

Elsewhere the Scripture attests the relationship of the second person of the trinity to the truth, “*And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. . . . For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ*” (John

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1:14,17). Jesus, being fully human and fully divine, is God who cannot lie. Truth is not only spoken by our Lord, but it is “realized.” He is the embodiment of truth, having testified, “*I am the . . . truth*” (John 14:6).

When God showed himself to Moses in answer to Moses' request, He said, “*The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth*” (Exodus 34:6). He is called “God of truth” in Psalm 31:5 and Isaiah 65:16. In John 14:17; 15:26 and 16:13 the Holy Spirit is called “the Spirit of truth.” The triune God of the Bible, Father, Son and Holy Spirit is characterized by truth.

The Bible says that “God cannot lie” (**Titus 1:2 & Hebrews 6:18**). Because of the truthfulness of God Christians ought to realize how crucial the issue of truth is and why error, falsehood and lies are incompatible with Biblical faith.

Can We Know the Truth?

Though Pilate's question was a rhetorical brush off of the issue, it still deserves consideration -- what **is** truth? In order to combat the relativism and pluralism of contemporary society we must understand how profound it is that we can conclusively know truth. I first encountered the question, “can we know that anything is true?” as a student at Iowa State University in September of 1971. I had enrolled in a class on the scientific method as part of my studies in chemical engineering. I sat in class as one who had been apprehended by Jesus Christ only two months earlier.

The professor, in introducing us to the quarter's study, shared his view on epistemology (the study of knowledge). He stated, “There are only two ways of knowing that anything is true: divine revelation and the scientific method. Divine revelation is hogwash. Therefore we will study the scientific method.” I was somewhat disturbed by the way he summarily dismissed the possibility that God could reveal truth to humans; but I expected that sort of thing from a secular professor. What was more surprising to me was his theory of scientific knowledge:

All scientific knowledge is based upon theories that are constructed to explain the universe. All theories are true for some universe somewhere; but some of them do not fit the one in which we are living. Those that work the best to explain things in our universe are the ones we use; but there is no **Truth** with a capital “T.”

I had been studying science for some time naively assuming that the things being taught were true.

Wanting to make sure I had not missed his point, I raised my hand and asked, “According to what you are saying then, it is impossible for us to ever know if something is true.” He answered, “yes, that's right.” His answer prompted

a gasp from the class -- evidently others had also been under the “delusion” that they were actually learning something in their university studies. I wondered if they, like I, were wondering how our tests could be graded for right and wrong answers under such a system. Perhaps our wrong answers were “true” for some yet undiscovered universe. Two weeks later I had quit my studies at Iowa State and was enrolled in Bible college (not just because of this incident).

It turns out that this university teacher was on the cutting edge of new thinking that has now become the majority opinion. Thomas Kuhn's seminal work, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, written in 1962 and revised in 1970 has so popularized the idea of “paradigm” (a mental construct or model of reality) dependent knowledge that one encounters it everywhere.³ One now hears about paradigms in sermons, self-help seminars, missions conventions, and parent-teacher seminars in schools.

Kuhn defines the term in his introduction as, “universally recognized scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners.”⁴ The bottom line of this new understanding of scientific knowledge is relativism -- we are so influenced by our own premises, theories, and predispositions about reality that true objectivity is not possible. We cannot be sure that we are even getting closer to the truth.

Like my university professor, Kuhn does not think it possible to know “Truth” in a decisive way: “There is, I think, no theory-independent way to reconstruct phrases like ‘really there’; the notion of a match between the ontology [the study or idea of being -- true existence] of a theory and its ‘real’ counterpart in nature now seems to me illusive in principle.”⁵ We seem to be hopelessly stuck in our mentally constructed worlds, interrupted by an occasional “revolution” that takes us from one paradigm to the next with no assurance that the new one is closer to the truth than the old.⁶ I doubt that many of the Christians I read and hear who use the terms “paradigm” and “paradigm shift” in their theological

positions have fully come to grips with Kuhn's own use of the term and its relativism.⁷

What is Truth?

What this means for many people today is that Pilate's rhetorical question is quite applicable. Truth is nothing to concern oneself with if it is not knowable. There is no **Truth**, only “truth for me for the moment” (the essence of relativism). I am surprised that Christians who look at these new developments in the theory of knowledge favorably do not see the damaging implications they have for the claims of the gospel. Jesus claimed to bear witness to a truth that modern humans do not consider knowable.

The last one hundred years have seen the development of sophisticated theories of language, knowledge, and the human thought process that have claimed to undermine any possibility that Divine

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revelation through the Scriptures and the person of Christ can communicate any “**True**” knowledge of God to all humans. Francis Schaeffer firmly denied the validity of these modern claims and urged Christians to understand and affirm that the claims of Scripture are verifiable and communicate truth.⁸ I heartily agree with him on this matter.

Clearly the Biblical writers asserted the facts about Jesus as God Incarnate with complete confidence in their truthfulness. Paul said that if Christ did not really rise from the dead, our faith is “worthless” (**1Corinthians 15:17**). Truth by definition is that which is in conformity with reality -- what is. Truth involves the idea of “really there,”⁹ of a match between belief and existence. “*And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him*” (**Hebrews 11:6**). Is the belief that one must have to be a person of faith (that God “is”) a naive or blind hope that there is “something out there,” or is it sober

reality?

It is popular these days, even among evangelicals, to assert that we will not have “proof” of the veracity of our faith until the future age. This they claim contra Paul (**Acts 17:31**) and John (**1John 1:1-3**). The apostles were supposedly trapped in their own naive paradigms and therefore cannot be faulted for thinking they knew things conclusively (they also supposedly thought the world to be flat say the critics and obviously their theories were wrong), though now we know that such is not the case.

Leslie Newbigin echoes the modern despair of knowing the truth:

We can never claim that either our understanding or our action is absolutely right. We have no way of proving that we are right. That kind of proof belongs only to the end. As part of the community that shares in the struggle, we open ourselves continually to Scripture, always in company with our fellow disciples of this and former ages and in the context of the struggle for obedience; and we constantly find in it fresh insights into the character and purpose of the one who is “rendered” for us in its pages.¹⁰

The problem is, if the reason that we cannot prove that we are right (presumably even about the resurrection) is that we are finite humans; then “the end” will not alleviate the problem. We shall always be finite,

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even after the resurrection. Even raised from the dead, it would be possible to suppose that we will only be dreaming that we are raised when in fact we are not. Putting proof off until the end does not solve the problem if humanness and finiteness are the cause. Not only that, if we are to be judged then for our present beliefs and actions, “then” is too late to find out we were wrong!

God does not change (**Malachi 3:6**) and the Scriptures claim that He has spoken truly and conclusively to us in His Son, Jesus Christ (**Hebrews 1:1,2**). The truth does not change or cease to be itself when it is ignored, lied against, denied, or defined out of existence. Paul alludes to this when he stated, “*For we can do nothing against the truth, but only for the truth*” (**2Corinthians 13:8**).

The context of this passage concerns appearances and how Paul and the other apostles might be seen or judged by the Corinthians (see verse 7). The truth does not change its nature and being when it is denied or not believed. If anything truly exists, then there is something that is true, even if one excepts the notion that it is unknowable. Truth in its ultimate sense is the very being of God who eternally exists -- **GOD IS!** Paul declared God's being to the “agnostic” (from the Greek word “unknown”) worshippers of **Acts 17:23**. God exists whether they knew Him or not.

The Objectivity of Truth

The eternal being of Almighty God whose very nature is characterized by truth shows us that truth is **objective**. That means that it has existence external to and independent of the mind. The existence of God transcends and precedes the state of mind of any person. God does not begin to exist when a human thinks that He does nor cease to exist when He is doubted. Objective is understood in opposition to **subjective** which means, “that which results from or exists only in the processes of the mind.”

David F. Wells describes the Biblical writers relationship to truth as compared to that of pagans and moderns:

In order to think biblically about our world, we have to put ourselves in the minds of Jeremiah, Isaiah, Paul, and Peter and accept for ourselves the norms and habits by which they functioned . . . Truth to them was not privatized. It was not synonymous with personal insight, with private intuition. It was not sought in the self at all, as a matter of fact, but in history -- the history that God wrote and interpreted -- and it was therefore objective, public, and authoritative. Here lay the great divide between the pagans and the prophets: the pagans thought of truth in terms of private intuition, and the prophets did not. The same divide

today separates moderns, for whom truth is a matter of private insight, from biblical Christianity, for which it cannot be.¹¹

Objectivity is what is now shunned and truth for many is a function of one's own thoughts. “You have your truth and I have mine” is the slogan of pluralism. This means that all beliefs are equally valid, as long as they are sincerely held. This also means that there is no authoritative Word of God that applies to all people.

Subjectivism is a frustrating thing to deal with. It claims to be its own justification. If truth is subjective, then there are as many versions of it as there are inhabitants of planet Earth. If it is **only** subjective, all human efforts that required cooperation and communication would cease. Communication requires that at least two people have common referents in the real world. For example, if one person asked another for directions and the explanation included driving north for a few miles; “north” must mean the same thing in the minds of the two having the conversation as it does in the external world for the directions to get the job done.

John Warwick Montgomery tells a humorous story to illustrate the problems of a merely subjective approach to truth. An inmate in an insane asylum was asked who he was. The man, with his hand in his vest answered, “Napoleon Bonapart.” He was then asked, “who told you that?” To which he answered, “God.” Another inmate who overheard the conversation responded, “no I didn't.” Typically people whose subjective beliefs have a skewed correspondence to the real world are considered insane if they cannot be dissuaded. I have talked to a man who thought he was a tree, a man who claimed he was the apostle Paul, a lady who claimed she had just married Bob Dylan, and others convinced of such unrealities. In every case these people needed serious help.

If truth is subjective and exists as a state of mind, how can anyone tell such individuals that they are wrong? It is no wonder life is becoming so confused in our day. We have men who claim to be women trapped in male bodies, and they are starting to be believed. If we accept the idea that truth is in the self and not in the acts of God and the words of God,

then we are well on our way back to the paganism that Paul encountered and refuted. False beliefs are “real” in that they adversely influence those who hold them, but they do nothing to change the way things are in the external world that God created.

Biblical truth is objective because it did not arise from the consciousness of humans, but came from God. “*But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God*” (2Peter 1:20,21). Scripture does not mean whatever we think it means, but what God intended it to mean. The oft used objection that the Bible has been subject to many interpretations should not discourage us from citing it authoritatively. The fact that humans seek **subjective** meanings of a Biblical passage does not prove that there is no discernable **objective** meaning intended by the author. When God said, “thou shall not steal,” someone may think, “that means I should not steal from others unless I need or want what they have.” Their “interpretation” does nothing to change the intended meaning and will not vindicate them on the day of judgment.

Talk is Cheap

When touring Israel in 1983, our Israeli guide pointed out a settlement of Samaritans. He told us, “the Samaritans say they are the true Hebrews, the true descendants of Abraham.” He then commented, “**Say!**, -- what is say? Anyone can say anything. When they found those Dead Sea Scrolls and opened them up, I could read them and they cannot. I know who the true Jews are.” Our guide was touching on a truth that has an expression here in America -- “Talk is Cheap.” James mentions those who “*lie against the truth*” (James 3:14) in the context of judging whether a claim of having wisdom from God is true. Saying that one has godly wisdom is not the same as having it -- objective standards of judgment must be applied. Demons can spout “wisdom” but we better not listen!

It seems that there is no limit to what can be said these days and broadcast to the whole world. The modern Christian is

confronted by “new ideas” that would make the Athenian philosophers of Paul's day (Acts 17:21) look like rookies. Never before have people been bombarded with more “truth claims.” What makes this even more incredible is that it all comes right into our homes -- we do not even have to travel to see and hear it!

It does not cost much to claim that something is true; but if “the truth” has eternal consequences and “. . . *all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death*” (Revelation 21:8b), we better make the right choice when deciding who to believe. Only the truth brings the freedom Jesus promised.

“*I declared the former things long ago and they went forth from My mouth, and I proclaimed them. Suddenly I acted, and they came to pass*” (Isaiah 48:3). God “. . . *who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist*” (Romans 4:17b) can create reality with his words, we cannot. Neither our ideas nor our words can change the truth. It is our job to know, believe and live the truth as revealed in Jesus Christ. Christianity rests on the veracity of the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. Those who say there is no resurrection cannot change the truth. We must ascertain the truth and not listen to cheap “talk” that has no relationship to the truth of God.

Next issue will take up further aspects of this important topic. I feel so strongly about this matter because the foundations of Christian faith are under ever more sophisticated attack. We will discuss the dangers of pluralism that claims to allow Christians to believe what they want (along with everyone else) but actually undermines the claims of the Gospel. We also will examine the nature of the conflict between “the truth” and “the lie” by seeing how lies live off of the truth in a similar way that evil is parasitical of the good that God created. Many are surprised about how strongly the Bible condemns liars; we will discuss the reason why it does.

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End Notes

1. David F. Wells, No Place For Truth, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

2. H.E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament, (New York: Macmillan, 1955) p. 141.

3. Thomas S. Kuhn THE STRUCTURE OF SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTIONS, second edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970)

4. *ibid.* viii.

5. *ibid.* 206.

6. Kuhn explains his doubts about the “ontological development” of science from Aristotle to Newton to Einstein on pages 206, 207 and his response to the charge of relativism -- “Conversely, if the position be relativism, I cannot see that the relativist loses anything needed to account for the nature and development of the sciences.” p. 207.

7. For a more lengthy, technical discussion of this matter, I have written a paper entitled, Thomas S. Kuhn's Paradigm Thesis and its Epistemological Applications in Theology. For a copy of this please write to me and request it.

8. see Francis A. Schaeffer, The God Who is There, (Downers Grove: IVP, 1968) Section III chapter 2 -- “Verifiable Facts and Knowing” pp 92-99.

9. *op. cit.* Kuhn, p. 206 though he doubts one can be sure of even making progress toward a “match” between theory and reality.

10. Leslie Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) p. 60.

11. *op. cit.* Wells, p. 264.

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