

What Is Truth?

by

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Pilate, therefore, said unto him, Art thou a king, then? Jesus answered, Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Everyone that is of the truth heareth my voice. Pilate saith unto him, What is truth? And when he had said this, he went out again unto the Jews, and saith unto them, I find in him no fault at all. (John 18:37, 38)

There are two ways to define something, and both are necessary. One way is by telling what the object in question is. The other way is by telling what it is not. Both are important because if you cannot say what it is not, then the object may very well be everything and consequently nothing. Some persons' definitions of God are like that; He is everything and therefore nothing at all. On the other hand, it is also necessary to say what the object is, because the negatives at best merely narrow down the possibilities.

This basic principle is important in the matter of the examination of Jesus by Pilate, for the crucial issue was the claim of the Lord to be a king and consequently to possess a kingdom. Was this kingship and kingdom to be thought of as in opposition to that of Caesar, whose interests Pilate was obliged to represent? Was it an earthly kingdom? Or was it something else, something that did not threaten Caesar's legitimate interests and which, therefore, neither he nor Pilate should fear? These were valid questions. So, in His conversation with Pilate, Jesus was careful to define the nature of His kingdom accurately. He did it negatively by affirming that it is "not of this world." Now He defines it positively, showing that it is "of the truth" and that it was for the very purpose of bearing witness to the truth that He came into the world. In developing this He says, "To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Everyone that is of the truth heareth my voice" (John 18:37).

PILATE'S QUESTION

The interesting thing about this definition of Jesus' kingdom is that Pilate's response was not in the nature of a further pursuit of the matter or even a recognition of the importance of what Jesus said. Rather, it was a cynical response based on what was to Pilate the seeming impossibility of ever knowing what truth was. "What is truth?" he said, and then walked out.

When Sir Francis Bacon came to write his famous essay "On Truth, " he suggested that Pilate's famous words were facetious. Bacon began, "What is truth? said jesting Pilate; and would not stay for an answer. " Whatever these words were they were far from facetious, however. Pilate had just looked into the eyes of the Son of God and had heard Him exclaim, "To this end was I born and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth." No one who has had that experience could be joking. Moreover, it was far from a laughing matter. The situation was grave, and the question that welled up from Pilate's deep cynicism was the disillusioned and despairing cry of his age.

It is this that makes Pilate the preeminently modern man. We readily admit that there are elements of this trial that we can identify with only with difficulty. Obviously Pilate's concern for Caesar's rights seems foreign to us. Even more so are the petty rivalries among the Jewish leaders and between these men and Pilate. But our inability to identify does not hold true at this point. On the contrary, here we detect the disillusioned voice of our own culture and recognize the current widespread view, not only that truth in the ultimate sense may be unknowable, but that it may in fact not even exist as an object of our inquiries.

In Pilate's day disillusionment with truth was disillusionment with Greek philosophy. Pilate may have been no philosopher, but he was aware, as were all Romans, that the Greeks had excelled in precisely this field and yet had failed to solve the ultimate philosophical questions. The man who had tried hardest was Plato. Plato understood that the basic problem in acquiring knowledge of what is true is that there must be knowledge of more than particulars if there is to be meaning. In the language of philosophy the word "particulars" means "things," those things we see in the world. We are surrounded by thousands of them at any given moment, and we know by experience and projection that there are many thousands, indeed millions, more. In a sense we know these particulars because we observe them. But real knowledge is something that goes beyond these individualized things to that general concept or form that gives them meaning.

For example, when we talk about chairs we can easily list many styles and types of chairs, some of them quite different from others. There are rocking chairs, spindle-back chairs, stuffed chairs, desk chairs--the list seems endless. Yet when we speak of a chair we obviously have some general idea of a chair into which these particulars fit. Plato said that what is so obviously true on this level must be true in every other area as well.

But where do these ideals come from? On the level of chairs we may argue that they come from the human mind and therefore localize the ultimate meaning of the universe there. But if we do that, we immediately want to ask: But where does the idea of the mind or of man himself come from? And where do we find absolutes in those areas about which men apparently disagree--morals, the proper structuring of human society, religion, and so on? Popular Greek thought answered: From the gods. But then, where does the idea of the gods come from? Plato recognized that in pursuing this necessary kind of argument one must move backward and upward to one great universal from which every meaning comes. But here is the problem. Although Plato and the other Greeks well understood the necessity of finding such a grand, overriding universal, they nevertheless never found a place from which the universal could come nor a way in which it could be known surely. It was out of the despair of this search that Plato is

reported to have said wistfully, "It may be that some day there will come forth from God a Word who will reveal all mysteries and make everything plain."

After Plato there were other attempts to solve this same great problem, but these were no more successful. Consequently, Greek philosophy gradually descended into a growing cynicism expressed in the "grin-and-bear-it" philosophy of the Stoics, the "if-it-feels-good-do-it" philosophy of the Epicureans, or the "leap-of-faith" philosophy of the various mystery religions. Pilate knew all this. So he asked (quite correctly from the perspective of the philosophical thought before him), "What is truth?" meaning that speculations in this area had proved both impractical and meaningless.

THE SITUATION TODAY

The situation today is identical, though the labels for the options have been changed. This is why we call Pilate the preeminently modern man.

One proposed solution to the problem of truth (though it is actually a denial of a solution) is the relativism which has grown out of the philosophy of Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831). Hegel was a German professor who, in a series of brilliant books, advanced the proposition that truth is not an absolute but rather is something that is always evolving through the flow of world history. In Hegel's view it is the result of a synthesis which comes about in this fashion. Every fact, theory or "truth" may be called a thesis, which by its very existence produces an antithesis. At first these appear as opposites, but in time they come together to form a synthesis. This synthesis in turn, becomes a new thesis producing its own antithesis, and so on. According to this system truth is relative. It depends upon whom you are asking and of what period you are asking. What is true now may not have been true ten or twenty years ago, and it may not be true ten or twenty years from now. Or again, it may be true for me but not for you. Or it may be true in America but not in Russia. This is Hegel's heritage for the modern world.

It is a pervasive heritage. In fact, even evangelical Christians are not always exempt from this world view. Significantly, the evangelical movement was criticized for precisely this by University of Chicago Divinity School's urbane professor of modern church history, Martin E. Marty. He wrote, "Today's evangelicalism more than it knows displays instrumental or functionalist views of truth. It says to me, 'Believe this, because everybody's doin' it; it must be true, because it is growing so fast,' or 'Believe this, because if you don't, your church's boundaries will be indistinct, your walls will be low, and in a day when people want authority and security you will fail them and decline.' Often the question of the truth of a teaching is shelved while its utility is advertised" (*Evangelical Newsletter*, Vol. 4, No. 11, June 3, 1977). If this is true--as I believe it is, at least in part--then evangelicals are also trapped by the relativistic views of truth growing out of Hegel's philosophy and find Pilate a spokesman for themselves.

There is one more thing that needs to be said about the modern view; in practice most people today speak of what is true or false purely on a subjective basis. That is, they determine whether a thing is true or not on the basis of how it makes them feel.

Recently we have witnessed an example of this on national television. In the winter of 1976/77, the Public Broadcasting System aired a six-part film series entitled *Scenes From a Marriage*. It was by Ingmar Bergman and was originally for Swedish viewers. On the surface it is merely a perceptive analysis of the breakup of what appears to be an ideal marriage. But it is actually more than that. It is an analysis of our culture, as most Bergman films are, and it is filled with personal and political implications. In the first of these six scenes there is a speech by Johan, the husband, which unintentionally reveals the weaknesses both of Johan and Marianne, his wife, and of their marriage. They are being interviewed for a national magazine. They are sitting on a sofa. The interviewer asks, "Are you afraid of the future?"

Johan replies, "If I stopped to think I'd be petrified with fear. Or so I imagine. So I don't think. I'm fond of this cozy old sofa and that oil lamp. They give me an illusion of security which is so fragile that it's almost comic. I like Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* though I'm not religious, because it gives me feelings of piety and belonging. Our families see a lot of each other and I depend very much on this contact, as it reminds me of my childhood when I felt I was protected. I like what Marianne said about fellow-feeling. It's good for a conscience which worries on quite the wrong occasions. I think you must have a kind of technique to be able to live and be content with your life. In fact, you have to practice quite hard not giving a damn about anything. The people I admire most are those who can take life as a joke. I can't. I have too little sense of humor for a feat like that. You won't print this, will you?"

The speech is devastating. There is a denial of security, but a wish for security feelings. There is denial of religious values, but a desire for religious feelings. In fact, feelings are all there are. Therefore it is no surprise that the solution to living that Johan puts forward is *technique* -- "You must have a kind of technique to be able to live and be content with your life." But where does the knowledge of what this technique should be come from? Or again, what happens when the technique fails? The answer to the second question is that the marriage breaks up, as this one does. Thus does Bergman dramatize what is happening to our society.

Today as never before, on thousands of campuses and in millions of homes, the question of truth is not even asked. Instead people are asking, "Does it work?" "Is it practical?" "How does it make you feel?" Obviously our own lack of meaning is linked to the failure of this quest, and the declining moral tone of our culture--expressed in Watergate, industrial pay-offs, legalized immorality, shoplifting, and many other things--flows from it.

WORD TO MODERN MAN

Here we turn to the answer to the modern dilemma, for if Pilate's question is preeminently the modern question, then the statement of Christ which provoked it is preeminently a word to our own disillusioned culture. This is not the first time Jesus had spoken of truth and its nature. Earlier He had spoken of Himself as "the truth" (John 14:6). He had called His Holy Spirit the "spirit of truth" (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13). He referred to the Bible as "truth" (John 17:17). He even spoke of the need to "worship . . . in truth" (John 4:23, 24) and to "do" the truth (John 3:21). All these references are totally understandable in view of the Old Testament conception of what truth is and how it functions. But here before Pilate, in the very last references to truth in the entire Gospel, Jesus refers to it in a way which even a Gentile like Pilate could fathom.

His statement is brief: "For this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Everyone that is of the truth heareth my voice." Yet it says several important things that Pilate and our own culture need to know.

First, it says that there *is* such a thing as truth and that *truth is an entity*. That is, truth is singular. It is not in fragments which, if it were, would require us to speak of "truths" in the sense of unrelated facts or items. Truth holds together. Therefore, there is no phase of truth that is not related to every other phase of truth. The nature of God is related to the structure of the atom. The inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible are related to the multiplication table. All things that are true are part of the truth and stand in a proper and inescapable relationship to God, who is himself the truth.

Second, the Lord indicates by His statement that truth is not only an entity, it is *objective*. That is, it is there to be observed and discussed, and we can observe it and discuss it without prejudice. This is involved in Christ's statement that He has come to bear witness to the truth, as one might to any fact submitted in a court of law.

This has implications in two areas. On the one hand, it says something about the way the Christian is to approach scientific truth. He may approach it dispassionately and analytically. On the other hand, this also says something about the nature of religious truth. For if truth is an entity and truth is objective, then religious truth is not something beyond the range of analysis and verification. It is not something to be reached by a great "leap of faith." Rather, it is something that may be studied and which will therefore inevitably throw light upon our natures and the nature of the universe. Just as the biologist might look through a microscope to study the nature of the microscopic world, so we look through the microscope of the Word to see our true condition. In that Book we find that God has done what needs to be done by sending His Son as our Savior. Jesus died for us. He rose for us. He reigns for us. That is objective truth. Therefore, it may be studied and applied to our lives as any other truth can.

Third, the words of the Lord to Pilate indicate that *truth must come from above*, for when Jesus says that He has come to bear witness unto the truth, He implies that in the ultimate sense truth is not of this world but rather must come to this world by revelation.

This is so of all truth. It is true of spiritual truth, of course, for apart from the revelation we have in the Word of God no one would even guess what is disclosed there, let alone really know it. We cannot guess what God is like nor what He has done in Jesus Christ for our salvation. On the other hand, it is also the case with scientific truth, for although it is true that God has not given us a book of scientific truth, as He has given us a book of spiritual truth, He has nevertheless given us minds capable of perceiving the revelation of Himself in nature and actually leads the mind to discover what is to be found there. Sometimes scientists are unaware of this. At other times they know it. It is said that Samuel Morse, the inventor of the telegraph, was once seen bowed over the desk where he was working. "What are you doing?" he was asked.

Morse replied, "I am asking God for help. Every time I go into my laboratory I say, 'O God, I am nothing. Give me wisdom. Give me clarity of mind.'" Morse knew that truth comes from God.

Consequently, we are not surprised to learn that the very first message sent over his new invention was the thankful and wondering question, "What hath God wrought?"

Fourth, the words of our Lord teach that in the ultimate sense *the truth that comes from God has been embodied in a person*. No one would ever imagine this. To us truth is abstract and may be supposed always to remain abstract. We think of truth in terms of equations and figures and propositions. But God says that truth is personal. More than that, it is a person and this person is the Lord Jesus Christ. He Himself said unequivocally (sic), "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). This is the answer to Plato's (and all the other philosophers') quest. Plato had said, "It may be that some day there will come forth from God a Word who will reveal all mysteries and make everything plain." That Word has now come. The Lord is that Word. He is the One who has come to reveal all mysteries and make everything plain to those who will come to Him.

How must we come? We must come humbly, because we have no claim upon Him and find Him (if we do) only by His grace. We must come seeking, because He has told us to seek. We must come believing, for God has declared that this alone is pleasing to Him. We are to believe that we are sinners but that Jesus is the Savior, that we are ignorant but that He is the fullness of the revelation of God. Let us commit ourselves to Him as that one who alone is able to meet the deepest needs of the human heart.

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