

What Is Truth?

The Unforgiving Watershed

by John Loeffler

Two thousand years ago, a governor in an obscure eastern province of the Roman Empire asked a condemned prisoner what his definition of truth was. At the time it was a sarcastic response to his prisoner's absurd claim that he was the way, the truth and the life. But the governor's simple query, "What is Truth?" spans two thousand years with a challenge that today's Christians are incapable of answering. Their failure to do so has impaired the spread of the Gospel and resulted in the deaths of millions of people during the course of the 20th century.

Knowing the Basis of Faith

Contrary to what the world's philosophers would tell us, true faith is not based on an irrational leap rooted in feeling or the heart. It cannot be based on a "feeling" because that would validate any religion whose believers had a "burning in the bosom" about their belief system. Feelings do not determine what is true. In reality, faith is a logically reasoned determination, an extension from what is known, to what *must be* - based on demonstrable evidence. In essence, it isn't true because we believe it; we believe it because it's true.

Today's Christians actually do have hardball answers for the modern world; most of the time they just don't know what the questions are and are always giving the wrong answers to the right questions. The most basic questions they cannot answer are: "What is truth?" and "Why do you believe what you believe?"

Definition of Truth

What we believe about truth affects everything we believe. How do we know what we know? That's why knowing the basis of truth and faith is so important. God Himself instructed us to have a ready word when someone asks the reasons for the hope that lies within us. He asked us to expound a reason, not verbalize a feeling. Without reason, all we are left with is feeling.

The History of Christian Truth

Avoiding the disputes about truth which philosophers have posed over the centuries, the simplest definition of truth is "that which is," which isn't too far afield from God's self-definition, "I am who I am." Thus any statement that accurately describes "that which is" can be considered true.

For Christians from the Middle Ages (starting notably with Thomas Aquinas) up to the Renaissance period, all knowledge - all truth - was viewed as a singular, integrated whole. There was no difference between the truth revealed from God and truth about scientific things we could learn on earth. Since truth was truth, everything had to fit together one way or another; after all, God was the Creator of the universe and He is a God of order. Anything that contradicted truth had to be eliminated.

Christians also believed that truth was constant and absolute; it never changed. There was legitimate debate about what could be known and how we could know it (epistemology), as well as problems with language and its interpretation, but the debate was rarely whether there was an absolute truth. We could correct errors and learn new truths, but truth itself was always the same. It was just a question of how much and how accurately we understood it.

God's Truth and the Box

If there is one concept that separates Judeo-Christianity from all other religions it is God's existence independently from the space-time universe, which we'll call the "box." God is outside the box. He existed before the box. He created the box and He continues to exist outside the box but maintains active communication with everything in the box. He is all-knowing, all-present, all-powerful but not a part of the box.¹ In this He is transcendent. The books of the Bible were all written by men inside the box (inside space-time) but inspired by a Being outside space-time (outside the box). Having made the box, this Being understands everything there is to know about the box: its inhabitants, its past and its future. All other religions, monotheistic Islam included, have their God situated at some point inside the box, subject to space-time just as we are. Judeo-Christianity is the only faith that puts God outside the box.

The Box Wants to Be Alone

As the Middle Ages dissolved into the Renaissance, followed later by the Enlightenment, new thought challenged the old. Whereas God's revealed truth and scientific (or natural) truth were earlier viewed as an integrated whole and truth was absolute, the emergent philosophy said the box was all we could ever know directly, mainly through science. Anything outside the box (God and revelational truth) could never be directly known or proven. God was relegated to the realm of "feeling" and "belief" as opposed to scientific "fact." This was a profound split, which forever changed western civilization and Christianity.

The new movement also redefined truth. A philosopher named Georg Friederich Hegel proposed that there were no absolutes; that all truth consists of constantly changing competing ideas. An old truth (thesis) is challenged by a new truth (antithesis) and the result will be a new truth (synthesis), which becomes the new thesis for the next round.

No longer was the debate over what is true but over what belief will dominate at any given time. This is the Hegelian dialectic, which was the foundational principle of Darwinism, Marxism, Humanism and which has now spread into Post-Modernism, a mode of thought infiltrating many churches.

Brave New World

When the dust settled, the new "modern" thought said the box is all that ever was, is and will be. First there was nothing and then it exploded and when the pieces came down, "Voila! There was the box." God was dead. Man had evolved as a part of the box through blind random chance, having started as a rock dissolved in primordial seawater.

There were no absolutes inside the box but rather a series of constantly changing "truths." There is no great moral meaning coming into the box from outside, and no meaning at all that mankind doesn't give to the box. There is no God inside the box and we can't prove if He exists outside the box. Anything outside the box cannot be known but can only be discussed as faith, feeling or belief, but not fact.

Absolutely No Absolutes

Since there are no absolutes, scientific and religious truth cannot be integrated into a unified belief system. Under the new system, a scientist can believe one thing in church on Sunday and just the opposite in his laboratory on Monday without any conflict. What was true in one discipline can be false in another.

As the new worldview separated from the old, it relentlessly pulled all intellectual disciplines—science, philosophy, music, literature, and art—with it, until just one discipline remained in the old camp: Judeo-Christian theology.

As the 19th century dawned, atheists thought that science had given them the perfect tool to overthrow Christianity. They threw down the gauntlet, claiming science would explain away superstitious Christian belief with "facts" (many of which, by the way, have since been disproven by science itself). The church found itself in the uncomfortable position of defending God's revealed Word as truth and looking intellectually stupid or trying to redefine Christian belief in the light of the new scientific "discoveries." The correct response would have been to formulate an intellectual response to the scientific "facts" of the time. But instead there were two church responses:

The first was to cave in to the new worldview. These churches accommodated themselves to the new worldview, readjusted their beliefs to fit it and reinterpreted the Bible to match the new atheistic, scientific belief system. Over time these churches lost faith in any Biblical authority. This had real consequences. Under the duress of Communism, pastors and lay people from these churches were unable to stand. After all, how could anyone be willing to lay down their life for a Jesus they were never sure existed or rose from the dead or was alive as God today?

Those churches who decided to remain faithful to the Biblical basis walled themselves off from the intellectual world, consoling themselves that the opposite was "worldly wisdom" and that belief was a matter of feeling not connected with earthly truth. As such they made it difficult for intelligent people to come to faith because they had accepted the disconnect between earthly truth and heavenly truth.

Either way, both responses were wrong and the result was the same. The world had no opposing moral and philosophical force, leaving new worldviews to sweep the western world over the course of a century. When it was done, Marxism, Nazism, and Humanism (all philosophical cousins) had achieved a deep-rooted hold on the hearts, minds and souls of huge numbers of people in the world.

A War - Not a Picnic

The church now finds itself on the defensive on virtually all cultural fronts in just one century. The results have been tragic. In mainline churches, the Bible has little authority. Indeed, most of those religions have substituted psychology for dogma, and it is difficult to tell the churches from "the world." Even the church growth movements of today are based in the same Hegelian dialectic that caused the deaths of millions of Christians.

As the church failed to defend its intellectual basis for a right to exist, religion was pitched out of the public marketplace even as the church watched and failed to react. Since there is no God, human life has become just a matter of definition, opening the door for abortion and euthanasia. Biblical morality is collapsing since everyone is busy defining his own. The unraveling list goes on and on.

Perhaps worst of all, those Christians who still adhere to Biblical Christianity are unable to articulate an intellectual basis for why they believe what they believe is true. The toll is terrific. Bible-based churches are sending their youth into the marketplace totally untrained for combat. They have been given a sword (the Word of God), but have never been instructed in how to use it in head-on confrontations with the world spirit of today. As a result, 50-80% of Christian youth abandon their faith within the first years of college, as soon as they encounter the first opposition to their faith from atheistic professors.

The Watershed of Faith

Large numbers of Christians have swallowed the lie that there is no such thing as absolute truth without realizing it undermines their very faith. The claim that truth is relative instead of absolute is a watershed issue.

Many continents have mountain ranges that divide the continents. Streams originate in the snow pack at the tops of these mountains and run off both sides of the mountains. Some of these streams begin only a few meters apart but they will end up thousands of kilometers apart.

Modern science, the arts, morality, etc. actually began in the Judeo-Christian view. After all, in order to learn about the universe, one had to believe there was a truth to be learned and an order to be discovered in the first place. In order to learn facts, there had to be absolute facts worth learning. But as the two philosophical streams flowed away from each other, religion and science were said to be far apart, separated by an unbridgeable chasm. Science was fact. Religion was feeling. That separation has major consequences, first, for believers who must maintain their faith, but also for non-believers asking reasonable and rational questions about our faith for which we have no answers.

The urgent necessity of our time is to train Christians how to fight the truth war so that having done all, they will stand.

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****NOTES****

1. At one point He did send Himself into the box as His Son.