

TRUTH

“What is truth?”

Key question

Is truth absolute or relative and can it be known?

Key Text

Colossians 2:8

"See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ,"

Key Definition

Truth

Truth is that which reflects the factual and spiritual reality of God and His Creation. Truth can be expressed in words but is not limited to words.

Introduction

1. Postmodernism has brought to a popular level a philosophical controversy that had its roots in the enlightenment – Is all reality subjective (in the mind of the observer) or objective (independent of human observation)?
2. Christian evangelism is viewed in one of two ways.
 - a. It is like an insurance salesman who is trying to peddle his company’s policy while we all know that his is simply one of many valid companies offering a valid policy for the person seeking insurance. This can be compared to the pluralist’s view.
 - b. (OR) It is like a doctor trying to convince a patient that they need medical treatment to save their life. In this case there is only one truth and only one effective response. This can be compared to the Christian view of evangelism. We might note that some patients may deny that they need a doctor and may even fail to recognize the symptoms of their disease but this does not alter their true condition.
 - c. NOTE: There are several universal symptoms of our souls plight.
 1. The greatest symptom is “God’s great visual aid” **physical death**. Why do we die?

2. The question can be asked – Why am I alive? Why does anything exist? **Does my existence suggest a purpose** and if so how do I discern it?
3. What is the **source of my unmet longings, idealistic dreams, appreciation for beauty, and psychological pain**? Those who attempt to provide answers to these questions through (natural) evolutionary models have little ground for criticizing Christians for basing their views on faith when great faith is required (by the materialist) to explain these symptoms in the human experience.
3. Traditionally, a “correspondent” view of truth was widely assumed. It defined truth as that which corresponds to its object or that which describes an actual state of affairs.
4. Christians understand truth as grounded in the reality of the Creator Redeemer God and all that He has done and said to reveal His Glory.
5. Human expressions of impressions of this reality are true to the extent that they find their correspondence in this reality.
6. The challenging path of the truth.
 - Perception** of the truth – We can be deceived.
 - Proclamation** of the truth – We can deceive others.
 - Practice** of the truth – We can be hypocritical.

A. Truths about truth (traditional correspondent view)

1. Historically, the most popular theory of truth was the Correspondence Theory. First proposed in a vague form by Plato and by Aristotle in his *Metaphysics*, this realist theory says truth is what propositions have by corresponding to a way the world is. The theory says that a proposition is true provided there exists a fact corresponding to it.
2. One can have different perspectives or understandings but not different truths.
3. Truth is discovered, not invented. Truth exists apart from our understanding of it.
4. Truth transcends culture, personalities, and circumstances.
5. Truth does not change even though our understanding about truth can change.
6. Beliefs cannot change a fact, no matter how sincerely they are held.
7. Truth is not altered by the one professing it even though understandings of truth may be.
8. All truths are absolute truths.
9. Contrary beliefs are possible, but contrary truths are not possible. We can believe everything is true, but we cannot make everything true.
10. The subjective knower may never be fully objective but this does not nullify the existence of objective understanding.
11. Objectivity in some areas (mathematics, science, and law), is easier to obtain than in others (religion, values, ethics, etc.).
12. Faith presuppositions are present in all perceptions of truth.
13. The literary form of the Biblical text should be allowed to determine the form of inerrancy that is maintained for the text. Biblical literature comes in varied forms (poetry, romances, proverbs,

parables, historical narrative, didactic letters, etc) and should be regarded as inspired and without error respecting the nature of the form of the particular text.

B. The pragmatic test

1. A self-defeating statement is one that fails to meet its own standard. Example: “All truth is relative.” But how can this statement be presented as an absolute if all truth is relative?
2. The basis of teaching and learning in our culture is built on an assumption of a “correspondent” view of truth. All education would stop if all truth were relative.
3. International treaties, civil contracts and laws, social community, virtually all social discourse depends on a “correspondent” view of truth.
4. Ideas have consequences that cannot be ignored. Hitler, Jesus, etc.
5. Our day-to-day decisions and interactions demand a “correspondence” view of truth.

C. Different kinds of knowing.

1. It is common to hear people speak of Eastern and Western truth. This is better understood as an Eastern and Western way of valuing or understanding. Truth does not change from East to West (Math and Science is the same in both cultures) but the way truth is defined and expressed can differ.
2. We sometimes hear people speak of “different ways of knowing” – intellectual, emotional, sensual, spiritual, social, etc. This does not suggest that propositional truths are known through emotional or social means although insight can come from the subjective and intuitive side of life.
3. Each sphere of life has “knowledge” of its own sphere of life that is unique to that side of life. We can know some things emotionally that cannot be defined intellectually (romantic love) but this does not mean that propositional knowledge and truths are understood through several means. Intellectual truths are known through the intellect. Spiritual experiences are known through the spirit. Emotional feelings are known through the emotions.
4. The Biblical concept of truth seems to be linked to a Person rather than an idea. As we enter into a faith commitment to Jesus, we know the truth. This truth is the fidelity of God expressed in his righteousness (actions and words) in history.

D. Different ways of understanding truth. (following the four temperament types)

1. **SJ** – (the correspondence theory) Truth is that which is consistent with and reflects the reality that exists apart from being understood or defined. “The earth is round.” This is a true statement. The reality of the round earth existed quite apart from the statement.
2. **NT** – (the coherence theory) Truth is that which is consistent with a whole larger understanding of reality. “John is the shortest man.” This is true only in a context that includes all other men.
3. **SP** – (the pragmatic theory) Truth is what works. “Being honest in business brings positive results.” This is true solely on the basis that it has worked in my experience.
5. **NF** – (the mystical theory) Truth is sensed in a deeply personal way apart from any rational support. “I sense that he loves me.” This is true and may be so apart from any tangible or rational evidence.”

E. Dualism – the escape from reason. (see also apptoteach.org theology #109,#807,#808)

1. Modern forms of dualism began with the Enlightenment and Romanticism where facts and values were viewed as distinct from each other. This separation was outlined in Frances Schaffer’s book *Escape from Reason*.
2. The development of modern thought might be charted in terms of four eras.
 - a. In the **Theological era** (300BC - CE1600) of intellectual development science was under the control and tutelage of church tradition. It served the interests of worshippers of an orderly Creator God who prescribed that His subjects take dominion over creation.
 - b. In the **Metaphysical era** (CE1600 - CE1800), science led many people to wrongly conclude that all phenomena (physical and social) were contingent upon previous natural phenomena. A personal God was no longer necessary even though eternal moral truths were real and necessary.
 - c. In the **Positivistic era** (CE1800 - CE 1950), science was believed to be the only source of all absolute truth. But as scientists began to make more sophisticated discoveries they learned that everything looked relative not absolute. Without God, the notion of absolute truth was extinct. This paved the way for postmodernism.
 - d. In the **Existential era** (CE1950 - present), postmodernism was born as a logical and inescapable end of a Godless and truthless world.

<i>Reality is objective.</i>		<i>Reality is subjective.</i>	
<i>A universal moral order exists.</i>		<i>There is no universal moral order.</i>	
<i>God centered</i>		<i>Man centered</i>	
Pre-modernism (The Church) <i>Martin Luther</i> 0-1750	Early Modernism (Common sense) <i>Thomas Jefferson</i> 1750-1850	Late Modernism (Scientism) <i>Carl Sagan</i> 1850-1950	Post modernism (Personal preference) <i>Jacques Derrida</i> 1950-2000?
GOD <u>man</u> cosmos	God MAN cosmos	MAN god cosmos	? man chaos
The traditional American mind set		<i>The modern American mind set</i>	
25% of population largely conservative Christian	25% of population largely sympathetic to Biblical values	25% of population largely unsympathetic to Biblical values	25% of population largely cultural leaders and hostile to Biblical values
Self-sacrifice is an expression of worship.	Self-sacrifice is a means of happiness.	Self-sacrifice is a necessary evil.	Self-sacrifice is foolish.

3. The following chart might illustrate the distinction between what Schaffer called upper story (romantic, artistic, mystical truth) and lower story (reason, science, objective truth). (The following general concepts come from *Total Truth* by Nancy Pearcey, Crossway books)

<i>Upper story</i>	<i>Lower story</i>
Romanticism (Religion and the Humanities)	Enlightenment (Science and Reason)
Mind (Spirit, Thought, Emotion, Will)	Matter (A Mechanical, Deterministic, Machine)
Freedom (The Autonomous Self)	Nature (The Newtonian World Machine)
Values (Socially constructed Meanings)	Fact (Publicly verifiable Truth)
The Ethics Game (Humans Have Moral Freedom and Dignity)	The Science Game (Humans are Data-Processing Machines)
Postmodern “Mysticism” (Moral and humane ideals have no basis in truth, as defined by scientific naturalism, but we affirm them anyway.)	Scientific naturalism (Humans are machines)
Subjective (Personal and Private)	Objective (Communal and Public)
Evangelical Revivalism (Grounding faith in feeling, autonomy, charisma, and pragmatism)	Mainline Traditionalism (Grounding faith in reason, community, character, and tradition)
Thomas Jefferson & Adam Smith (Political and Economic freedom)	Federalists (Political and Economic controls)

F. Truth and Tolerance

1. Tolerance is one of the great virtues of postmodern culture. It has come to mean that we are supposed to accept every belief as true or worthy of respect. It dignifies any and every idea or value as an expression of the human spirit.
 - a. There are two types of tolerance that must be distinguished from one another. See *The Geography of Good and Evil* by Andreas Kinneging (ch.7)
 1. **True tolerance** is putting up with those of whom and that of which we disapprove when we are in a position to change the situation and, at the same time, are motivated by reverence or love and affection. This tolerance has a modest place as a virtue for people with strong

convictions and great will power that keeps them from browbeating others. It is vital to effective community.

2. **Pseudo-tolerance** is a form of decadence. It is destructive to healthy community in that it is without the virtue of self-giving love.
- b. Pseudo-tolerance can be nuanced in a number of ways.
1. **Indifference** is characterized by the absence of feelings of disapproval or approval.
 - a. **Neutrality** is to have no real preference. In an absolute sense it is related to having no values or vices.
 - b. **Unconcern** can be carefree confidence (wisdom) or careless irresponsibility (foolish).
 - c. **Disrespect** sees the world as worthless. It is associated with egalitarian cultures.
 - d. **Lovelessness** is isolation from society with the effect of being motivated by self-interest over and above the care for others.
 2. **Resignation** is passivity with no inner energy to respond.
 - a. **Stoicism** is inner rest of the soul (escaping or depersonalizing an event) and is peaceful.
 - b. **Despondency** is weariness of mind (giving up out of weakness or cowardice) and is stressful depression.
 3. **Self-interest** is protective of self, alone.
 - a. **Postponed confrontation** is the sacrifice of values to secure temporal safety.
 - b. **Cowardice** is the sacrifice of values to secure temporal comfort.
2. Some observations with respect to true tolerance.
- a. Three different kinds of tolerance must be distinguished.
 1. **Legal toleration** commits us always to protect people's political rights to follow any religion or no religion at all.
 2. **Social toleration** advocates charity toward people who think and believe differently from the way we do.
 3. **Intellectual toleration** is the relativistic notion that one system of belief is as true as any other.

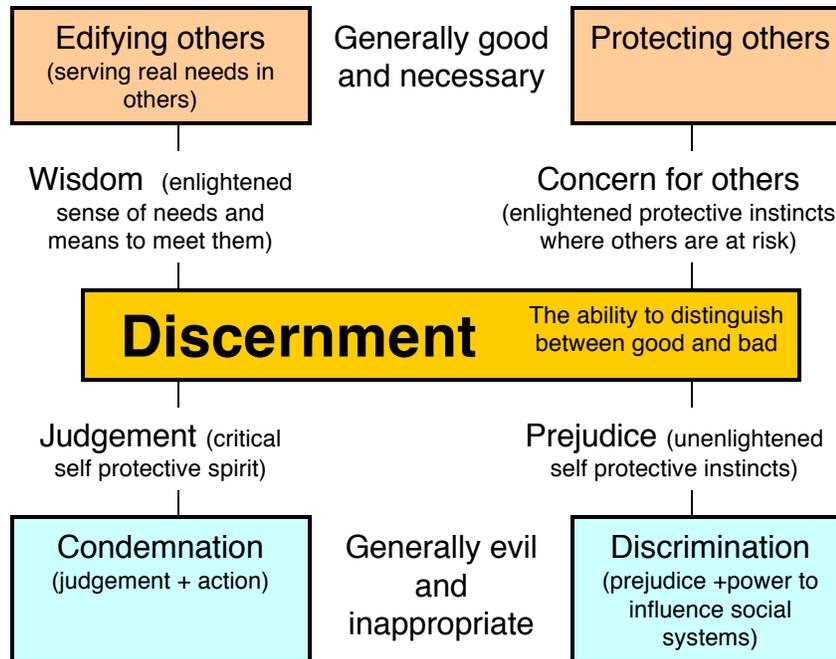
NOTE: Intellectual toleration is not necessarily demanded by legal and social toleration.

 - a. Pluralism does not demand that we all believe and behave the same way nor does it demand that we believe that any belief system is as good or true as another.

Illustration: Slavery is a part of social systems preferred by many groups throughout history. This does not mean that it is as right or good as other systems that promote human dignity and freedom. Christians believe that their view of truth and the world is not the only view but that it is the correct view. It is worth defending against all contrary views. Christians would argue for the rightness of their own view without fear of disrespecting the freedom of others to disagree.
 - b. Pluralism does demand that we practice legal and social toleration.
 - c. Evangelicals must embrace legal and social toleration without intellectual toleration.
 - d. They must also resist the tendency of their critics to tie intellectual intolerance to legal and social intolerance.

- b. Is it not judgmental to judge those with restrictive moral and ideological beliefs. Does tolerance apply to all but those who have an absolute view of truth?
 - c. We all have certain “common sense” boundaries or limits on our pluralism. Most of us do not feel that Hitler’s views or the views of Muslim terrorists were simply moral preferences that deserve respect and should not be condemned.
 - d. If you define religious belief as a “world and life view” held by faith, then you must label radical pluralism as a religious conviction.
3. Tolerance of legitimate differences is needed in seeking the truth.
- a. “Nietzsche claimed that if men took God seriously, they would still be burning heretics at the stake.” Two types of people agree with this statement.
 - 1 **Ordinary bigots** – “That’s why we should burn heretics.”
 - 2 **Reactionaries** – “That’s why we should suppress the public expression of belief in God.”
 - b. Tolerance cannot be neutral about what is good, for its very purpose is to guard good and avert evils. What is tolerated depends upon what is viewed as the ultimate good or concern.
 - c. Tolerance is a moral virtue between the two vices of:
 - 1. **Soft-headedness** – We stand for little and fall for anything. When radical tolerance is the only virtue, we must dignify every form of human expression no matter how weird, as beautiful and noble.
 - 2. **Narrow mindedness** - We cannot see beyond our own preferences, which we mistakenly assume are also God’s standards.
 - d. Tolerance involves right judgment in the protection of ends against mistaken means.
ILLUSTRATION: Political conservatives and Liberals often share a common core goal (liberty and justice for all). They however have very different ideas as to how that goal is best reached and preserved. The danger is that the means of reaching the goal can be so closely identified with the goal itself that to challenge the means is to be understood as a challenge to the goal. Those who do not share our means to reach the goal we assume to be motivated by something other than reaching the goal. That “something other” is usually pretty ugly, selfish, and un-American.
 - e. Tolerance needs an ultimate concern as an end. It assumes a certain value system constructed around an ultimate goal.
 - f. Christians are to be legally and socially tolerant for four reasons.
 - 1. God does not want unwilling worship.
 - 2. We see in a glass dimly. I Cor.13:12
 - 3. We are all in process.
 - 4. There is a Biblical precedent for it in **Rom.14:5** “One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind.”
4. Discernment is a virtue that should be sought.
- a. **Prov.16:21** “The wise in heart will be called discerning.”
 - b. **Ps.119:66** “Teach me good discernment and knowledge,”
 - c. **I Kings 3:9** “So give Thy servant an understanding heart to judge Thy people to discern between good and evil.” (Solomon)

- d. **Deut.32:28-29** “For they are a nation lacking in counsel, and there is no understanding in them. Would that they were wise that they understood this, That they would discern their future!
- e. **Phil.1:9-10** “And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment. So that you may approve that things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ.”
5. The following chart shows the relationship between discernment and both good and bad applications. It should be noted that there are legitimate times for proper authority to express condemnation of certain issues.



G. The ethics of truth telling

- The use of the tongue (speaking) is at the heart of the Biblical story of God and His people.
 - God spoke the creation into existence.
 - The word “angel” means “messenger.”
 - The Messiah Jesus is described as “the Word become flesh.”
 - Prophets and teachers played a pivotal role among God’s people.
 - The Gospel is a message or story that is proclaimed with words.
 - Christians are to grow to spiritual maturity (Christ likeness) as they speak the truth in love.
- Godly speech is committed to speaking the truth in love. **Eph.4:15** “but **speaking the truth in love**, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head even Christ.”
 - Speaking the truth – Eph.4:25** “Therefore, lay aside falsehood, speak truth, each one of you, with this neighbor, for we are members of one another.”
 - Keeping one’s word.
 - Giving an honest report.

- b. ***It is to be wholesome, timely, gracious and edifying*** – **Eph.4:29** “Let **no unwholesome word** proceed from your mouth, but only such a word that is **good for edification** according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear.”

Jas.3 “⁹ With it we **bless** {our} Lord and Father; and with it we **curse** men, who have been made in the likeness of God; ¹⁰ from the same mouth come {both} blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.”

- c. ***Confession of faith*** – **Rom.10:9** “If you **confess** with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved.”

I Jn.1:9 “If we **confess** our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

3. **Matt.5** “³³ Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, ‘*You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord.*’ ³⁴ But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is *the city of the great King.* ³⁶ Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷ But let your statement be, ‘Yes, yes’ or ‘No, no’; and anything beyond these is of evil.”

- a. The Kingdom of God is a “no spin” zone.

- b. A lie is the proclamation of a fact, idea, or feeling that we know to be false. This suggests that if I am communicating information that is false (but I believe to be true), I am not lying. I am honestly communicating what I believe.

- c. The cultural context of Matt.3:33-37 is shaped by

- **Deuteronomy 10:20** “You shall fear the LORD your God. You shall serve him and hold fast to him, and by his name you shall swear.”

(**See also** "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name." (Exodus 20:7) "Do not swear falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God. I am the LORD." (Leviticus 19:12) "When a man makes a vow to the LORD or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but must do everything he said." (Numbers 30:2))

- The Pharisees would create technical boundaries that would permit them to distinguish between oaths that were tied to the Lord (binding) and those that were not (not binding). **Matthew 23:16-22** “Woe to you, blind guides! You say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.' You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? You also say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gift on it, he is bound by his oath.' You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? Therefore, he who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And he who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. And he who swears by heaven swears by God’s throne and by the one who sits on it.”

- d. What about oaths today? Consider the fact that Jesus may have been using hyperbole in forbidding all oaths.

- **God swears oaths.** Luke 1:73 speaks of “the oath that [the Lord] swore to our father Abraham.” Acts 2:30, speaking in reference to Psalm 16:10, says that “God had sworn with an oath to [David].” Hebrews 6:17 says, “So when God desired to show more convincingly

to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath...”

- **Jesus testified under oath.** In this same gospel, when Jesus is being questioned before Caiaphas, he remains silent. That is, he remains silent until the high priest puts Jesus under oath. Matthew 26:63 records this: “But Jesus remained silent. And the high priest said to him, “I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.” Then, Jesus answered when put under oath.
 - **The Apostle Paul swore oaths.** There are at least six examples of Paul using God’s name to swear an oath, such as Romans 1:9-10, “For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers.” (II Cor. 1:18, 23; Gal. 1:20; Phil. 1:8; I Thess. 2:5) Either Paul did not see Jesus’ teaching as an absolute prohibition of oaths, or his words of Scripture are disobedience to Christ as He swears an oath by God’s name.
4. But what do we do when love and truth do not seem to be on the same page?
- a. Is it ever appropriate to lie, steal or break one of the other moral “absolutes?”
 1. A missionary is imprisoned in a Latin American country on a trumped-up charge. His fellow missionaries can free him if they bribe the police (which is a common practice, but illegal). Bribing is strictly forbidden by the mission authorities. What should they do? Let’s say three years have passed. Let’s say he is being tortured. Let’s say that the family and children of the imprisoned man are suffering because of his situation. Are there any situations that would warrant a bribe?
 2. A young Christian student feels strongly that his nation (Germany 1942) is engaged in an immoral war. He defies his government and refuses to fight. Is he doing the right thing? Let’s put him in the USA in 1965 — protesting the Vietnam War. Does that make a difference? Why?
 - b. Three degrees of “self protective lies”
 - 1st degree** – deliberate deception with harmful intent – “He never spoke to me about it.” (when we know that he did).
 - 2nd degree** – white lies, half truths, advertising, political spin – “Come see the friendliest church in town” (a phone book add for a new start up congregation).
 - 3rd degree** –distortion, exaggeration, silence – “The sermon was wonderful.” (when it was just so so).
 - c. As we face complex moral challenges we can make one of two mistakes.
 1. We can make God too big and the moral challenge too small. That is, we can belittle the complexity of the moral challenges we face.
 2. We can make the moral challenge too big and God too small. That is, we can start with the assumption that God’s revelation is not sensitive enough to apply to the really tough moral challenges of life.
 - d. Most lies fall into a spectrum of three broad categories.
 1. **Lies to cause harm** —
 - “Trust me on this one.” (when the speaker is wanting to take advantage of the listener)
 - “You surely shall not die.” Gen. 3:4
 2. **Lies to protect the liar** —

- “The dog ate my homework.”
- Greed (“Things go better with Coke.”), and fear (“I didn’t do it.”) are the incentives.
- “I do not know the man” Matt.26:74

3. **Lies to protect others** —(two categories)

- a. Social grace —
 - 1) “I love your dress.”
 - 2) In this context, people want to be fooled.
- b. Social necessity —
 - 1) Rahab in Joshua 2 In some cases, this is a matter of life and death.

5. Practical guides for discerning what to do in conflicted situations.

- a. When is telling the truth unwise?
 - **When it violates a higher moral principle.** (life over property, spiritual health over temporal comfort, etc.)
 - **When circumstances make it impossible to be heard.** (After losing a child a mother does not need to be told that God has a better plan, etc.)
 - **When the effect is contrary to the ultimate well being of others.** (Rahab.)
- b. The “sleep – test” ethic says that if you can sleep well after a decision it is probably a good one. This test raises some questions however.
 - Does the “right thing” always condition our conscience?
 - Is the individualism that this test implies a sound basis for moral decisions?
 - Can we assume that a good conscience can be developed in a community context that does not encourage virtues like – courage, justice, prudence, and temperance?
 - Is it not true that often out conscience pulls us in different directions?
 - **Note:** The key to a valid “sleep – test” ethic is the development of character.
- c. Good decisions should pass the test of all three questions raised by St Thomas Aquinas.
 - Does the Scripture address the issue directly?
 - Is your motive one of selfless love or is it fear, anger, etc.? A technical conformity to the letter of the law without a loving heart is no virtue.
 - Is the timing right? A good deed or word done at the wrong time and in the wrong setting can be more harmful than helpful.
- d. Wisdom = Spirit guided common sense.
 1. Most of us will never have to avoid the truth.
 2. Pray for and seek creative alternatives to avoiding the truth.
 3. Be slow to speak and quick to listen. Sensitive listening will give us insight in knowing how to speak the truth in a loving way.
 4. Respect the power of the tongue for both good and evil.
 5. Commit yourself to speaking the truth in love.
 6. Audit your conversations.
 7. Make it safe for others to tell the truth. When we give signals that suggest that we refuse to hear the truth or will penalize those who bring it to us, we discourage truth telling.

H. Six Blind men and an Elephant

It was six men of Indostan
To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the Elephant
(Though all of them were blind),
That each by observation
Might satisfy his mind.

The First approached the Elephant,
And happening to fall
Against his broad and sturdy side,
At once began to bawl:
“God bless me! but the Elephant
Is nothing but a wall!”

The Second, feeling of the tusk,
Cried, “Oh! what have we here?”
So very round and smooth and sharp,
to me ‘tis mighty clear.
This wonder of an Elephant
Is nothing but a spear!”

The Third approached the animal,
And happening to take
The squirming trunk within his hands,
Thus boldly up and spake:
“I see,” quoth he, “the Elephant
Is nothing but a snake!”

The Fourth reached out an eager hand,
And felt about the knee.
“What most this wondrous beast is like
Is mighty plain,” quoth he;
“‘Tis clear enough the Elephant
Is nothing but a tree!”

The Fifth who chanced to touch the ear,
Said: “E’en the blindest man
Can tell what this resembles most;
Deny the fact who can,
This marvel of an Elephant
Is nothing but a fan!”

The Sixth no sooner had begun
About the beast to grope,
Than, seizing on the swinging tail
That fell within his scope,
“I see,” quoth he, “the Elephant
Is nothing but a rope!”

So oft in theologic wars,
The disputants, I ween,
Rail on in utter ignorance
Of what each other mean,
And prate about an Elephant
Not one of them has seen!

And so these men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right,
And all were in the wrong!

But Jesus made a bolder claim,
as prophet of the light,
who touched a man with blinded eyes,
and gave him perfect sight,
and looking at his healer’s face,
this man saw God aright.

We like the man that Jesus touched
Have eyes that need be clear
And like the six of Indostan
Each other’s witness hear
So as we seek the truth of God
We to His Son draw near.

But woe to those of swaggered heart
As prophets I recall
Spoke of the pride and arrogance
That comes before the fall.
For those who claim alone to see
May scarcely see at all.

But some will say, “There is no beast.”
But only words and fears
That create for us a fantasy
To wipe away our tears.
But such live in a different world
And not in Indostan.
Where something called an elephant
Does often step on man.

And so, the elephant we seek
That we might wiser be
and in our quest we hope to gain
a gift to set us free
from death to life,
from dark to light
from strife to harmony.

- It is true that each observer is prone to subjective personal bias in interpreting the nature of the elephant.
- It is also true that an elephant exists.
- Objectivity will always be somewhat relative but we strive to move toward it as we listen to each other and seek wisdom.

I. Is not religion more the problem than the solution? (the following points are taken from chapter one in Timothy Keller’s *The Reason for God – Relief in an Age of Skepticism*.)

1. A common complaint among skeptics is the observation that “religion erodes peace on earth” in that it promotes divisiveness, intolerance, and even bloodshed. A number of skeptic have responded with the following solutions.
 - **Outlaw religion** – Soviet Russia, Communist China, Khmer Rouge, Nazi Germany, etc.
 - a. Alister McGrath notes: “the 20th century gave rise to one of the greatest and most distressing paradoxes in human history: that the greatest intolerance and violence of that century were practiced by those who believed that religion caused intolerance and violence” *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World* p.230

- b. Virtually all major world religions are growing in spite of predictions that modernity with its technology and evolution would remove the “need” for religion.
- c. Efforts to suppress or control it often serve only to make it stronger because religion scratches a human itch that is touched by nothing else.
- **Condemn religion** – via education and argument.
 - a. It is often considered unenlightened and outrageous to make exclusive religious claims.
 - b. This claim is however inconsistent if not hypocritical. Consider the following claims.
 - ***“All major religions are equally valid and basically teach the same thing.”***
 1. Most people who make this claim have no intention of supporting it when a religion promotes practices that are politically unacceptable (child sacrifice, repression of women, slavery, etc.)
 2. The insistence that doctrines do not matter is really a doctrine itself. It holds a specific view of God, which is touted as superior and more enlightened than the beliefs of most major religions.
 - ***“Each religion sees part of spiritual truth, but none can see the whole truth.”***
 1. The poem of the six blind men examining the elephant illustrates this criticism. But how can we know that each blind man only sees part of the elephant unless we claim to be able to see the whole elephant?
 2. How could a person possibly know that no religion can see the whole truth unless they have the superior, comprehensive knowledge of spiritual reality you just claimed that none of the religions have?
 - ***“Religious belief is too culturally and historically conditioned to be truth.”***
 1. While this is certainly true to a limited extent it is a claim that in itself is culturally conditioned and therefore suspect.
 2. Alvin Plantinga notes that, “All claims about religions are historically conditioned except the one I am making right now.”
 - ***“It is arrogant to insist your religion is right and to convert others to it.”***
 1. To make such a claim is to take an intellectual position that makes faith assumptions that can be discounted as exclusive, arrogant, and ethnocentric.
 2. It assumes God is unknowable, or that God is loving but not wrathful, or that God is an impersonal force rather than a person who speaks in Scripture.
- **Keep religion private** – John Rawls, Robert Audi
 - a. Religion-based positions are seen as sectarian and controversial, while secular reasoning for moral positions are seen as universal and available to all.
 - b. But as Stephen L. Carter of Yale notes, it is impossible to leave religious (faith) views behind when we do any kind of moral reasoning.
 - c. We understand religion broadly as a set of beliefs that explain what life is all about, who we are, and the most important things that human beings should spend their time doing. No one is without a religious base. Some people call this a “worldview” or a “narrative identity.”
 - d. Whenever we think in terms of “What a person should or should not do” we are standing on some faith system of ethics.

2. Christianity can save the world.
 - a. Christianity has within itself remarkable power to explain and expunge the divisive tendencies within the human heart.
 1. Christians respect all people (no matter what their faith) because all people bear the image of God. Jesus recognized the good in all people (Matt.5:16, I Peter 2:12).
 2. Christians also respect the depravity of human nature (even their own) so that they are not surprised by the failure of Christians to live up to their calling.
 - b. “We cannot skip lightly over the fact that there have been injustices done by the church in the name of Christ, yet who can deny that the force of Christians’ most fundamental beliefs can be a powerful impetus for peace making in our troubled world?” *Timothy Keller*

J. A critique of the modern university. (from *Peace Seekers* by Jim Abrahamson p129-130.)

“Higher education in American has adopted a radical secularism which is undermining its commitment to 1) humanism and 2) to the basic idea of a university. By removing God and any notion of transcendent (over arching) authority as a grand narrative, it has lost its vision of the human soul and with it any hope of finding a unifying story to link various branches of learning to a cohesive whole. The university ceases to be authentically humanistic when it reduces human spirituality (that which makes humans distinct from animals) to a branch of anthropology or sociology. Modern universities no longer seek a unifying story but rather are a loosely associated community of independent departments operating in intellectual isolation from one other. All seem to share the notion that anything outside the umbrella of “science” has no authority, yet each department has its own understanding of how to apply the scientific method. The departments seem unaware of what is being done in other areas of learning. The idea of a Renaissance Scholar integrating knowledge from several key disciplines is viewed as idealistic at best and career ending at worst. The university in becoming radically secularized—defining reality and making decisions as though God did not exist or matter—has lost its very soul. It has adopted a faith commitment to naturalism where reality is limited to space, time, matter / energy, and nothing else. It has marginalized religious faith and adopted a naturalistic philosophy that ultimately may bring the demise of both religion and science. It marginalizes religion as a superficial storefront to something “more substantive” defined in economic, psychological, or cultural terms. It undermines science by removing any assurance that the universe is ordered, and that we who observe it are capable of being objective (at least in part) in our observations. Jesus, revealed as Logos and Creator, is the key to a unified understanding of life and nature. He alone addresses man’s deepest need—reconciliation, (peace) with God, creation, others, and self.”

The Point

We all live with a “correspondent” view of truth.

Response

Head

I am to understand that:

Truth is absolute even though our understanding may not be perfect.

Heart

I am to believe that:

Understanding the truth involves more than just my reason although it is not unreasonable.

Hands

I am to behave by:

Pressing for common understanding of the truth but willing to tolerate with respect and humility, the process where there may be differing understandings.