

“Therefore Pilate 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 testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.’ Pilate said to Him, ‘What is truth?’” —John 18:37–38 (NASB)

Many consider the question “What is truth?” to be a topic suited more for a debate within the halls of the academe than for a discussion around the kitchen table. After all, such a topic usually involves exotic terms and complicated arguments. It certainly seems far removed from practical life—from the need to salvage a marriage, pay the rent, or endure an illness. But nothing could be farther from . . . the *truth*. There can hardly be a more important question for a person to grapple with than the question about the nature of truth. And there can hardly be a question of such importance that is answered incorrectly with such consistency and conviction.

The centrality of the question is vividly illustrated in the Apostle John’s record of the trial of Jesus Christ (John 18:33–38). Brought before Pilate with a death sentence looming over his head, Jesus is questioned about his identity. Pilate asks, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus answers, “You say *correctly* that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.” At the very mention of *truth* Pilate cynically retorts, “**What is truth?**” The irony is inescapable. The truth stood before Pilate’s very eyes in its most perfect embodiment and even answered Pilate’s questions. Yet Pilate had the audacity to claim that truth is unknowable and inconsequential.

Pilate’s cynicism summarizes the attitude of unredeemed humanity toward truth, not only in antiquity but in modern times as well. Describing the situation in public universities at the end of the twentieth century, Allan Bloom famously observed,

There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative. If this belief is put to the test, one can count on the students’ reaction: they will be uncomprehending. (*The Closing of the American Mind*, 25)

A 2020 “State of Theology” survey conducted by Ligonier confirmed that the situation is not improving. In response to the statement, “**Religious belief is a matter of personal opinion; it is not about objective truth,**” fifty-four percent of American respondents answered in the affirmative. Indeed, in response to the all-important question, “What is truth?,” most today consider it just a synonym for *preference*. It is what one *prefers*. It is what one *feels*. It is *private, personal, ever-changing, socially constructed, never certain*, and definitely not determined by a higher authority. David Wells describes the prevailing perspective well when he writes,

Truth is now simply a matter of etiquette: it has no authority, no sense of rightness, because it is no longer anchored in anything absolute. If it persuades, it does so only because our experience has given it its persuasive power, but tomorrow our experience might be different. (*God in the Wasteland*, 148–49)

Sadly, many professing Christians have succumbed to the culture perspective on respect to truth. Beginning in the early 20th century, increasing numbers of professing Christ-followers have started to sound like Pilate. Either they find themselves speechless in response to the question, “What is truth?,” or they themselves ask it with the same cynicism. Harry Blamires captures the shocking nature of this trend when he writes,

One may say without exaggeration that failure to distinguish clearly between the Christian conception of truth and the conception of truth popularly cherished in the secular mind has been one of the most unfortunate neglects of our age. (*The Christian Mind*, 106)

So, what is truth? The question cannot remain unanswered, for it is by the truth that the sinner is saved (James 1:18), and it is by the truth that the one who is saved is sanctified (John 17:17). How a man answers this question has direct and practical implications for his entire life—both for the immediate moment and for the age to come.

Truth as Defined by the Culture

It would be incorrect to conclude that the culture has abandoned or denied any concept of truth. To the contrary, the topic of truth continues to be a key focus of discussion in most corners of society. Media companies regularly incorporate the word “truth” in their mottos (e.g., CNN: “Moving Truth Forward”; New York Times: “The Truth Is More Important Now Than Ever”). “Fact-checking” agencies have sprung up all over the internet, each one claiming to check public statements for “truthfulness” (e.g., Politifact’s “Truth-O-Meter”). Social media platforms have begun blocking private posts for what is deemed “misinformation.” Politicians regularly claim to speak only the truth. University deans claim their universities are about the “open-minded pursuit of truth.” And the list goes on.

Indeed, the issue is not that the concept of truth is *denied*. Rather, the issue is that the concept of truth has been *hijacked* and *redefined*. Specifically, our culture has embraced the notion of truth as defined by **secular humanism**. The essence of secular humanism can be defined as follows:

- Secularism is the approach to truth which asserts that the natural world is the extent of what can be studied, known, and perceived as “reality.”
- Secularism contends that the supernatural realm—if it exists—is not part of our world and is thus beyond the scope of “truth.”
- The “sacred” must be distinguished from the “secular.” Reality and truth belong to the domain of the secular; faith, myth, and superstition belong to the realm of the sacred.
- Consequently, secularism defines “reality” in a way that is unaccountable to any transcendent, supernatural authority. Truth is known apart from any belief in or accountability to God.
- In the void left by denying that God has the sole authority to determine reality and truth, secularism combines with *humanism*—the belief that man is the measure of all things—to ascribe that authority for defining “reality” to man.
- “Truth” is therefore *subjective*. It is wholly dependent upon man as the one who perceives, studies, and determines “reality.”

Summarizing the essence of secularism, Blamires writes,

Modern secular thought ignores the reality beyond this world. It treats the world as *The Thing*. Secularism is, by its very nature, rooted in this world, accounting it the only sure basis of knowledge, the only reliable source of meaning and value. Secularism puts its trust in this life and makes earthly happiness and well-being its primary concern. . . . Its most basic presupposition, implicit in all its judgments, is that this which we experience directly with the senses constitutes the heart and totality of things. . . . *This World – All that Is*. (*The Christian Mind*, 68)

This understanding of truth is pervasive in our culture. It affects everything from government to journalism to science to education to entertainment. There is no “neutral” perspective on truth. This approach to truth is the consequence of unregenerate mankind’s effort to escape accountability to the God of truth:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools. (Romans 1:18–22)

Despite its mantra of tolerance and openness, secular humanism asserts one unassailable absolute: “The only absolute is that there are no absolutes.” It reacts with vehement opposition to any worldview that affirms the existence of transcendent, objective, universal truth. It therefore stands in complete antipathy to the biblical definition of truth.

Truth as Defined by God's Word

Whereas the secularist gives the final word on truth to man, the Christian worldview recognizes that God is the arbiter truth. A study of the Bible—his own verbal testimony—leads to the following understanding of truth: **“truth is that which corresponds to reality as determined by God.”**

This definition contains three important nuances: (1) First, truth is that which *corresponds*. In other words, truth is a verbal expression—a linguistic construction—which agrees, conforms, or is equivalent to something else. (2) Second, that “something else” is *reality*—truth is the verbal description of the state of things as they actually exist. (3) Finally, *God*—not anyone else in his creation—is the one who determines how things actually exist; God is the one who has singular authority to determine and define, and he is able to because of his unrestricted and absolute knowledge and sovereignty. Therefore, the determination of truth is not the prerogative of man; he does not even have the capacity to do so. Instead, man’s responsibility is to recognize, receive, and submit to the truth. Indeed, all truth is God’s truth—as God himself determines it to be.

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God’s exclusive authority in this realm is asserted by the following testimonies of Scripture:

- God is the arbiter of reality/truth by virtue of his *transcendent existence* (Deut 4:35, 39; Isa 44:6).
- God is the arbiter of reality/truth by virtue of his *infinite knowledge* (Isa 40:13–14; Heb 4:13).
- God is the arbiter of reality/truth by virtue of his *sovereign determination* (Pss 135:6; 139:16; Rev 4:11).
- God is the arbiter of reality/truth by virtue of his *revelatory nature* (Pss 111:7–8; 119:160; 1 Sam 15:29).
- God is the arbiter of reality/truth by virtue of his *very essence* (John 1:14, 18; 14:6; Rev 19:11).

These biblical testimonies lead us to recognize truth as having these qualities: truth is absolute, not relative; it is objective, not subjective; it is constant, not evolving; it is universal, not private; it is theocentric, not anthropocentric; it is revealed, not invented. Whatever does not share these characteristics is something other than *true truth*.

“Truth is what God thinks; it is what God does; it is what God is; it is what God has revealed of Himself in the Bible. Truth is found in its fullest form in God, for He is truth; He is the very source and origin of all truth.”

—Tim Challies, *The Discipline of Spiritual Discernment*, 94

How must we respond?

The biblical definition of truth leads to the following inescapable implications (these applications will be treated in much greater detail in sessions to come):

1. **Seek the truth.** As Proverbs 23:23 states, “Buy truth, and do not sell *it*, *get* wisdom and instruction and understanding.” Refuse to lean on your own intuitive interpretation of your circumstances and the world around you. Instead, prioritize the pursuit of truth above the attainment of worldly values, earthly conveniences, and temporal pleasures. Defy conformity to the culture’s antipathy to true truth.
2. **Think the truth.** The Apostle Paul puts this eloquently in Philippians 4:8, “Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwelling on these things.” The most intense spiritual battle we face is the battle over what to *think*—true thoughts or false thoughts. How we wage the war to think true thoughts has consequences that extend throughout life.
3. **Practice the truth.** Jesus stated, “For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God” (John 3:20–21; cf. also 1 John 1:6–7). It is the epitome of hypocrisy to claim to know truth but fail to apply it to everyday life. True truth is always *practical*; it always has significance to everyday life. As such, truth inherently calls for the response of obedience.

4. **Speak the truth.** Paul says to the Colossian church, “Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its *evil* practices, and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him” (Col 3:9–10; cf. also Eph 4:25). The nature of truth demands that we mortify the practice of lying, speaking falsehood, using words to deceive and mislead, inappropriate exaggeration, etc. Conversely, the nature of truth demands that we cultivate a pattern of speech that communicates reality as *God* has determined it.

“If you are of the truth, if you have learned the truth, if you see the sanctity of the truth, then speak truth. We are not called to be deceivers or liars. God is a God of truth, and His people are called to have an enormously high standard of truth.” —R. C. Sproul, *Exposition of Ephesians*, 114

5. **Stand for truth.** Archibald Alexander Hodge once quipped, “It is easier to find a score of men wise enough to discover the truth than to find one intrepid enough, in the face of opposition, to stand up for it.” It is in light of the nature of truth that the Apostle Paul commands the Corinthian believers, “Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong” (1 Cor 16:13). The nature of truth demands that we as Christians courageously embrace our role as dissenters in this secular culture. We must stand for the truth because in doing so, we stand for God’s glory. It is this conviction about truth that led Martin Luther to nail his ninety-five theses to the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg—an act that fanned the flames of the Reformation into a purifying blaze. It is this conviction about truth that then led him to state before the Diet of Worms,

Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason (I do not accept the authority of popes and councils because they have contradicted each other), my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God. Amen.”

“Evangelicals now stand among those who are on easiest terms with the world, for they have lost their capacity for dissent. The recovery of dissent is what is most needed, and the path to its recovery is the reformation of the Church.” —David Wells, *No Place for Truth*, 288

“Here is the great evangelical disaster—the failure of the evangelical world to stand for truth as truth. There is only one word for this—*accommodation*: the evangelical church has accommodated to the world spirit of the age. . . .

Truth carries with it confrontation. Truth demands confrontation: loving confrontation, but confrontation nevertheless. If our reflex action is always accommodation regardless of the centrality of the truth involved, there is something wrong.” —*Francis Shaeffer*

For Further Study

1. Memorize Proverbs 23:23.
2. Explain “secular humanism.” Be able to identify its key characteristics.
3. Over this next week, pay careful attention to the expressions of “truth” or “factual information” that you hear from others (at work, on the news, in conversations with neighbors, over social media, etc.). Look for evidence of secularist assumptions and come ready to share those examples with the group.
4. Define “truth” biblically. List the testimonies of Scripture that give rise to this definition of truth.
5. Carefully consider each of the five implications of the nature of truth: (1) seek the truth; (2) think the truth; (3) practice the truth; (4) speak the truth; and (5) stand for truth. Determine one practical thing you can do this week in response to each of these five implications.
6. Spend extra time this week praying that God would make you a man of truth—that he would give you a greater hunger for truth, a sharper discernment against erroneous thinking, and a more faithful appropriation of truth in your daily life.

Audio, video, and handouts for this session: gracechurch.org/motw

Next meeting: November 3, 7pm – “By What Authority?”

Submit
a question:

