

Commitment to the Truth: A Pastoral Essay

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Essay

Abstract

This essay is presented as a challenge to Jesus-followers and their leaders to be truth-seekers and truth followers by carefully examining the teaching of Jesus, especially in the Gospel according to John. The brief study seeks to present the unique and bold statements of Jesus concerning truth, truthful living, and truth-telling. Then offers practical challenges to be considered and taught.

Keywords: Truth, Jesus' teaching, commands of Jesus, post-truth, and alternative facts

Introduction

The challenge for Christians to be diligent in the pursuit of truth has never been greater. The openness to lying, slander, and violence has become all too common, even among professing Christians. The aim of this paper is a call to Jesus followers, especially those who lead communities of believers, to listen carefully to the teaching of Jesus as he addresses the topic of truth. It is then incumbent upon the leaders to be a reflection of Jesus in truth and to be faithful to teach what is discovered in the pursuit.

1. Truth in the Gospel of John

As Jesus was being tried before Pilate, Jesus made a startling statement. This statement was followed by a question from Pilate, which bears answering by those who seek to shepherd every community of Jesus followers:

Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here." Pilate therefore said to Him, "Are You a king then?" Jesus answered, "You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice." Pilate said to Him, "What is truth?" (John 18:36-38)¹

The statement by Jesus, which must be fundamental to all who seek to follow Jesus as Lord of life is, "I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth." The question posed by Pilate must be diligently answered and followed by all Jesus followers, especially those who shepherd his people: "what is truth?" Both the statement and the question which follows have always been important but are even more so in the day in which we seek to minister.

Social scientists have defined the time in which we live as "the era of post-truth."² It is sad to note that: Oxford Dictionaries declared that its international word of the year in 2016 was "post-truth," citing a 2,000% increase in usage compared to 2015 (Flood 2016). Political statements made all over the world, especially in Europe and the USA are announced as "true" but are seriously questioned by the media and social scientists. When challenged with observable facts, some responders counter with "alternative facts."³ So many "alternative facts" are put forth that many have come to question every statement made in print or person. Truth has long been questioned in product advertising. Every detergent, every toothpaste, every automobile, every hamburger, etc. is said to be "the best." Must we and those who listen to us settle for "alternative facts," or the opinions of some experts? Is there objective truth for 2021? If there is, where is it to be found? Who will state it, and how will "truth" be used?

We who follow Jesus and claim to be "born again" affirm that we have found "the Way, the Truth, and the Life" (John 14:6) and that *he* is Jesus Christ. We teach and preach that Jesus is "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). If these statements as quoted by the writer of the Gospel of John are accurate, it behooves serious Jesus-followers to discover, and then inculcate in into life, what Jesus said about "truth."

1 Unless stated otherwise, all biblical quotations are taken from *The New King James Version* 1982.

2 See, Keyes 2004, Lonsdale 1957, Krugman 2011 and others.

3 See Hendricks and Vestergaard 2019.

A beginning place for one who seeks to be a Christian leader is found in the Gospel according to John chapter 8 verses 31-32: “Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, ‘If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.’” Part of the statement from Jesus is often taken out of context and inscribed on walls and entranceways found in schools, libraries, and many government buildings (ex. The CIA building in the USA capital). However, the promises of truth discovery and the freedom which would result are given to those who are “disciples” as Jesus defined them. George Beasley-Murray (1999, 133) brings straightforward clarity and understanding to this passage:

The primary duty of a believer is indicated in the exhortation of Jesus, “Remain in my word.” That is the mark of a real disciple. *Μείνητε* signifies a settled determination to *live* in the word of Christ and by it, and so entails a perpetual listening to it, reflection on it, holding fast to it, carrying out its bidding. In 15:7 it is represented as letting the word abide in us, which puts the same thing in another figure, and it leads to living (abiding) in Christ and Christ in us.

To abide or “remain” in the word of Jesus requires a careful reading of the Gospels to discover how Jesus lived the truth, consistently denounced hypocrisy, emphatically emphasized the validity of a statement, and identified both the essence and the source of truth. The Synoptic Gospels and John differ as each recounts the life and teaching of Jesus but share in the presentation of Jesus’ passion for truth. It is important to be aware of what Jesus said, especially what he affirmed to be the truth! In the Synoptic Gospels, only Luke places specific truth language on the lips of Jesus: 4:24; 9:27; 12:44; and 21:3, although in each instance it is merely Luke’s rendition of the amen sayings (Crump 1992, 859). It is in the Gospel of John that the specific sayings of Jesus concerning truth are recorded.

In the above passage, Jesus uses adverb *alethos* to identify his disciples as “genuine” disciples. The noun *aletheia* (truth) is found 21 times in John’s Gospel (1:14, 17; 3:21; 4:23-24; 5:33; 8:32, 40, 44, 45, 46; 14:6, 17; 15:26; 16:7, 13; 17:19; 18:37-38) (Johnson 2010, 474). The word “truth” is uttered by Jesus in this Gospel 18 times. As Jesus identifies truth, it is not merely intellectual; it is personal. It is acquired through knowing God, not through the mental application (Crump 1992, 861). It is individually revealed through a personal relationship with Jesus.

Jesus identifies God, his Father as truth in chapter eight. Although Jesus does not specifically state his Father is truth, it is implied throughout his conversation with Pharisees. Jesus says only what he has heard and seen from the Father. In this passage, Jesus clearly states that he has been sent from the Father to reveal the truth. Repeatedly Jesus claims himself to be the truth. As such, Jesus is both the message and the messenger of “truth.” He came to reveal the truth because that was part of his mission. He said that he and the Father were one. His truth was

and is the Father's truth! To know Jesus is to know the Father (14:9) and thereby know Jesus as truth. Furthermore, Jesus identified the Holy Spirit as "the Spirit of Truth." Part of the role of the Holy Spirit would be to remind the disciples of everything that Jesus (the Truth) said (14:26). It would be his responsibility to lead the disciples into truth by continuing to grow in the knowledge of the Father and the Son (16:13).

Not everyone accepts these statements concerning the truth as the fundamental reality. While both other religions and even non-religious people agree that pursuit of truth and truth-telling are important, the Jesus-follower boldly affirms confidence that truth is found uniquely in the words of Jesus. Those committed to other religious faiths might say that the teachings of Jesus contain *some* truth but must be evaluated based upon their religious thought. Those who have no religious convictions might discount the Biblical teaching concerning Jesus and the truth there stated as irrelevant in any search for truth. Many who identify themselves as "Christian" might be ignorant of the teaching of Jesus or be familiar with only some of his teachings or perhaps see the words of Jesus as only suggestions or possibilities. However, for those who confess the faith-based conviction that Jesus identified in the New Testament as Lord and Christ, then the "truth statements given by Jesus" become objective truth. This truth is to be affirmed. It is to be believed. And all life actions for the disciple of Jesus must reflect the Biblical teachings of him who is the truth.

Since believers in Jesus identifies him as the truth and believe Jesus, when he said, "...I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth" (18:37), Jesus then becomes the model to be studied and emulated. Many in other religious traditions and perhaps others who are non-religious will affirm that Jesus is an effective model for truthful living. Any person who would study the life of Jesus would be impressed at how he truthfully treated others with grace and respect. However, it is even more incumbent upon the Christian leader to search the New Testament to see and teach how Jesus (the "truth") relates to people, all people. He becomes the definitive model truthfully to respond to sin and sinful people, how to respond to pain and sickness, and how to respond to those who wrong or speak evil against anyone, especially another disciple. Because Jesus is the truth, he exemplifies the way to walk and talk with integrity. Humility and service, not boastful pride and arrogance, were the hallmarks of his life, and they are the hallmarks and the life traits of truthful living which are to be discovered, emulated, and taught to others by any who are committed to following the truth.

It is not only the "modeled life" of truth that becomes definitive of truth. Jesus became so intimately concerned with truth that as John records, he becomes truth and even "the way" of truth. The teaching and commands of Jesus must become identified, studied, and "lived out" by every committed Jesus follower. This is why Jesus commissioned his disciples after they made new disciples and bap-

tized them, to “teach them to do everything I have commanded.” The Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7) and all his other teachings are not “suggestions for happy living,” but rather they are clear commands for living out truthful Christ-honoring daily walk. Being a “peacemaker,” loving those who become your enemies, treating others with respect, honoring others above one’s self, loving strangers, helping the poor, and all the other demanding yet clear instructions and commands given by Jesus are the very essences of truth.

When the Gospel of Jesus burst upon the first-century world, there was a multitude of claims and pronouncements which claimed to be true. There were power plays in every area of society. From the marketplace to the halls of government, from temples to religious shrines there were the ever-present proclamations of perceived “truth.” There were lies and purposeful deceit told and retold, all claiming to be true. False stories and conspiracies were told and believed by the people which resulted in trouble and terrible consequences. But when “Truth” came and was believed lived and was out by those who believed, and then communities of truth became lights of truth that brought hope and changed societies. When the truth was practiced, statements of truth were believed as the Spirit of Truth brought conviction and validation.

2. The Historical Speaking and Practicing of Truth by Jesus Followers Needed in the 21st Century

The 21st century is not unlike the 1st century. Stories and conspiracies are being told and written; then they are grasped and believed. In the marketplace and religious temples, on TV and all of the media affirmations are claiming validity and are calling for action. In his world, the Apostle Paul challenged his readers to live a life worthy of their calling. Surely that calling was to follow the way of truth, to be true, to speak the truth, and to proclaim him who is Truth. Paul linked truth to putting off falsehood and speaking truthfully to one’s neighbors. He even linked truth to unwholesome talk and getting rid of bitterness, rage, and slander.⁴ That message has been heard and followed down through the centuries. Those who heard the truthful message and believed the Messenger of truth and his truth were set free with a freedom that amazed all of society. There is a truth, an objective eternal truth that will set one free. It is as valid today as when it was first announced.

Christian leaders need today to heed the challenge that Paul gave to Timothy: “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the *word of truth* (italics

4 See Eph 4:25-29, Col 3:5-10.

mine). Avoid godless chatter because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly” (2 Tim 2:15-16).⁵ We must be committed and teach others to be committed to the truth of Jesus. Our lives must reflect his truth in our written and oral words. Only then will the message we proclaim be trusted. Surely each servant of Christ will seek out every teaching and command of Jesus, meditate on each and prayerfully apply each to life. Then every Jesus follower must humbly teach and challenge other believers in Jesus to do the same.

There are many implications from Jesus being the truth and proclaiming the truth for the preacher and teacher who seek to serve Jesus in this era of “post-truth” which present themselves. The following are humbly presented to be considered:

1. As instructed by Paul, careful attention must be given to the way “the word of truth” is handled. “Proof texting” as a means to prove a point in a sermon or written communication must be avoided. The Biblical texts that are used to illustrate or foster an argument need to be true to the original context. The text must be allowed to say what the Biblical speaker or original writer intended to say, not what the teacher, preacher, or writer wants it to say.
2. The commands and teaching of Jesus must be exemplified in the life of the one representing Jesus. Many Pharisees who interacted with Jesus taught what was correct, but Jesus knew of the hypocrisy demonstrated by the difference between life and teaching. Credibility is lost when the life of the teacher/preacher is not congruent with the teaching.
3. The life, teaching, and commands of Jesus need to be the center of all communication of the preacher/teacher. Three commands given to the disciples hours before Jesus was crucified were (1) To humbly serve one another (John 13:15), (2) the command to love one another (fellow disciples) *just as Jesus has loved them* (Italics mine) (John 13:34), and (3) to obey the commands of Jesus (John 14:21-24).
4. Every message communicated by the preacher/teacher via social media needs to be measured by the teaching and commands of Jesus and carefully considered if it reflects the spirit of Jesus, as well as the teaching of Jesus, and is researched as to the validity of the facts presented.
5. Plagiarism is always dishonest. Honestly giving credit to the source is the hallmark of truthful speech, in sermons, and print.

5 *The New International Version* 1984.

Conclusion

The question of Pilate, “what is the truth?” has echoed throughout history. It clamors for attention in 2021. Philosophers debate the topic. Books are being written, some offering answers, others raising more questions. Serious Jesus followers have a unique opportunity to both proclaim answers and be an answer. Those committed to Jesus Christ know him as The Truth and as The Way. Those committed are challenged to follow in that Way. The Apostle Paul urged his readers, “Live a life worthy of the calling you have received” (Eph 4:1).⁶ In that same Epistle, he challenged his readers to live as “children of light.” And then he wrote, “light consists of goodness, righteousness, and *truth*” (Eph 5:9).⁷ The commitment of all Jesus followers must search out the truth, be the truth, speak the truth and write the truth.

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6 *The New International Version* 1984.

7 *The New International Version* 1984.

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Vjernost istini: pastoralni esej

Sažetak

Ovaj je esej prezentiran kao poziv Isusovim sljedbenicima i njihovim vođama da budu tražitelji i sljedbenici istine tako što će pomno istraživati Isusova učenja, posebno ona iz Ivanova evanđelja. U ovoj kratkoj studiji nastojat ćemo predstaviti Isusove jedinstvene i smjele tvrdnje o istini, iskrenom životu i govorenju istine. Zatim ćemo iznijeti praktične izazove koje treba razmotriti i poučavati.