

What is Truth? A Biblical Perspective

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Unfortunately modern evangelicalism, like theologic liberalism, has all too often redefined terms (frequently with slogans), so that many a professing Christian's theology is no deeper than the latest evangelical cliché. Truth is one term that has suffered sorely. We are told that "All truth is God's truth" and that we must "integrate faith with learning." The notion that God has two bodies of "truth" (special revelation in His Son and His Word) and "natural revelation" that are equally authoritative and necessary for godly living is especially pernicious. I think few people have actually considered the biblical notion of truth.

The biblical concept of truth is far different than that conveyed by the popular "All truth is God's truth" mentality. The idea of truth is conveyed primarily in the Old Testament by two words. Scott in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* says of *emet* (truth, faithfulness, verity).

This word carries underlying sense of certainty, dependability. We find it used in several categories of contexts, all of which relate to God directly or indirectly. First, it is frequently applied to God as a characteristic of his nature. In Gen. 24:27, for example, it describes God who leads Abraham's servant to the right wife for Isaac. In Ex 34:6, it is given as one of the verbal descriptions of God which constitute God's goodness...

It is a term fittingly applied to God's words (Ps 119: 142, 151, 160; Dan. 10:21).

As a characteristic of God revealed to men, it therefore becomes the means by which men know and serve God as their savior (Josh 24:14; I Kgs 2:4; Ps 86:11; Ps 91:4; Isa 38:3), and then, as a characteristic to be found in those who have indeed come to God (Ex 18:21; Neh

7:2; Ps 15:2; Zech 8:16). As we study its various contexts, it becomes manifestly clear that there is no truth in the biblical sense, i.e., valid truth, outside God. All truth comes from God and is truth because it is related to God.

The other major Hebrew word for truth is *emuna*, translated as "firmness, faithfulness, fidelity." Scott says that this word expresses God's total dependability (Deut 32:4), or the faithfulness of believers (Prov 12:22).

While truth as "conformity to fact" is sometimes considered (for example, Deut 13:14), it is usually in a moral sense and not in a sense of empiricism (the best hypothesis for the data). Therefore the Old Testament concept of truth is tied closely to the unchanging character of God, and no truth in the biblical sense can at all be inconsistent with His Person (sovereignty, holiness, omniscience, etc.).

Truth in the New Testament is characterized by the Person of Christ (John 1:14,17; John 14:6), the Holy Spirit (I John 5:7), and the Word of God (John 17:17, James 1:8). Since God and His Word last forever, but the creation is transient (I Peter 1:24, 25), the derivation of any empirically derived "truth" must also be of a transient nature.

Since man rejects "general revelation" of God (Rom 1) and may only know God by special revelation, it would seem likely that truth is similarly dispensed, by revelation, not empiricism. The advocate of empiricism must grapple with the problem that his body of "truth" is ever changing and contradictory (we in medicine see this almost daily), while truth in the biblical sense is settled forever. Even when man studies creation, he cannot learn truth (Rom 1), but suppresses it.

The empirical notion of "truth" as commonly applied to medicine is one based on statistical probabilities. How foolish it must seem to God that we revel in a "statistically significant p value" and think that we have arrived at truth. The medical literature contains thousands of articles which have now been corrected, disregarded, or even been shown to be flagrantly wrong despite the presence of a "statistically significant p value" for the results. Our practice of medicine is really one of "functional hypothesis" based on statistical probabilities, not a static, once-for-all empirically derived "truth."

Men are commanded to serve the Lord "in truth" (I Sam 12:24) and to "obtain truth (Prov 23:23). If this process is to include empiricism, then God obliges Himself to teach men an empirical approach to find truth. Obviously, the scientific method is not to be found in the pages of Scripture.

Truth is inseparably related to righteousness in the 15th and 26th Psalms. Truth is related to godliness (Titus 1:1). It is contrasted with wickedness in Prov 8:7, Jer 7:28, and Rom 2:8. The biblical concept of truth does not view truth as amoral "facts of nature."

The saint is preserved by God's truth (Psa 40:11). To equate contemporary science with this kind of truth would be to impugn God for not having earlier allowed men to discover cures of diseases, the neurochemical processes involved in cognition, etc. The saint can be steadfast without the help or explanations of modern science. The notion of God's gift to the believer of "everything pertaining to life and godliness" (II Peter 1:3,4) is undermined if we hold out for contemporary and yet to be discovered "truth" that will enable the Christian to live in a manner pleasing to God.

God's truth is to bring men to Him so they can worship Him (Psa 43:3,4). While some pre-Darwinian scientists studied creation and perceived God's glory in that study, more often than not in the modern context scientific exploration concludes in a doxology for man and not for God.

Truth is involved in atonement for sin (Prov 16:6) and must be believed for salvation (II Thess 2:12,13). The

concepts of "truth" as generally conceived by science are incompatible with such concepts as sin and atonement. A purpose of truth is to make men free (John 8:32). Empirically derived "facts of nature" do not serve this function.

God desires all men to come to know the truth (I Tim 2:4). The worshipper at the altar of empiricism must answer how this can be God's will, and yet He left no instructions for a method to obtain this sort of "truth."

God's truth is absolutely reliable (I John 2:21). Man's best hypothesis to explain natural phenomena are changing and often unreliable. Walking in the truth (II John 4, III John 3,4) has to do with a way of life related to God, not science. The way to know the truth is to abide in God's Word (John 8:31,32), not by scientific investigation. Jesus promised that the Spirit of truth (the Holy Spirit) would guide His disciples into all the truth (John 16:13). To the best of my knowledge, no scientific explorations were carried out (or deemed necessary) by the post-Pentecost disciples.

Those who delight in the Lord study His works (Psa 111), but they are the ones related to His character and sovereign working in history. Truth only belongs to God's children (John 18:37). Unbelievers are deprived of truth (I Tim 6:5). Knowledge of the truth comes not by scientific exploration, but by God granting repentance (II Tim 2:25). The truth includes a corpus of doctrine (II Tim 2:18, 4:4; Hebrews 10:26). The church, not scientists, is the pillar and support of the truth (I Tim 3:15). Men's wisdom is foolishness by God's standard (I Cor 1:18-25). Learning does not equal learning the truth (II Tim 3:7).

"Truth" ascertainable by physical evidence failed to transform lives in countless examples in Scripture (the miracles of Moses and the prophets and the miracles of Jesus). Supernatural revelation, not natural understanding, brings man into relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt 16:17; John 1:12,13).

In summary, truth relates to god Himself and is eternal. It is only perceived by man by special revelation. To view the study of nature (including man) as providing supplementary truth to that revealed in Scripture is

contrary to God's revelation of Himself and His working in history. We are called, not to integrate two bodies of "truth," but to know _the truth, love the truth, live the truth, and teach the truth.

Evangelicalism is in epistemologic crisis. "Natural revelation" has not supplemented the Bible, but supplanted it in many areas. As a whole, we seem destined to repeat the errors of those in the past who have compromised the faith on the altars of added "truth," be they higher criticism, Darwinian biology, or "new revelations." Christian physicians should readily admit that our functional hypotheses ("truths") are changing daily. While we should not discard empiricism in dealing with the temporary problems of physical health and disease (we only have temporary solutions), where the Bible has clearly spoken we should not try to "supplement" truth with changing transient functional hypotheses.

O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you, avoiding worldly and empty chatter and the opposing arguments of what is falsely called "knowledge" -- which some have professed and thus gone astray from the faith. Grace be with you. I Timothy 6:20,21, New American Standard Bible.

Endnotes

1. Scott, J.B., in _Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament_. Harris, R.L., Archer, G.L., Jr., & Waltke, B.K., (ed). Chicago: Moody, 1980, pp. 52-53.

2. Ibid, p. 52.