

# Truth



## What Is Truth and Does It Matter?

Dick Tripp

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## Foreword

A new title in this admirable series of booklets lives up to the standards set by its predecessors. The question it deals with is perhaps THE basic question in our Western culture, for if a common truth for us all does not exist then there is no point in writing or in reading this booklet. So much in our society asserts that all that matters is what is "true for me" or "for you" and many are influenced by this in their views of morals, or religion, or life-style, and now even of science. But of course we cannot consistently live this way as one nation, so in fact we all have to trust one another in sharing a common truth to a considerable degree in our daily lives.

This means that our theory and our practice are all of a jumble, and

between the proclaimed theory and at least some of the practice there is much inconsistency, if not actual hypocrisy. No wonder our country is all at sea, for the truth question runs across all dimensions of life, including the arts, and especially morality, and above all religion.

Dick Tripp's essay deals especially with these last dimensions and affirms the truth of the Christian faith among the main competing worldviews. His simple summary account of these is something we should all have readily available in our minds and be able to use to sort out and test the jumble of views tumbling about in our society. These pages are well illustrated by apt quotation and Scripture reference, and provide a clear, common-sense presentation of the essence of the issue. They should provide anyone who takes these matters at all seriously with a good start on the important question of truth in our lives.

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## Introduction

A recent Barna Research Group survey on what Americans believe asked the question, "Is there absolute Truth?" Sixty-six percent of adults responded that they believe that "there is no such thing as absolute truth; different people can define truth in conflicting ways and still be correct." Seventy-two percent of those aged 18 to 25 expressed this belief. In a recent series of more than twenty interviews conducted at random at a large university, people were asked if there was such a thing as absolute truth—truth that is true across all times and cultures for all people. All but one respondent answered along these lines:

"Truth is whatever you believe."

"There is no absolute truth."

"If there *were* such a thing as absolute truth, how could we know what it is?"

"People who believe in absolute truth are dangerous."

The lone exception was an evangelical Christian, who said absolute truth was in Jesus Christ.

I suggest that the situation that these surveys reveal is fairly typical of the Western World. As Clive Calver says, in an article "Thinking Clearly About Truth" in *Christianity*, we "drift on a tide of uncertainty into a sea of unknowing."

Oddly enough, those who claim that there is no such thing as absolute truth make scores of decisions every day on the basis that they believe some things are true and some are false. We all do. I will not turn on a light without believing in the reality of electricity, or drive a car without believing in the effectiveness of the combustion engine. No one flying in a cloud through mountainous terrain would want to be directed by a navigator who did not believe in the truth of his instruments. No one undergoing brain surgery would want to be operated on by a surgeon who did not believe that some things about the brain were true and some not true. And yet when it comes to the most important issues of life—What is the meaning of life? Why are we here? Does it matter whether I am good or bad, or is there any such thing as goodness and badness? What happens when I die? Will I be called to account by the Judge of the Universe or will I not? Does he exist anyway?—it is assumed that either we can't know or it doesn't matter. Figuring out something that "works for me" is all that is required. Or I can assume the attitude of Marilyn Monroe who is said to have declared, "I believe in everything—a little bit."

One thing I must never do is to tell anyone else they are wrong. Not long ago, the popular US column *Dear Abby* tackled the issue of family quarrels over religion. A reader told Abby,

*Your answer to the woman who complained that her relatives were always arguing with her about religion was ridiculous. You advised her to simply declare the subject off-limits. Are you suggesting that people talk only about trivial, meaningless subjects so as to avoid a potential controversy?...It is arrogant to tell people there are subjects they may not mention in your presence. You could have suggested she learn enough about her relatives' cult to show them the errors contained in its teachings.*

In response, Abby wrote this:

*In my view, the height of arrogance is to attempt to show people the 'errors' in the religion of their choice.*

In today's climate, to suggest that you might be right about your beliefs and that others might be wrong is about the greatest offence one can commit.

The poet Steve Turner wrote a brilliant parody of this attitude and called it "Creed". Part of it goes like this:

*I believe that each man must find the truth that is right for him.*

*Reality will adapt accordingly.*

*The universe will readjust. History will alter.*

*I believe that there is no absolute truth excepting the truth that there is no absolute truth.*

Yet, in spite of the pervasiveness of these attitudes to truth, voices are being raised in protest. Michael Novak, in an article in the *Reader's Digest*, declared that "the most critical threat to our freedom is a failure to appreciate the power of truth." This link between freedom and truth was strongly argued by Pope John Paul II in his recent encyclical *Veritas Splendor* (The Splendor of Truth). Richard John Neuhaus, editor in chief of *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life*, in commenting on this encyclical said, "In the absence of truth, power is the only game in town."

The purpose of this booklet is to explore these questions. Is there real truth to be discovered? Does it matter? Will it affect my usefulness or happiness either in this life or the next?

## **Four major worldviews**

It may be helpful to begin by giving a brief summary of four important worldviews that are prominent in the world today. A "worldview" is a way of thinking about truth and reality. It sums up the basic conclusions about life and meaning that a person figures out and lives by, either consciously or unconsciously. James Sire in *The Universe Next Door* gives the following definition of "worldview":

*A world view is a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic make-up of our world.*

Or we could simply say it is the sum total of what we believe about the most important issues of life.

Sire suggests the following seven questions we can ask ourselves in determining our own particular worldview. In summary they are as follows:

1. *What is prime reality—the really real?* To this we might answer: God, the gods, or the material universe.

2. *What is the nature of external reality, that is, the world around us?* Do we see the world as created or autonomous, as chaotic or orderly, as matter or spirit? Do we emphasise our subjective, personal relationship to the world or its objectivity apart from us.

3. *What is a human being?* Are we highly complex machines, sleeping gods, people made in the image of God, or "naked apes"?

4. *What happens to a person at death?* Is it personal extinction, transformation to a higher state, or departure to a shadowy existence on “the other side”?

5. *Why is it possible to know anything at all?* Sample answers include the idea that we are made in the image of an all-knowing God or that consciousness and intelligence have developed under the pressures of survival in a long process of evolution.

6. *How do we know what is right and wrong?* Is it because we are made in the image of God whose character is good? Are right and wrong determined by human choice alone? Or have the notions simply developed under the pressures of cultural and physical survival.

7. *What is the meaning of human history?* Is it to realise the purposes of God or the gods, to make a paradise on earth, to prepare people for a life in community with a loving and holy God, or something else?

Whatever answers we give to such questions will obviously have a big effect on such matters as our goals in life—how we make decisions; the way we treat other people; the way we value ourselves; our attitude to material possessions; the way we face death; what we think is wrong with the world and how we are going to put it right; how we relate to human need, to family structure, to those outside our own community, to human rights, or to government. Though recognising that what we *say* we believe and how we *behave* do not always match up, our actions often point clearly to what we *really* believe.

With these questions in mind, let’s have a brief look at what are perhaps the major worldviews that people hold in this modern world. It is important to note that the following summaries are extremely brief, and you may well think simplistic. Certainly we could find variations on each of them. However, I give them here in order to underline the fact that they are *different* and that these differences cannot but affect the way we live. Some tend to pick bits that appeal to them from two or more of these worldviews and end up with a hotch-potch of beliefs, but this is usually the result of not thinking deeply enough about the issues. If indeed one of them should be true and the others false, then which one we choose to go with cannot but have important consequences, both for the present and the future.

Samuel Johnson, the essayist and dictionary-maker of the eighteenth century, said: “Truth, sir, is a cow; which, when sceptics have found it will give them no more milk, they have gone off to milk the bull.” But milking the bull is not only futile. It can be positively dangerous to one’s health!

## **There is no God—or gods. Atheistic materialism**

### *Reality*

This material universe is what is really real. As Carl Sagan, astrophysicist and populariser of science puts it, “The cosmos is all that is or all that ever will be.” The present scientific view of how the universe came into being, now taught in major universities worldwide, is that it all came into existence with a “big bang” some billions of years ago. The atheist would say this was initiated by some physical process as yet unknown.<sup>1</sup>

### *Humans*

Human consciousness and intelligence developed from chemicals by a long process of chance evolution. Personality developed from impersonal hydrogen atoms. “God is the DNA code,” says Timothy Leary. We are all the products of matter, time and chance alone.

### *How do we know things?*

Knowledge is the result of physical processes in our brains. A problem here was well expressed by Professor Haldane as follows: “If my mental processes are determined wholly by the motion of atoms in my brain, I have no reason to suppose that my beliefs are true...and hence I have no reason for supposing my brain to be composed of atoms.” If my self-awareness, intelligence and ability to make choices is something more than *just* the movement of atoms in my brain, then, according to the materialist view, this self awareness has somehow come about *only as the result of physical processes*.

### *Meaning*

As there is no intelligent being who planned it all, life only has what meaning we humans choose to give it. Some would give it no meaning. Samuel Beckett’s play *Breath* is a 35-second play that has no human actors. The props are a pile of rubbish on the stage, lit by a light which begins to dim, brightens (but never fully) and then recedes to dimness. There are no words, only a “recorded” cry opening the play, an inhaled breath, an exhaled breath and an identical “recorded” cry closing the play. For Beckett life is such a “breath”.

### *Death*

Death is the end of our personal existence—blotto! “Human destiny,” Ernest Nagel confesses in *Naturalism Reconsidered.*, “[is] an episode between two oblivions.”

### *Morality and values*

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<sup>1</sup> For a look at the development of the Big Bang theory, and its implications for Christian beliefs, see my booklet *The Complementary Nature of Science and Christianity*.

Right and wrong are merely what we decide for ourselves as humans, either individually or in groups. Usually it is the majority decision that wins the day.

### *History*

History has no ultimate purpose. We have to make the most of what we have got. In the end, this planet will certainly burn up or freeze and that will be the end of everything.

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Atheism is a relative newcomer to the historical scene in any significant measure but now appears to be in decline. Statistician David Barrett says that since 1970 the number of atheists has dropped from 4.6% of world population to 3.8% (222 million). He predicts continuing decline.

### **Hinduism, Buddhism and New Age thinking**

It is obviously simplistic to lump Hinduism and Buddhism together but they do have certain basic beliefs in common. New Age thinking tends to be an adaption of some of these Eastern beliefs to Western culture.

### *Reality*

Everything is God. We all share the same essence or “stuff” of reality, which is spirit (Hinduism—the Brahma, Buddhism—Nirvana). This philosophy of the unity of all things has been called Monism. The basic philosophy of New Age thinking has been summed up in three pithy sayings: “All is God”, “All is one” and “All is well”. The New Age concept of God is impersonal, usually described as Force, Energy, Essence, Consciousness, Vibration, Principle, or Being.

### *Matter*

This material world is unreal, a sort of fantasy or dream of some kind. The “realised soul” understands that this world means nothing and is of no value. Ultimately, salvation consists in escaping from matter. New Agers tend to put a little more value on this world than do Hindus and Buddhists.

### *Humans*

We are one with God. Our unity with all reality is emphasised. Individual personality is underplayed.

### *Meaning*

Meaning in life comes through realising who we are in our oneness with the divine spirit. There are no criteria for judging true from false religious experience. “I believe” tends to become “I feel”.

### *How we know truth*

Our significant learning comes from withdrawal from the world, looking within, getting in touch with our real selves, the divine within. Hinduism, Buddhism and New Age share a distrust of reason. In Hinduism and Buddhism the Ultimate is unknown and unknowable. It is *neti neti*, 'not this, not that'.

### *Morality*

Sin is merely ignorance of the true nature of reality. We need enlightenment, not repentance. Suffering, rather than evil, is seen as our major problem and much of Hindu and Buddhist philosophy is a response to this. For some, there is no objective standard of right and wrong. As one spiritual sage from India put it, "It's not a question of whether you are good or bad...good and bad are relative. They are two sides of one coin, part of the same whole." In a similar vein, Carl Frederick wrote in *Playing the Game the New Way*, "You are the supreme being...there isn't any right or wrong." New Age guru Shirley Maclaine's philosophy, along with that of many other New Agers, could be summed up as: "If it feels good, do it."

### *Death*

We die only to be reborn in a continuous cycle of rebirth—reincarnation. In our next life we will endure the consequences of our behaviour in this one—the Eastern doctrine of Karma. If we succeed in progressing in the steps of enlightenment we will eventually escape this cycle into Nirvana where individual personality will be absorbed into complete oneness with Ultimate Reality, like a wave being absorbed back into the ocean. Much of Buddhism denies the personal nature of God. New Age thinkers tend to be a little more optimistic about our continuous advance in this process than do Hindus and Buddhists.

### *History*

Because we are caught up in this constant cycle of rebirth, history has little meaning. Eastern religion tends not to understand the world in terms of purpose. As someone has said, there is "movement and change without involving the idea of purpose."

In this worldview the focus tends to be on self, how we can improve ourselves, rather than on how we can know God, and better serve him and others. A typical statement from a popular New Age magazine says: "All paths lead to God. The true path finally becomes self empowerment: the path of self-love. Then one demonstrates that they can manifest God and no longer need to look outside themselves for this information. They have become the path themselves."

## Postmodernism

Postmodernism is the term used by sociologists and others to describe a way of thinking that has become very pervasive in the Western world over the last generation. It is an approach to reality that is having a significant affect on literature, theatre, art, education, psychotherapy, law, science, architecture, the study of history and people's view of religion. Some significant writers who have promoted postmodernism are de Man, Geoffrey Hartman, Harold Bloom, J. Hillis Miller, Jean-Francois Lytard, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty. Its origins are found in the philosophies of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Marx and Freud. On some points, particularly its attitude to truth, it is similar to New Age thinking. As a way of thinking it can hardly be described as a "worldview" as one of its tenets is that there is no longer any one big story that is able to make sense of our little stories. In other words "worldviews" are out!

### *Reality*

We all create our own reality. God tends to be ignored. Should he (she, it?) exist, he certainly has nothing to say about what we should believe or how we should behave.

### *Truth and reason*

There is no absolute truth. New Age guru, Shirley MacLaine, holds a typical postmodern perspective. In *Out on a Limb* she asks David, her spiritual guide, if he believes in reincarnation. He replies, "It's true if you believe it and that goes for anything." As Wheaton College professor Roger Lundin explains in *The Culture of Interpretation*, in postmodernism "all principles are preferences—and only preferences." As a result "they are nothing but masks for the will to power." Postmodernism is distrustful of all authority and dogmatism. It often recast the Enlightenment's sacred cows of reason and science as tools of oppression. Feminist scholar Sandra Harding complains that science embodies a male-centred view that is "culturally coercive".

Emotions, feelings, intuition, reflection, magic, myth, and mystical experience are now centre stage. "I know" has been replaced by "I feel". There is a blurring of the difference between ourselves and the real world out there.

The postmodern aversion to truth is well expressed by Allan Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind*:

*The danger...is not error but intolerance. Relativism is necessary to openness; and this is the virtue, the only virtue, which all primary education for more than fifty years has dedicated itself to [teaching]. Openness—and*

*the relativism that makes it the only plausible stance in the face of various claims to truth and the various ways of life and kinds of human beings—is the great insight of our times. The true believer is the real danger. The study of history and of culture teaches that all the world was mad in the past; men always thought they were right, and that led to wars, persecutions, slavery, xenophobia, racism and chauvinism. The point is not to correct the mistakes and really be right; rather it is not to think that you are right at all.*

Sigmund Freud had described this outcome with glaring precision nearly one hundred years ago:

*Fundamentally, we only find what we need and only see what we want to see. We have no other possibility. Since the criterion for truth—correspondence with the external world—is absent, it is entirely a matter of indifference what opinions we adopt. All of them are equally true and equally false. And no one has the right to accuse anyone else of error.*

Someone has said that we have now moved from the conviction that everyone has a right to his own opinions, to the notion that every opinion is equally right!

#### *Religion*

Postmodernism does not rule out religion as did modernism, with its emphasis on human reason. However, the religions that are approved are very different from Christianity. You may believe what you want to. Go for what makes you feel good. Religion is cafeteria style. You choose what you like from what is spread in front of you, and put a meal together that suits your taste. There are strong links with paganism.

#### *Morality*

All moral values are relative. Each person or culture develops their own moral values. The important question is not “Is it right?” but “What will it do for me?” There is a strong emphasis on the fact that we are shaped by our culture, and a consequent diminishing of personal responsibility.

#### *Tolerance*

Tolerance of other views is one of the pillars of postmodernism. However, there is one group of people to whom this tolerance is not extended, those who believe truth to be important! This intolerance is especially directed to those who think others might be wrong. Postmodern analyst Frederick Turner, for instance, in *The Future of the Gods: Notes Towards a Postmodern Religion*, calls for tolerance and syncretism (mixing different religions together). Yet in the same article he calls evangelical Christianity a “junk religion”!

#### *Individualism*

There is a strong emphasis on individualism. In the American court case *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, in justifying the abortion licence, the court declared that it is up to each individual to determine “the concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.”

### *History*

There is much rewriting of history. What really happened is either unknowable or unimportant. A sad symptom of this is seen in a survey indicating that 33% of Americans subscribed to the view that the Holocaust, the killing of six million Jews by the Nazis during World War II, may never have happened.

A good summary of postmodern thinking is given by Os Guinness in *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds*:

*Where modernism was a manifesto of human self-confidence and self-congratulation, postmodernism is a confession of modesty, if not despair. There is no truth, only truths. There are no principles, only preferences. There is no grand reason, only reasons. There is no privileged civilization, only a multiple of cultures, beliefs, periods, and styles. There is no grand narrative of human progress, only countless stories of where people and their cultures are now. There is no simple reality or any grand objectivity of universal, detached knowledge, only a ceaseless representation of everything in terms of everything else. In sum, postmodernism...is an extreme form of relativism.*

William Dever, in an excellent article in *Near Eastern Archeology* on some writer’s approach to history, and archeology in particular, says:

*Such “post modern” thinking has affected nearly all disciplines since [about] 1950, both in the natural and social sciences, to such an extent that it is now taken for granted as the reigning paradigm.*

## **Christianity**

### *Reality*

There is one God of infinite wisdom, holiness and power, who has existed eternally. God is personal and exists within himself as three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit that have always existed in a love relationship.<sup>2</sup>

### *Matter*

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<sup>2</sup> I have summarised the Bible understanding of the Trinity, and the logic for it, in my booklet *Understanding the Trinity*. Jews and Muslims also believe in the existence of one God. Because of the limited purpose of this booklet I have chosen not to include their beliefs, and the similarities and differences of their views to Christianity.

The universe is the creation of this God and is dependent on him for its existence. It had a beginning and, in its present form, will have an end. Matter is real and good. God himself shared in created human nature in the person of Jesus Christ. Though God maintains the created universe, he is distinct from it. He himself is beyond space and time.

#### *Humans*

God has created humans “in his own likeness” with self-consciousness, freedom to make choices, moral accountability, intelligence, and spiritual qualities that enable us to relate personally to him.<sup>3</sup> His desire is that we should enter into the loving relationships that already exist within the persons of the divine Trinity, and enjoy fellowship with him both in this life and through eternity. We have messed things up by our waywardness but he has acted in Jesus Christ to restore that fellowship. More of that later.

#### *Death*

We exist beyond death, either in a relationship with God or without him, depending on choices we have made in this life. Because the material creation matters to God our bodies will be resurrected at Christ’s Second Coming, though in a transformed state, similar to Christ’s resurrected body.

#### *How do we know the nature of reality?*

God has given us intelligence which he expects us to use, whether in our understanding of the universe or our knowledge of him. However, our moral perversity affects our ability to think clearly, especially when it comes to truth about spiritual matters. Truth about God, the meaning of life and death, and such matters, come to us by revelation. In other words, God reveals this truth to those humble enough to receive it.

#### *Morality*

Because God is perfectly good, he created humans with the same qualities of moral goodness. However, humans have misused the freedom given them, and our moral natures have become warped. Our goodness is tainted with “sin” and this affects our relationship with God whose justice demands the condemnation of evil.

#### *History*

God makes his purposes known in history. It is “his story”. He has made himself known by his actions in history and by revealing himself to chosen individuals, and particularly by entering the world in the person of Jesus

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<sup>3</sup> I have dealt with issues such as the creation of humans, their place in the universe and their distinction from the animal world in the booklet *The Complementary Nature of Science and Christianity*.

Christ. History had a beginning and will culminate in the return of Jesus Christ whom he has appointed as judge of the human race. God will ultimately create “a new heavens and a new earth” in which his people will live eternally in a loving and joyful relationship with him.

## **The Biblical understanding of truth**

My purpose in presenting the above four worldviews is to emphasise their differences. Unless you believe that *anything* can be true (which is what some appear to believe!), then it must be obvious that if one of these worldviews is *really* true, the others must be false. I will spend the rest of this booklet exploring the Christian viewpoint—what the Bible has to say about truth. You, the reader, must decide whether or not this view best fits the facts and, if so, whether or not you will do anything about it. One thing is certain, whichever worldview you decide to run with, it will affect your value system and the way you choose to live in this brief life. If Christianity should be true, then it will affect your eternal future as well.

### **The Bible emphasis on the importance of truth**

The Bible has a great deal to say about truth, particularly the truth about God and our relationship to him as human beings created with God-like qualities. On practically every page of the New Testament this emphasis is apparent. The gospel message concerning the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is spoken of as “**the word of truth**” (Ephesians 1:13; Colossians 1:5; James 1:18) or often simply as “**the truth**”. Christians are spoken about as those that are “**of the truth**” (1 John 3:19). God the Father’s word is truth (John 17:17), God the Son declared himself to be the truth (14:6) and God the Holy Spirit is spoken of as the “**Spirit of truth**” (1 John 5:6).

Warnings about false teaching, false teachers and wrong behaviour, both from Jesus and other writers of the New Testament, are numerous. Philemon is the only one of the twenty-seven books that doesn’t contain such warnings. The connection between truth and behaviour is constant through the Bible. More of that later. False teaching, symbolised by the “false prophet” in the book of Revelation, is pictured as one of the four major enemies of God’s people (the others being Satan, godless civil powers and corrupt values).

It is significant that the Greek word for “truth”, used about a hundred times in the New Testament, also has the meaning of “reality”. The Bible is a book about what is *really* real and *truly* true.

### Truth about God is known by revelation

From Genesis to Revelation the Bible underlines the point that we *can* know the truth about God because he has chosen to make himself known to us. This makes perfect sense. If he is indeed the creator of this vast universe, he must obviously be infinitely greater than our puny little minds can take in. Something more is needed than our own limited reason. If, however, as the Bible declares, he created us for the express purpose of knowing him and living in a loving personal relationship with him, then he is obviously going to make himself known to us somehow.

The Bible declares that God has made himself known through both creation and history in a number of ways. He has revealed certain things about himself through the vastness, the beauty, and the order of his created universe. **“God’s eternal power and character cannot be seen. But from the beginning of creation, God has shown what these are like by all he has made. That’s why those people don’t have any excuse”** (Romans 1:20). However, what we can learn from this source is limited, and so God has chosen to make himself known more directly and personally. **“In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son...”** (Hebrews 1:1,2). God has revealed himself to individuals and through his dealings with his chosen people, the Israelites, descended from Abraham. All this was preparatory to his supreme revelation of himself to the world in the person of Jesus Christ.<sup>4</sup> The record of these revelations is given to us in the sixty-six books of the Bible. It is now the ministry of the Holy Spirit to reveal the truth of these things to those open to heed them. It is one of the chief responsibilities of the church to be a community of seekers and listeners, where people can explore the meaning of this revelation and apply it to their daily lives, in loving relationships and humble submission to one another. Christian belief is that truth not only matters, it is *accessible*. The coming of Jesus, particularly, has made it so.

### The place of human intelligence in understanding God

As God created our human intelligence, he obviously intends us to use it. However, we have a problem. The Bible declares that though humans were created perfect, in a loving relationship with God, they abused the freedom they had been given and chose to live independently of God. One of the results of this “fall” is that our intelligence, and our ability to think clearly, has been affected. Paul puts it this way, **“They know about God, but they**

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<sup>4</sup> I have dealt with the evidence for believing that Jesus is indeed the Son of God, the divine second person of the Trinity, in the booklet *Is Jesus Really God?*

**don't honor him or even thank him. Their thoughts are useless, and their stupid minds are in the dark"** (Romans 1:21). In other words, when we reject the truth of God, one of the effects is that we become blind to further spiritual truth. Theologians used to talk about the "total depravity" of the human race—not meaning that we are incapable of any good, but that no part of our nature has been unaffected by our rebellion against God. That includes both our reasoning ability and our moral character. One is affected by the other. John declares, **"If we hate others, we are living and walking in the dark. We don't know where we are going, because we can't see in the dark"** (1 John 2:11). Conversely, one of the qualities of love is that it **"rejoices in the truth"** (1 Corinthians 13:6).

One of the reasons for the confusion that exists today, with so many conflicting ideas about the nature of truth and reality, has been the overemphasis over the last three hundred years on the ability of human reason to solve all our problems. Nicky Gumbel sums this up well in *Searching Issues*:

*In pre-Enlightenment times, reason was viewed as a tool of understanding but subordinated to the revealed truth of Christianity which was seen as thoroughly supernatural. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw a shift in the European way of thinking. Central to Enlightenment thought were the use and celebration of reason—the power by which we understand the universe and improve our condition. The Enlightenment brought enormous progress in science, technology and medicine, but within it were the seeds of its own destruction. Revelation was made subject to reason. Although the Enlightenment was for the few, nineteenth-century secularisation was for the many. Yet in spite of all the changes of atmosphere, the Victorians preserved a society which was powerfully influenced by Christian ideas and continued to accept the Christian ethic as the highest known to mankind. It was not until the twentieth century that the full implications and the fruit of the seeds sown were seen in a devastatingly clear light.*

All this means that the first requirement for knowing the truth about God is humility. We must admit that he knows a little more than we do, and also admit to our moral weaknesses and need of God's forgiveness. Are we really willing for God to make his truth known to us, including the truth about ourselves? The most pervasive and most destructive symptom of our fallen nature is our pride, whether it reveals itself in our relationship to others or in our relationship to God. God has revealed to us in history, and will reveal to us personally, all we need to know of the truth in order for us to live as he intended, if we humbly submit to his authority. **"The secret things belong to**

the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law” (Deuteronomy 29:29). Or as Paul puts it in his letter to Timothy in the New Testament, **“Everything in the Scripture is God’s Word. All of it is useful for teaching and helping people and for correcting them and showing them how to live. The Scriptures train God’s servants to do all kinds of good deeds”** (2 Timothy 3:16,17).

### **The claim of Jesus to be ultimate reality**

Jesus made many remarkable statements—ridiculous if not true— about himself.<sup>5</sup> One of these is his claim to be the truth. **“Thomas said, ‘Lord, we don’t even know where you are going! How can we know the way?’ ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life!’ Jesus answered. ‘Without me, no one can go to the Father (John 14:5,6).”** Notice that Jesus here is not just claiming to speak the truth (which he often did claim), but to *be* the truth. Stephen Neil, in *Crises of Belief*, says of this claim:

*[This] does not mean that Jesus was stating a number of good and true ideas. It means that in him the total structure, the inmost reality, of the universe was for the first time and forever disclosed.*

Theologian John Snyder puts it like this:

*[Jesus is depicted as] the one in whom is manifested the Creator of the universe; the fullest disclosure of the character and person of God; the focal point of all that God has been doing in history; the chief personality in God’s creation of the world; the ruler of natural forces; the watershed of human destiny, and the only path to the presence of God. Jesus is portrayed not simply as the greatest teacher, but as the foundation of all teaching—the truth itself.*

Of course, if Jesus is indeed the Son of God, the second person of the divine Trinity, this claim makes sense. After all, he had a hand in creating all of reality. **“Everything was created by him, everything in heaven and on earth, everything seen and unseen, including all the forces and powers, and all rulers and authorities. All things were created by God’s Son, and everything was made for him”** (Colossians 1:16).

In the opening chapter of his Gospel, John speaks of Jesus as **“the Word”**. He declares, **“The Word became a human being and lived here with us”** (John 1:14). The Greek word *logos* that John uses here could also be translated “reason” and was associated by the Greeks with divinity. In commenting on this passage, the popular writer William Barclay says:

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<sup>5</sup> I have given a comprehensive list of these claims in the booklet *Is Jesus Really God?*

*Jesus is the expression of the mind of God. It is as if John said to the Greeks: "For the last six centuries you have been speaking about the mind of God in the universe. If you want to see what the mind of God is, look at Jesus Christ. Here, full-displayed, is that mind of God about which you have always been thinking and talking. The **logos** has become flesh. The mind of God has become a person.*

It is one of the ironies of history that when Pilate asked Jesus at his trial, **"What is truth?"** the one who is the embodiment of all truth was standing before him in person. There is some indication from the account of the story that Pilate sensed something of this. He was, however, unwilling to face the implications of it. The statement of Jesus to Pilate on this occasion is significant: **"I was born into this world to tell about the truth. And everyone who belongs to the truth knows my voice"** (John 18:37,38).

The greatest demonstration of the authenticity of Jesus' claim is his resurrection from the dead. You can bury Truth in the grave if you wish, but it won't stay there.<sup>6</sup>

## **Why we resist the truth**

John, referring to Jesus, says: **"The light has come into the world, and people who do evil things are judged guilty because they love the dark more than the light. People who do evil hate the light and won't come to the light, because it clearly shows what they have done. But everyone who lives by the truth will come to the light, because they want others to know that God is really the one doing what they do"** (John 3:19-21). In other words, if Jesus is God's true standard of what goodness is all about, then the test of our own goodness, or lack of it, is whether or not we are willing to live in a relationship with him, the risen and living Saviour.

Here lies our dilemma. When compared with the perfect goodness revealed in the life of Jesus, God's goodness, we all come a long way short. **"All of us have sinned and fallen short of God's glory"** (Romans 3:23). It doesn't make the slightest difference whether we are big sinners or little sinners—we are all sinners! And we don't like our sins exposed, so we keep away from Jesus. However, God can't do anything about our sins unless we *are* willing to have them exposed. This is not an intellectual problem—it is a moral one.

Mike Yaconelli, a very perceptive American writer, sums up this dilemma in an article in *Christianity*:

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<sup>6</sup> I have dealt with the historical evidence of the resurrection of Jesus and its implications in the booklet *Did Jesus Really Rise from the Dead?*

*Because the pain of knowing who we are is so great, we spend a lifetime running from ourselves. We have become experts in dodging, avoiding, hiding, pretending, covering, running, protecting, eluding, escaping, averting, evading the real us. This 'Great Escape' from ourselves is the way most of us have chosen to live our lives, Christian or not, because it is the way of less pain.*

*That is why the Good News of the Gospel is so painful. Jesus wants to do much more than forgive our sins: He wants to capture our real self—and for us to face who we are. Not only is our real self full of sin, it is full of flaws and brokenness—and full of hope.*

*To see who we are meant to be, who we are capable of being if we will stop running and start looking, is what conversion is all about.*

If we are willing to have our sins exposed, in the light of God's goodness revealed in Jesus, then he will do two things for us. First he will forgive us. One of the terms used to describe this forgiveness in the New Testament is the word "justified". It is a legal term that means we are acquitted of all the charges against us—accepted by God as if we had never sinned. We are **"justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Jesus Christ"** (Romans 3:24). The word "grace" in the Bible is a wonderful word that means God's undeserved kindness towards us. Someone has put it like this in a simple acrostic:

God's  
Riches  
At  
Christ's  
Expense

What it cost Christ in order to offer us this forgiveness was the cross. He went to the cross to take upon himself the just judgement of God, the consequence of our sins. This is the constant emphasis of the New Testament. **"God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us"** (Romans 5:8). The riches he offers us in return are not only forgiveness, but reconciliation, his friendship and love, and a certain future with him beyond the grave in **"a new heaven and a new earth, where justice will rule"** (2 Peter 3:13).

The second thing he will do for us is to give us the Holy Spirit. God the Holy Spirit will literally come to live within our human bodies. Our bodies become the **"temple where the Holy Spirit lives"** (1 Corinthians 6:19). His purpose is to transform us from the inside out in order to mould us into the sort of persons he planned us to be. This is a lifetime process as we learn to live in a daily relationship with him. One day he will **"present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy"** (Jude 24). In that

day our salvation will be complete. Christ's call is not just an invitation to be on the right side; it is an invitation to become the right person.

One of the great benefits of having experienced this forgiveness and the transforming power of the gospel is that we no longer have to live a life of pretence. Paul talks about it as living in a relationship with God with "unveiled faces". **"And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory"** (2 Corinthians 3:18). As we are fully accepted, there is no need to hide anything. It becomes easier to acknowledge our faults and we don't expect perfection of others. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, executed by the Nazis for his opposition to Hitler and his stand for Jesus, wrote, in *The Cost of Discipleship*:

*Only those who follow Jesus and cleave to him are living in complete truthfulness. Such men have nothing to hide from their Lord...Complete truthfulness is only possible where sin has been uncovered, and forgiven by Jesus...The cross is God's truth about us, and therefore it is the only power which can make us truthful. When we know the cross we are no longer afraid of the truth. We need no more oaths to confirm the truth of our utterances, for we live in the perfect truth of God.*

A good example of our human inclination to believe what we want about reality comes from the reporting by the New York Times on the fate of Petrograd in 1917. There was no suggestion of any falsely planted information; the paper's liberal credentials were impeccable. One historian later summed up the paper's performance:

*In the course of little over two years the New York Times reported the fall of Petrograd six times, announced at least three times more that it was on the verge of capture, burned it to the ground twice, twice declared it in absolute panic, starved it to death constantly, and had it in revolt against the Bolsheviks constantly, all without the slightest foundation in fact.*

Writing about the same event, Walter Lippman, himself a journalist, commented: "The news about Russia is a case of seeing not what was, but what men wished to see."

When it comes to the truth about ourselves, we resist truth even more strongly. If you consider that your "goodness" is quite adequate to satisfy the living God and to merit you a place in his heaven, may I suggest a little exercise. Read through the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel, chapters 5, 6 and 7, and prayerfully consider how you measure up.

## **A choice to be made**

The Bible is very clear that we all have a choice to make in this life—the most important choice we will ever make. Truth calls for a response. We can face the light of God’s truth as it is revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, and any truth that will also reveal about ourselves, or we can continue to avoid it. If, however, we avoid it, then we will have no choice but to face it fully one day because **“[God] has set a day when he will judge all the world’s people with fairness. And he has chosen the man Jesus to do the judging for him. God has given proof of this to all of us by raising Jesus from death”** (Acts 17:31).

While on earth Jesus claimed that we would be judged in the light of the truth he himself had spoken. **“There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day”** (John 12:48). In that day God **“will show what is hidden in the dark and what is in everyone’s heart”** (1 Corinthians 4:5). Unfortunately, it will be too late then to accept his forgiveness and his transforming love. Our choice will have already been made. In the solemn words of the Bible we will be forever **“shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power”** (2 Thessalonians 1:9). It is significant that we are told three times in the last two chapters of the Bible that heaven will be no place for those who have lived in deceit (Revelation 21:8, 27; 22:15).

## Suggestions for those searching for truth

If you are among those who are looking for the truth and still have an open mind about it, then I suggest you begin by reading through one of the gospels at the beginning of the New Testament, in a modern translation.<sup>7</sup> However, before you do, pray a prayer something like this:

*Lord, I don’t know whether you are there or not, but if you are, then I want you to know I am sincere about wanting to know the truth about you. As I read this Gospel, I want you to reveal to me in some way whether this Jesus is really who he claimed to be and if it is true that he died for me. If you should convince me of this, then I will accept him as my Saviour and my Lord and follow wherever this truth leads.*

It takes some courage to pray a prayer like that as we can never be sure where it will lead. However, it is a good test of our sincerity. And it makes sense that we will always be better off facing whatever truth is out there than avoiding it. Jesus once said, **“If you really want to obey God, you will know if what I teach comes from God or from me”** (John 7:17). In other words,

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<sup>7</sup> There are many good translations available including *Good News* (for those with English as a second language), *New International Version* and *Contemporary English Version*.

whether or not I am going to know the truth depends on *what I really want*. George Macdonald in *The Curate's Awakening*, warned: "To try to explain truth to him who loves it not, is but to give him more plentiful material for misinterpretation."

The prominent Chinese Christian, Watchman Nee, spelled out more fully the kind of attitudes we must have if we are to know the truth:

*Lies have no price upon them. They are cheap and they abound everywhere. But for the truth there is always a price to pay. First there is the price of humility, for it is to the meek that light is given from God. If we are not prepared to buy the truth at the cost of our own humbling we shall not receive it. Then there is the price of patience. Quick verdicts and impatient decisions have little to do with the divine light which is given to those who will wait upon God and wait for God. And supremely, there is the price of obedience. "If any man willeth to do his will, he shall know." Unquestioning obedience is essential if we would know God's will and God's ways. Is our faith the cheap, easy kind that pays no price? Or are we prepared to have it founded on the truth of God, however great to us the cost of coming by that truth?*

In his book *Wise As a Serpent, Harmless As a Dove*, Charles Strohmer tells of his own search for truth:

*There is a real sense in which this book started to be written more than twenty-five years ago. It was in the late 1960s, and I was in my teens, when the inspiring idea broke in on me that 'whatever the answer to the problems of the world was, it must be Truth with a capital "T".' Within months this insight cast like iron in my soul and I resolved to make a search for Truth, whatever that was. And then when I found it, I wanted to communicate it to others who were likewise disenchanted...*

*In my early twenties, astrology, meditation, visualisation, 'spirit guides', vegetarianism, asceticism and psychic healing, roughly in that order — along with a spattering of other so-called New Age beliefs and practices — dominated my search for Truth. It did not take eighteen years this time, but roughly eight, for complete disenchantment to set in. The joy within me died when the 'truth' of the Aquarian Dream was found to be lies. The hope of more and better lives through reincarnation disappeared. Trusted New Age practices like meditation no longer brought tranquillity; others lost their appeal. As a friend said, "I was no better, I was no god." What I now know to be the power of God had smashed my Aquarian Dream.*

*Not knowing then in what direction to turn for the Truth, I dropped into deep depression. If Truth wasn't in the West or the East, or in a metaphysical marriage of the two, just where was it? I hadn't a clue now.*

*After several weeks of bewilderment, by God's grace I met the Truth Himself and became a Christian in July 1976. What an awakening, I can tell you! And indeed I wanted to tell everyone about the Truth, Jesus Christ.*

The certainty that Charles Strohmer found when he met Jesus has been experienced by countless others over the last 2,000 years (including myself!) regardless of where they started from, or what their past life may have dished up to them. Of course, meeting with Jesus is only the beginning, but the beginning of a wonderful new relationship that will deepen and become more satisfying as your faith grows and he leads you into more and more truth about himself and his plans for you, in this life and the next.

The Russian writer, Dostoevsky, met with Jesus through reading the New Testament while imprisoned in Siberia. Shortly after his release he wrote to a woman who had befriended him during this period:

*To believe that there is nothing more beautiful, more profound, more sympathetic, more reasonable, more manly, more perfect than Christ, and not only is there nothing but I tell myself with jealous love, there can be nothing. Besides, if anyone proved to me that Christ was outside the truth and it really was so that the truth was outside Christ, then I would prefer to remain with Christ than with the truth.*

The great thing is, however, as Dostoevsky found, that you may have both Christ and the truth, for in him truth finds its ultimate expression.

## **Commitment to truth**

Becoming a Christian, in the sense of entering into a personal relationship with the living Christ, is but the beginning of a journey. It can be a painful process as we learn to open up our lives more and more to the light of his truth. However, the rewards are incalculable, both for ourselves and others who may also begin the journey as a result of our decision. Jesus said that if we obeyed him, **“You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free”** (John 8:32). You will find that as God transforms you from within then your understanding of truth will grow. Character and spiritual understanding are inextricably linked in the Bible. John says, **“When we love others, we know that we belong to the truth, and we feel at ease in the presence of God”** (1 John 3:19).

One of the great advantages of being a Christian is that you don't have to avoid truth, wherever it may be found. There is no need to explain things away. It fits all the evidence—evidence that comes to us from science regarding the structure of the universe<sup>8</sup>; evidence from the nature of human

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<sup>8</sup> I have dealt with this in some detail in *The Complementary Nature of Science and Christianity*.

beings, their capacity for both great good and great evil; evidence from history, particularly that relating to the remarkable life, teaching and influence of Jesus Christ; evidence from the lives of millions who have claimed to have met this Christ and whose lives have been transformed as a result. Francis Schaeffer, one of the leading Christian thinkers of the past generation, was fond of emphasising that there is only one reason to be a Christian—because it is true.

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If you have come to the point where you are prepared to begin such a journey, you may find it helpful to pray a prayer something like this:

*Jesus, I am willing to open my life to you. Show me the truth about myself—the best and the worst.*

*I accept that you died for my sins because of your great love for me and I thank you for that.*

*I am sorry for my sin, I repent of it, and I now accept your forgiveness.*

*Come into my life and begin the process of moulding me into all you planned that I should be.*

*Give me the courage and strength to live worthily of your love and to follow this truth wherever it leads.*

*Amen.*

If you should make this commitment, then start reading through the New Testament, asking God to reveal more of himself and his plans for you. Also, find other Christians with whom you feel comfortable and who can be an encouragement. We grow in our faith more when we do it with others on the same journey. May God grant you that certainty that only comes from knowing him who is Truth.

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Some books I have found helpful in exploring the whole issue of truth in today's postmodern world:

*Moving Between the Times* by Brian Carrell (The Deepsight Trust, PO Box 87-362, Meadowbank, Auckland, New Zealand, 1998).

*The Universe Next Door* by James W. Sire (Second Edition, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois 60515, 1988).

*The Death of Truth* by Dennis McCallum—General Editor—and others (Bethany House Publishers, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55438, 1996).

*The New Absolutes* by William D. Watkins (Bethany House Publishers, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55438, 1996).

*The Good, the Bad and the Mislead* by Mark Roques with Jim Tickner (Monarch Publications, Broadway House, The Broadway, Crowborough, East Sussex, TN6 1HQ, 1994).

