

Introduction

AS MODERN THINKERS, WE have inherited a legacy concerning our concept of truth. Part of that legacy involves the idea that our understanding of truth should be objective or factual: that truth is not something subjective or a matter of opinion, but something that is “out there” within a reality apart from us and unaffected by our perspective of it. The idea of certainty is also part of that legacy and it too shapes our modern notion of truth. If something is true, it should be certain, and the new science of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries provided a model for that certainty. The new science was a mathematical science that quantified nature as never before. It joined the study of nature with mathematics and offered a degree of certainty unknown to the ancients and medievals. This mathematical science also provided the third part of our inherited concept of truth, that is, that truth should be precise. In the modern period, these ideas became so closely associated with truth that we came to believe that any ideas that were contradictory, vague, or ambiguous should have no place in our thinking about truth. All truth claims should be objective, certain, and precise.

One of the reasons these ideas became so dominant in our thinking about truth was that they held forth the promise of dispelling mystery. The ancient and medieval worlds were full of mystery, but the emerging science of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries set its sights on transforming the mysterious into knowledge. The early modern belief was that we could eliminate many of life’s problems if our knowledge of them was objective, certain, and precise. If we had such knowledge of a certain disease, for example, we could cure it. As the new science grew in popularity, we came to imagine that if we were to know the truth, our knowledge would have to be objective, certain, and precise.

In the chapters that follow, we trace the emergence of these ideas that became so closely associated with, and thus shaped our modern concept of truth. We then look at how those ideas came under scrutiny in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and were abandoned or greatly modified in order to fit our contemporary understanding of the human condition. Finally, we suggest alternative ideas that might better shape our concept of truth in ways that are more compatible with both a twenty-first century understanding of the human condition, and the things that Jesus said and did.

We begin with the idea of objectivity: there had always been the idea that we had access to objective reality, but in the modern period, some influential thinkers stressed the importance of pure observation— independent of theory—as the means to truth. This had a great influence on forming the new science, which stressed its independence from theory and reliance on the pure data of experience. The new science would maintain that the best way to get at the true nature of things was to make objective observations free of theory and speculation. There certainly was reason to distrust the theories of the past, as we will see, and as the new emerging science continued to yield fruit, objectivity became an essential element in the quest for truth. With the apparent success of the new science, the idea of objectivity found its way into modern theology as well.

In theology, there was a similar rejection of theory in favor of the objective study of Scripture. The reformers had rejected the traditional authority of the church just as modern science rejected the authority of Aristotle. As science looked to what it took to be the facts of nature as authority, modern theologians looked to the facts of Scripture. This had a disastrous effect upon the Gospel. If God were revealing himself to us through the facts reported in Scripture, then the revelations offered through Moses, Joshua, or David were as true as the revelation offered by Jesus. Indeed, if all of Scripture is an objective revelation of who God is, then the Jesus revelation is no different from the other revelations offered throughout the Scripture. They all represent objective facts about the nature of God. Of course, this kind of fundamentalism is attractive to us because of the freedom it offers. With such an objective reading of Scripture, we can temper Jesus' command to love our enemies,¹ with

1. Matt 5:44 and Luke 6:27.

Joshua command to kill our enemies.² If both are revelations of the objective nature of God, sometimes God wants us to love our enemies and sometimes God wants us to kill our enemies. Thus, we get to choose whether we think this is a time for loving or killing our enemies. Usually, we decide this is a time for killing, and we have God's objective revelation to support our choice.

We now know, however, that objectivity, as the early modern thinkers understood it, is an illusion, and what they imagined to be the objective study of nature was not raw data at all but a phenomenal interpretation of data. We now know that human experience is a composite of data and the understanding through which we interpret that data. Our God experience is no different, and is always a composite of God's revelation, and our interpretation of that revelation. This is the nature of our human condition as we understand it today, and, as we will see, it provides us with a way to understand the Scripture, not as an objective revelation of God's nature, but as God's revelation of how human beings interpret their God experiences. Thus, although both Joshua and Jesus experience the same God, they interpret and understand their experience of God in very different ways.

It should be obvious that finite, temporal human beings could never objectively understand an infinite and eternal God. The best we can hope for is an understanding befitting our limited perspective, and that seems to be exactly what the Scripture offers. As such, the Scripture is God's revelation of how we human beings understand our encounters with God, and how God patiently and graciously works with our misunderstandings to bring us to a better perspective.

Having considered the modern connection between truth and objectivity, we then examine the way early modern thinkers tried to connect their new scientific inquiries to the kind of certainty that we find in mathematics. The modern idea of a mathematical physics, which gave us a quantifiable understanding of nature, produced the illusion that the truths of science were certain and precise, like the truths of mathematics. As the influence of modern science spread and became the model for all right thinking, so did the idea that all truth should be certain and precise. Consequently, if the Gospel were true, its truth would have to appear certain and precise as well. This led to an enormous distortion concerning the truth of the Gospel.

2. Josh 6:20–21.

Today we now know that the truths of science are probable rather than certain, and when science is precise with its predictions, it usually concerns its own technology rather than nature itself. Contemporary science has modified the ambition of earlier modern science, but many people still equate truth with the kind of certainty we find in mathematics. Consequently, they imagine that if the Gospel is true, then it must be certain, but the Gospel never offers us certainty. Instead, Jesus says, “follow me” and calls us to a journey. Truth is the end of that journey. It is not a truth that we possess, but a truth that we follow. It is something that draws us unto itself. It is not a truth that we get a hold of, but a truth that gets hold of us. It does not provide assurance that we can be certain of the future but it is what provides direction for that future.

The next three chapters examine the nature of logic as a means to truth. In the medieval world, under Aristotle’s influence, logic enjoyed a dominant place. With the modern age, however, we came to see the kind of analytic thinking at the base of Western logic since the time of Aristotle as synonymous with reason itself. The logic of such thinking was based upon laws of thought that included the Law of Non-Contradiction (A does not equal not A.), the Law of Identity (A equals A.), and the Law of Excluded Middle (either A or not A, but not both A and not A). As we came to see these laws of thought as the basis for all right thinking, it became even more difficult to get at the truth of the Gospel. When we associate reason exclusively with analytic thinking and its laws of thought, we deem unreasonable anything that does not conform to such thinking and its laws. Consequently, much of modern theology found itself either ignoring parts of the Gospel or interpreting them in ways that conformed to the narrow, analytic reasoning of modernity.

Today we know that the two hemispheres of our bicameral brain allow for different types of thinking, and the analytic, left-brain logic of modernity is not the only logic. The logic of synthetic, right-brain thinking allows for contradictions, and the laws of thought that govern such thinking are very different from those that govern analytic, left-brain thinking. When we refuse to analyze phenomena into ever smaller parts in order to eliminate all contradictions, but instead attempt to understand things synthetically in their wholeness, contradictions are natural. Thus, a divine mystery such as God being both a plurality (three) and a unity (one) at the same time is perfectly reasonable to right-brain thinking, which accepts contradictions as natural. Equally, we best understand

many of the teachings of Jesus with a synthetic logic that defies the Law of Non-Contradiction and the Law of Exclude Middle. With such an alternative logic, Divine mysteries are not unknowable but are rather infinitely knowable; that is, infinitely knowable if we allow ourselves to be drawn into those mysteries rather than rejecting them because they defy analysis.

In the final chapters, we consider what the Jesus revelation would look like from an enlightened twenty-first century concept of truth. By freeing our notion of truth from its exclusive association with analytic thinking and ideas of objectivity, certainty, and precision, we gain new insight into the truth of Jesus' message. Of course, coming to the truth of the Gospel will never be easy. The Jesus revelation will always do violence to our understanding, because there simply is no context from which to understand the God of the universe having become a human being. What possible context could there be for a human being who was also the God who spoke the universe into existence? Thus, even if we can get beyond our truncated, modern notion of truth, we still face the absurdity of an infinite God having become a finite man. That will forever be a mystery to us, but, as an infinitely knowable mystery, we can continue to gain insight into it.

The Gospel is about a truth that is a person, and like the truth of any person, we come to better know that truth when we discover that it is more mysterious than we first imagined. In coming to know the truth of a person, a certain and precise understanding says there is no mystery and there is no more for us to know. By contrast, a less certain and precise understanding is the better understanding because it allows us to delve deeper into the mystery of that persons. This is especially true if we are trying to understand a divine person. The truth we seek in coming to know Jesus is a truth that is neither certain nor precise. It is rather a truth that is compatible with the things he said and did, and a truth that better enables us to follow him.