

The Truth Question

JOHN 1:1-4, 14-17; 8:32 (NRSV) *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ...¹⁴And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's* *only son, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵(John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") ¹⁶From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*

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8:32" *...and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."*

48 times in the Gospel of John—as compared to ten times in the other three gospels combined—48 times John uses some form of "αλήθεια", which in the original language of the New Testament means "truth." It is a major theme in John.

This is the fifth in a series of sermons sharing the title of Jim Wallis' book, *Christ in Crisis: Why We Need to Reclaim Jesus*. If you've missed any of the previous sermons and are interested, the video recordings and the printed manuscripts are available on our website, which is shown at the bottom of the screen.

Wallis finds eight questions—eight teachings of Jesus—to help us gauge whether we truly are reclaiming Jesus. Today we look at "The Truth Question."

The Temple leadership charged Jesus with claiming to be a king. That would have been a direct challenge to the power of Rome. As he stood before Pilate:

"Pilate asked him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.' Pilate asked him, 'What is truth?'" ~JOHN 18:37-38 (NRSV)

It's an infamous, yet universal question, and John has been setting it up all thru his Gospel. Maybe Pilate asked it rhetorically, implying there's no such thing as objective truth, but we need to ask the question literally.

I've said many times: I believe in universal, absolute truth. But we humans are not capable of comprehending truth absolutely. Paul writes in I Corinthians: *"For now we see as if through a flawed pane of glass, but then we will see face to face."* (13:12)

Given our limitations, how do we answer Pilate's question today?

The clay of which we humans are made is crumbling, and with it, any general comprehension of truth. People in leadership offer alternative facts to fit their partisan narrative and label any disagreement "fake news." Lies and misrepresentations are accepted as valid foundations for domestic policy and international relationships. Pilate's question is our question: "What is truth?"

At the table on the night he was betrayed, Jesus said to his disciples: (JOHN 14:3-6 NRSV) *"...I go and prepare a place for you, (and) I will come again and will*

take you to myself... ⁴And you know the way to the place where I am going.” ⁵Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” ⁶Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.”

When the number of official lies reaches the point that people question whether truth is even possible, Jesus says, “I am the truth.” That theme was established in John’s prologue: The “Word” that was in the beginning with God became flesh and lived among us, “...and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” The theme of “truth” grows throughout the gospel.

In my estimation, one of the most important books of this century is Derek Flood’s *Disarming Scripture: Cherry-Picking Liberals, Violence-Loving Conservatives, and Why We All Need to Learn to Read the Bible Like Jesus Did*.¹ A primary premise of the book is that the Hebrew Scriptures establish a trajectory.

A projectile fired from a canon follows a calculated trajectory to its target. A football thrown by an NFL quarterback follows a practiced trajectory to a receiver. From the creation narratives through the historic, prophetic, and wisdom writings of Israel, the Hebrew Scriptures form a trajectory that leads to Jesus.

Now, be careful. I’m not saying that from the time God said, “Let there be light,” that it was God’s plan at some future date God to send Jesus to die on a cross. That conclusion begs the question, “Why didn’t God just start with Jesus?” ACTUALLY, GOD DID EXACTLY THAT!

Jesus didn’t change anything about God’s plan. He was not an afterthought—not an adjustment or corrective to a flawed divine plan. In the beginning was the Word! In Jesus, we see a complete picture, start to finish: a flesh and blood manifestation of all God intended when God said, “Let us make humankind in our image.”

When Pilate asks, “What is truth?” Jesus already has said, “I am the truth.”

Theologian Andreas Köstenberger comments, “In the end, Pilate is a tragic figure who fails to realize the momentous significance of the present encounter... In fact, through Pilate, John teaches us something quite profound about the connection between Jesus and truth, namely, that the more one knows who Jesus is (who is the truth), the more one must become apathetic about the issue of truth itself if one is to continue rejecting Jesus.”²

Theologian Miroslav Volf adds, “Trials are supposed to be about finding out what happened and meting out justice. In Jesus’ trial, neither the accusers nor the judge cared for the truth... The judge scorns the very notion of truth: ‘What is truth?’ he asks, and uninterested in any answer, he leaves the scene... For both the accusers and the judge, the truth is irrelevant because it works at cross-purposes

¹ Metanoia Books, 2014.

² Andreas J. Köstenberger, “‘What Is Truth?’: Pilate’s Question in Its Johannine and Larger Biblical Context,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48, no. 1 (March 2005): p. 51.

to their hold on power. The only truth they will recognize is 'the truth of power.' So, it was the accused who raised the issue of truth and shrewdly reminded the judge of his highest obligation—find out the truth."³

I've often quoted C. S. Lewis: "It is Christ Himself, not the Bible, who is the true word of God. The Bible, read in the right spirit and with the guidance of good teachers will bring us to Him."⁴ It's that "trajectory" thing, you see.

So, paraphrasing Jim Wallis: for Jesus, "truth" is relational—not different from, but more than facts. In Jesus, truth is manifested as faithfulness, obedience, and loyalty to God; so truth is about the choices we make—who we believe and who we follow.⁵ Truth emerges from our relationship with God, and is lived out in how we incorporate the life of Christ into our own relationships with each other.

For us who see "as if through a flawed pane of glass," Jesus is the lens through which we see truth clearly. What we see is that truth and fact, while related, are not the same thing. Truth is more closely related to faith than to fact. Like faith, truth is not truth—it's merely fact—until it is lived out in our lives—as if we truly believe what we say we believe. Truth, then, is first cousin to integrity.

In the 1970s a popular bumper sticker said, "Jesus is the answer". I always wondered, "What was the question?"

Pilate asked, "What is truth?" Jesus IS the answer. You want to know what truth is? Look at Jesus—(again paraphrasing Wallis) the one who lived the truth of love over hate, service and sacrifice over domination; the truth of what is best for all, and not just the few in power; what is best for our neighbor, and not just our tribe, and the truth of nonviolence over violence for what is truly redemptive.⁶

Wallis reminds us of the many examples of redemptive truth exposing the falsehoods of official power: Dr. King leading children against the clubs, dogs, and water cannons of Bull Connor in Birmingham; Congressman John Lewis and the other voting rights foot soldiers crossing Edmund Pettis Bridge on "bloody Sunday" in Selma; the students who stood up for democracy in Tiananmen Square; East German Christians marching in prayer against the Berlin Wall; Parkland teenagers standing up to the gun lobby after their classmates were killed.

It's worth noting, however, that pitting the power of truth against the truth of power will entail risk and even self-sacrifice because of how entrenched the truth of power is. Truth is dismissed or denied by power, and the power of truth is then crucified by the powers that be—with Jesus and Pilate being the ultimate

³ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 266.

⁴ from a letter to Mrs. Johnson on November 8, 1952.

⁵ Wallis, Jim. *Christ in Crisis* (pp. 89-90). HarperOne. Kindle Edition.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.93.

example. (p. 93-94)

But as Köstenberger concludes, "Truth has a power of its own, a power that in the long run proves stronger than the usurped authority of institutional power. Jesus embodies this hope, the hope of the ultimate triumph of truth in the reign of his kingdom. It is this hope to which he bore witness in his 'good confession' before Pilate. May you and I bear witness to this truth, the gospel, which is found only in Jesus, and may we, by our words and our lives, give a clear, distinct, and irrefutable answer to Pilate's question, "What is truth?"⁷

Prayer Slide

⁷ Köstenberger, *Op. Cit.*, p. 62.