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Paul Anderson

George Fox University, panderso@georgefox.edu

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Truth and Liberation 1

Paul Anderson

Jesus says in the Gospel of John, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.” (John 8:32) But what did he mean by that? And, what does that saying mean to you and me today?

On one hand, we in the modern era might take this to mean that the discovery of truth about the world, science, and technology will help us do problem-solving in ways that lead to progress. After all, modern science has led to the eradication of many illnesses, food and drinking water are more available now than ever before in human history, and our lives are healthier because of technology and scientific discovery. Truth indeed liberates and empowers.

Or, we might think of liberation as freedom from bondage and entrapment. How many politicians, celebrities, or public figures wish they had not compromised the truth — either on small matters or on large ones — their reputations eventually destroyed by dishonesty or duplicity? Living in the truth would indeed have made things easier in the long run, although perhaps more difficult in the short run. And yet, coming clean, confessing the truth, also poses a new way forward, as owning up to the truth allows the extension and reception of grace.

Another way to understand this saying is to see it as affirming emancipation from our false understandings of self and society. In Plato’s Allegory of the Cave (The Republic 8), men are bound in chains in a cave, seeing in front of them their shadows dancing on the wall, projected by the fire in back of them. When one man breaks loose of his shackles, goes outside, sees the sun, and comes back in to tell people the good news that what they see in front of them is not reality but only shadows on the wall, they kill him.

Ironically, rather than welcoming the truth about their condition and perspective as liberating, those who are bound by the shackles are threatened by the truth. They enjoyed congratulating each other on predicting movements of the shadows, and they prized status among peers over and above the

liberating power of truth. As the Gospel of John puts it, they loved the praise of humans more than the glory of God (John 12:43).

But that's how things are in the world; Socrates claimed to be guilty of corrupting the youth — corrupting them by helping them appreciate the higher ideals of life over and above their material expressions. So, he was killed, as were Jesus, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and others. Sometimes the truth is threatening as well as liberating, and in Jesus' day, some preferred darkness rather than light, lest it be exposed that their notions are rooted in self-made conventions rather than the liberating power the truth (John 3:18-21).

The great promise of the modern era, however, is that the discovery of truth in science, technology, art, and reason will provide a great service in making things better for everyone — even the state of the planet. Because of scientific discovery we understand the biology, chemistry, and composition of the world and its inhabitants far better than any other time in human history. Discoveries in medicine allow people to be healthier and for devastating illnesses to be overcome. Breakthroughs in technology allow us to build the structures and framework of society in ways that make life easier and better than it ever has been before. Advances in discovery and communication allow for problems to be solved collectively instead of resorting to force or coercion.

These and other advances show that Jesus was right. Truth indeed is liberating, and what we need in the world is greater access to the truth and greater adherence to it. This is the first of several essays on this subject — building what I hope will be a book-length project. All input is welcome; and, may we all abide in the truth, which alone is truly liberating!