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Truth and Liberation 1.2: A Part of My Story

Paul Anderson

A Part of My Story

While others might approach this subject in their own ways, this is my story. My understanding of the liberating power of truth came to me clearly, late one night driving from London to Glasgow, where I had begun my doctoral studies on the Gospel of John. Carla and I had just spent Thanksgiving weekend with an American couple in London, Tom and Nancy Taylor, serving with the Friends World Committee for Consultation. As we made our way back to Glasgow with our two-year-old daughter Sarah, we stopped at Jordan Friends Meeting, the historic site featured in the classic painting by Doyle Penrose, *The Presence in the Midst*. In that painting, the image of Christ is shown to be blessing the meeting where people are gathered in his name—a sacramental image rooted in Matthew 18:18-20.

“Presence in the Midst” by Doyle Penrose

As we entered the meeting for worship, the stillness of the silence was gripping. One could feel a rich sense of divine presence as people worshiped quietly, attending the leadings of Christ within the gathered meeting. For the next 45 minutes, our usually active two-year-old sat on my lap without stirring; that was amazing! Yet even she could sense that there were something special about being gathered in the Spirit of the one who claimed to be the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). This also was the historic site where the families of William Penn and Isaac Penington were buried in the graveyard. The barn nearby is also said to have been built with timbers taken from the *Mayflower*, the boat that brought pilgrims across the Atlantic in search of religious freedom in the New World. After leaving

Jordan's, we headed on to Stratford on Avon, the home of William Shakespeare. There we visited his birthplace and museums featuring the life and great literary work of the Bard; once again I was reminded of the power of literary expression in his capacity to open our eyes to ironic truths about ourselves, society, and the world. After we got back in the car, covering the remaining 500 miles to Glasgow, Carla and Sarah fell asleep. Over the next several hours, a number of insights came to me about the liberating power of truth. These are the insights shared in this book, but here's a bit more about the background.

Before coming to Glasgow, as a pastor of a Friends Church in Oregon, I had been impressed by Parker Palmer's book, *To Know as We Are Known: The Spirituality of Education*. In that book we are reminded that truth is not limited to objective measures of facts and reason; rather, truth also includes subjective realities involving feelings and relationships. According to Palmer, if Jesus really is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6), to come closer to the truth is to come closer to Christ, and to come closer to Christ is to come closer to the truth.

This made sense to me, as I was also reading the Gospel of John carefully and thoughtfully in my studies. I was also impressed at Glasgow Friends Meeting, which embraced far more open and inclusive approach to Christian faith and practice than other traditions. This made me wonder if the light of Christ, accessible to every person (John 1:9)—at least potentially—required particular religious packaging for one to experience the liberating truth of Christ. After all, truth is often encountered in ways that genuinely surprise us. If people were open to the truth, in whatever form or venue it might be found, might people be reached by the saving-revealing work of Christ in ways yet unimagined?

Further, if Jesus came to reveal God's truth to the world, the content of that truth is personal and relational rather than being limited to a particular set of notions or propositions. Just as the Jesus of history challenged religious and political leaders of his day as the Revealer of God's presence and love, the revelational work of Christ through the Holy Spirit also scandalizes religious leaders today if they are not rooted in God's love and open to God's leadings. Like the religious leaders before the seeing blind man in John 9, their sin is that they claim, "We see." (John 9:41) As we drove in the dark and the rain on the way to Scotland, I recalled the provocative actions of Jesus. He healed people on the Sabbath rather

than allowing people to continue in their suffering just because doctors were trying not to break the law by working on that special day. Jesus also overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the temple and drove out the animals; God's house is not a marketplace of trade, privileging some but excluding others. God's grace is availed to all, not just those who can afford the right sort of sacrificial animal or those who perform the prescribed ritual ask. Jesus dined with "sinners"—even before they repented—an act of inclusion and embrace offered to those alienated from society. God looks upon the heart, and those who fully receive God's embrace by faith also receive fully God's gifts of grace and love.

In contrast to both religious and political approaches to power, truth is always liberating, and that's what Jesus came to bring. However, if truth is personal, it is not a static reality, but a dynamic one. Therefore, in following Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life, the question is not simply how can we seek the truth; rather, we also must be open to being found by the truth. God is Spirit, and those who worship him must do so in Spirit and in truth; those are the sorts of people that God actively seeks, desiring to draw them into transformative relationship (John 4:21-24). In that sense, we seek the truth until by it we are also found. Building on these insights, a new set of understandings came over me that night, driving from Stratford to Glasgow. And, I'm still unpacking their meanings as they connect with further insights and learnings ever since. What follows in this book is thus not an academic exercise exegeting a biblical text in the Gospel of John. I do plenty of that in my other writings. Rather, this exploration reflects my unpacking the implications of truth and its liberating power as I've thought about them over the years.

As a teacher, writer, and follower of Jesus, one of my lifelong callings is to be a seeker of truth and its liberating power. Thank you for joining me in that quest; we are not alone.