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Truth and Liberation 1.2, But, How Do We Proceed?

Paul Anderson

In seeking the truth, though, how do we proceed? Is there one universal truth, or is truth in the eye of countless beholders? Is truth discovered, or is it revealed? If discovered, how do we approach it; if revealed, how do we apprehend the revelation? Does discerning truth primarily involve our senses or our minds? These questions defy easy answers, but light leads to life, and grace reflects the paradoxes of truth. God's love has been spoken and expressed throughout time, but the problem is not divine silence: God has spoken at many times and in many ways (Heb 1:1-4). The problem is human incapacity to imagine the inconceivable: that undeserved love, forgiveness, acceptance, and embrace are availed to any and all who are willing receive. This is why Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life, is the one through whom all who come to the Father do so (John 14:6). It is not God who requires humans to get with a designated religious program; it is humans who require the revelation of the unimaginable—God's transformative grace and truth—for this gift to be glimpsed and received.

No one has seen God at any time (John 1:18;); the only hope for humanity is to be taught by God (John 6:45-46). In that sense, revelation (God's self-disclosure to humanity) becomes a scandal to religion (human systems designed to engage the divine). A God who speaks is also a God who threatens, lest the revelation exposes creaturely origins of our platforms and scaffoldings (John 3:19-21). The human initiative is of no avail; it is only the divine initiative that offers hope for humanity (John 1:10-13). No one *can* come to God's truth except one be drawn to it (John 6:44), and God's saving-revealing initiative has been at work throughout

time and across cultures. So, the God who creates and redeems is also the God who speaks. But, how do we discern the one Voice from among the many, especially in relation to liberating truth?

Is discerning the truth simply a matter of getting “the three R’s” down—readin’, writin’, ‘rithmetic—or are other elements involved? I liked the way Robert Funk and the Jesus Seminar emphasized “the fourth R” several decades ago: *religion*. While the quest for truth rightly involves the best of intellectual inquiry, it ultimately is a spiritual quest because it goes to the core of our being as humans. And yet, the religious quest can also be problematic. In our growingly diverse world, which also grows ever smaller in terms of connectivity, the authority of one religion against all others becomes increasingly difficult to assert. However, if truth and its discernment are central to the quest, new possibilities emerge in ways that include religious faith but also transcend religious boundaries. This is what I believe the truth of Christ entails, and it need not have a religious label or packaging for it to be real and transformative.

A powerful thrust of John’s prologue asserts that the light of Christ enlightens all persons—this is the one who was coming into the world in the ministry of Jesus (John 1:9). Access to light and truth would have included John’s Jewish family and friends in the late first century, but it also would have extended to those among the Gentiles who warmed to the message of the gospel even before embracing markers of Jewish and emerging Christian faith and practice. As the Greek philosopher Heraclitus taught in 5th-century BC Ephesus, whereas the cosmos is laden with movement and flux (one cannot step into a moving stream twice in the same place) order still abides. And, the source of that ordering force in the cosmos is named as the divine *Logos*—the divine force and principle available to all. Philo of Alexandria later links God’s *Logos* with the creative work of God, and John connects the creative Word of God at the beginning of time with God’s redemptive work of light, grace, and truth availed through Christ.

Within the Christian tradition, the divine *Logos* has been conceived in numerous ways over the centuries, but several approaches are worth noting. First, with Heraclitus and the Greek philosophers, *reason* is a gift that is available to all. Within the scientific era, that which is discernible by the five senses—seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, tasting—is available for all to judge. This is what

“facts” are and why they are compelling. They are elements of truth ascertained and attested by one or more of the five senses. Conversely, reason works with abstract realities as well as physical ones, engaging theory and abstraction. The math will be constant even if numbers of particular apples or oranges in a fruit basket vary. Therefore, reason and reflection are means of discerning liberating truth.

A second basis for discerning truth within the Jewish-Christian heritage is *Scripture*. After all, if God has spoken in the past, the record of those impressions continues to serve later generations seeking to hear God speaking in the present. And, when read prayerfully, it might even be that the same Spirit who inspired the development and writing of the Scriptures will also engage us as we read them. Of course, discerning what is being said within a text leads to inferring what it means. Therefore, the central portrayal of God in the Old and New Testament is of a creator-redeemer who speaks—in many times and in many ways. And, in finding meaning in the text, God continues to speak as readers are drawn into encountering God’s truth.

A third way to discern God’s truth involves *learning from the past*. As we embrace lessons of the past throughout the history of church and society, we learn from the past and need not repeat the mistakes of others. We also benefit from how the most weighty themes of Scripture have been interpreted by the most thoughtful of readers, and they become our guides in discerning God’s truth for the present. By reading the best of classic literature, the great minds of the past also become our partners in thought and reflection—transcending the limitations of time and space. Therefore, God’s truth revealed in art, music, literature, culture, and other contributions over the centuries provides helpful guides for glimpsing what God might be doing in our world today.

A fourth approach to hearing God speak involves hearing the voice of God *in community*. We are not alone in the quest for truth; all have at least potential access to God’s truth, while no one has total access. That being the case, we need one another in discerning genuine truth from its lesser alternatives, and the community of faith becomes the primary context in which impressions are tested and refined. In a very real sense, truth-seeking communities also provide a common sense of how the truth is ascertained and understood. Therefore,

clearness within a corporate setting, especially among the wise and earnest seekers of truth, is a key resource for seekers of truth. Submitting understandings and leadings to the evaluation of a community saves many from potential disaster if offered humbly and conscientiously.

Finally, if all have at least potential access to God's truth, and if the light of Christ is available to all, its discernment must also involve *an inward quest*. That which is of God, in contrast to that which is creaturely in origin, is threshed inwardly, as kernels are separated from the chaff, and the potent granules of truth are preserved. However, despite being apprehended inwardly, the source is none other than the God of truth, who continues to speak if we will but attend, discern, and mind the present leadings of the divine.

Of course, seeing the truth about ourselves can be threatening, as we all face things about ourselves that we wish were different. And, the truth about God is always elusive, as we too easily project onto the divine what we find missing in our lives. Further, failure to glimpse the truth of the other forms the basis for prejudice and hatred as we dehumanize those we do not know and alienate ones with whom we do not empathize. Within society, the power of truth-convincement is far more compelling than the use of violence and force, and authoritative leadership is ever a function of facilitating the discernment of truth and viable ways forward. Ultimately, living in the truth liberates us from the shame and embarrassment that comes from breaches of honesty and lapses of integrity.

So, as Jesus promises that his followers would know the truth, and that the truth would be liberating, I write this book as a reflection on what that means to me. And, I'll blame Parker Palmer more than just a little bit for the ways that his connecting of truth and its liberating power with love and grace of God revealed in Jesus as the Christ. In my understanding, this relates to our lives and personal transformation, to authentic worship as we glimpse the truth of God, to social concern and ministry as we glimpse the truth of the other, as nonviolent and discernment-oriented approaches to problem-solving and leadership, and as a basis for living with integrity in an ever-changing world.

In these and other ways, we not only understand liberating power truth; we experience that liberation for selves. That's what I hope this book will convey, and that's what I hope its readers will discover also for themselves.