

2016

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Paul Anderson

George Fox University, panderso@georgefox.edu

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Recommended Citation

Anderson, Paul, "Truth and Liberation 2: Personal Transformation" (2016). *Faculty Publications - College of Christian Studies*. Paper 199.

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Truth and Liberation 2:

Personal Transformation

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 does that mean for you and me, personally? One of the most powerful ways that truth offers liberation involves personal transformation. When we come to see the truth about ourselves, we find ourselves liberated from any number of inward chains or shackles, restoring the abundant life that Jesus came to offer (John 10:10).

When you look at the life-producing encounters with Jesus storied in the Gospel of John, notice how many of them are connected to people feeling known by another in the transformative power of truth. From afar Jesus recognizes Nathanael as “an Israelite in whom there is nothing false” (1:46-50). In his knowing exchange with the Samaritan woman at the well, she ran and told her friends, “He told me everything I’ve ever done.” (4:15-19) After the resurrection, in his encounter with Mary Magdalene in the garden, the very mention of her name leads to her moment of spiritual recognition. Hearing her name, “Mary,” she immediately responds, “Master!” (using the Aramaic word for teacher, *Rabbouni*, 20:16). And, the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of Truth—leads followers of Jesus into truth faithfully, bringing to remembrance his earlier words and teachings as they need in their lives (16:13).

But how do we encounter liberating truth in our lives today, and how are we set free in the process? As human beings, Genesis 1 reminds us that we are created, male and female in the divine image, entrusted a unique role as stewards of the planet (vv. 26-31). The next chapters, though, show the fall of humanity and its

devastating results. In following the deceiver, humans came to know the difference between good and evil—feeling themselves ashamed of their nakedness. This caused estrangement from God—even feeling like strangers to ourselves and to one another. Note that the Creator’s first act is to offer coverings to humans—not because God needed it, but because humans did. Note also that humans were created for fellowship with God and with one another; because of the fall, those relationships became troubled, and pain and labor also entered human existence.

What we see in the rest of the biblical story, though, is that God has been at work, throughout history, seeking to heal and restore humans’ relationships with God, with one another, with the planet, and within ourselves. Through covenants with Israel, God reveals truth to the world as to what best practices deserve to be—both in relation to God and to one another (Ex 20:1-17). God’s chosen people thus become a light to the nations, wherein the instructions of God pose a blessing to the nations—offering clear standards of justice, peace, and integrity as ways forward in making this a more peaceable and prosperous world. Jesus even reduced the Ten Commandments to the essential two: love God, and Love one another (Mark 12:29-31). And, as well as being the light of the world (John 8:12), Jesus calls for his followers also to be the light of the world (Matt 5:14) as they become living witnesses to God’s grace and truth.

Seeing the truth about ourselves, though, can be threatening. Not only was Israel given the Law of Moses, but the Gentiles also have a law unto themselves, exposing the fact that none of us lives up to our convictions about the right ways to act and be. Therefore, people tend to suppress the truth about the ways of God in order to justify their ways, and people also deny the truth of God in making for themselves idols that conform to their interests rather than God’s liberating truth (Ro 1:18-2:16). And, those who know the Jewish Law also fall short, with the result being the awareness that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God (3:23). This is why all are in need of grace; there is none righteous—no, not one (Ro 3:10). God’s unimaginable grace is what Jesus came to reveal, and what as the Christ he came to offer.

The amazing thing is that none of us deserves the love of God, and that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us, making the newness of life possible (Ro 5:8).

Both justice and grace are rooted in the perfect love of God. God's justice, or even the sense of justice embraced by humans, is not vindictive or punitive; it roots in a sense of what is fair and deserved. Therefore, in our awareness of how short we fall, as beloved children of God created in God's image but also falling short of that perfect standard, we know we do not deserve God's favor. It is a gift beyond what we deserve. In conventional terms, humans live by deservedness—by merit—and it cannot be otherwise. Without conventional norms and standards, society itself falls apart. And yet, the undeserved love of God—God's grace—is so radical and counter-conventional that it cannot be imagined or concocted. It must be revealed.

I wonder if that's why Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life is held to be the only way to the Father—the means by which all who come to God do so in John 14:6? If the light of Christ is available to all (John 1:9), John's presentation of saving grace is the most universal in the Bible, as well as the means of its disclosure being the most exclusive. The tension here, though, is not necessarily a contradiction. If both of these tenets are true, the reason may be that no one can come to the Father except being drawn by God (John 6:44); thus, Jesus as the light of the world is the time-changing way that God has drawn, and continues to draw, all persons to Godself. The issue is human capacity to imagine God's saving-revealing grace, not the divine restricting of one option over and against all others.

Therefore, if humanity can only receive God's gift of eternal life as an undeserved gift, rather than a merited form of justice, the only hope for humanity is what must be revealed—God's saving and redeeming grace—which is what God tells the world in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as the Messiah/Christ. Therefore, while the Law came through Moses, grace and truth have come to the world through Jesus Christ (John 1:16-17). God's saving-revealing work is a scandal to religion, because it requires the laying down of all that is of creaturely and human origin (which is what political, societal, and religious platforms do) in order to respond in faith to God's initiative and love.

While seeing the truth about ourselves helps us see our need for God, leading to the humbling reception of grace in considering the truth of God's saving-revealing work in Christ, it not only assures our future; it also redeems our past and

present. God's gift of eternal life not only begins after we die; it also becomes a reality in the here and now, as we see ourselves more clearly in the light of grace and truth. Therefore, glimpsing God's truth about ourselves becomes liberating to us personally, and that happens on several levels.

Several years ago, a couple of theorists developed what came to be known as the Johari Window.[1] This is not an eastern paradigm; their names were Joe and Harry. The four-framed image they constructed involves four categories of personal truth. The first quadrant involves our *open selves—the arena*: what is known to ourselves and to others. The second quadrant involves our *hidden selves—the façade*: what is known to ourselves but not to others. The third quadrant involves our *unaware selves—our blind spots*: what is known to others, but not to ourselves. The fourth quadrant involves our *unknown selves*—what is known neither to ourselves nor to others: the truth of ourselves known only to God. Of course, God knows us through all of these panes, even though we and others are only aware of two of them. And yet, as the Holy Spirit works in our lives, a greater awareness of the truth in our lives bolsters a healthy self-esteem, freeing us to also amend what might be lacking.

For instance, as we see more clearly the truth about ourselves, we develop a healthier and more balanced sense of self-esteem. Welcoming the criticisms of others illumines our blind sides. That helps us become better people, enabling us to offend people less and to become a more life-producing presence in the company of others. As God's truth about our lives becomes more fully known to us, we also are often led to make needed changes in our lives and to confess our needs and shortcomings before God and others. And, as we come to glimpse more clearly the unaware and hidden aspects of our lives, dealing with them appropriately, we find liberty in bringing aspects of our authentic selves into the public spheres in our lives in ways that have integrity. In all of these movements, of course, the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of Truth (John 16:13)—leads us into life-producing truth, and seeing more fully the truth about ourselves is always liberating.

Another way the truth sets us free personally is that our anxiety is greatly reduced. The great therapist Carl Rogers argued that anxiety—feeling of discomfort regarding one's intimate self—is a direct result of the lack of overlap

between our perceived selves and our experienced selves.[2] More specifically, what we hope or feel we should do or be might involve one set of values, while our honest self-appraisal, or the appraisal of others, might involve another. Rogers calls the lack of overlap between our perceived and experienced selves “incongruity,” whereas the section of overlap he calls “congruity.” Therefore, the degree to which one’s perceived self matches one’s experienced self leads to congruity and emotional health. Conversely, the lack of overlap between our perceived and experienced selves involves incongruity, and such is the source of anxiety, or personal dis-ease.

Therefore, the effective therapist will work with the client, helping one appreciate the difference between these two realities, and empowering the individual to make changes toward greater congruity, thus diminishing anxiety and defensiveness. For instance, if my perceived self is that of a good golfer, but my experienced self suggests that I’d be better off trading my golf score for my bowling score, that difference will involve a high degree of incongruity. The more important the subject is, of course, the greater the anxiety will also be.

So, having become aware of the dissonance between what sort of golfer I might like to be, in tension with my actual performance, I have three options. First, I may just live with the tension, although I might then get defensive if others pointed out my inadequacies along those lines. Second, I could modify my self-perception and say to myself, “Well, I wish I were a good golfer, but I’m actually rather modest in my performance.” That would adjust my self-appraisal in more realistic directions. Third, I could get out there and work on my short game, and my long game, and try to improve my actual scores. Or, some combination of the three options is often the way things go, given the fact that in this life we will never achieve full congruity. Adjustment in any of these directions, though, will lead to a healthier and less anxious existence; that indeed is liberating inwardly and otherwise!

Interestingly, the work of the Holy Spirit actually does a similar sort of work in our lives as that of a good therapist. Jesus promises to send the Spirit of truth called the *Paraklētos* (the helper, comforter, advocate—one who is called alongside, to help), who convicts the world of sin and of righteousness (John 16:8). This inward work of truth-orientation is liberating in two directions. First, if we can trust the

Holy Spirit to convict us of sin, or the truth of what needs to change in our lives, we need not subject ourselves to self-doubt, or self-blame. Rather, but we can simply open our lives to God and embrace the correction needed in order to live lives that are pleasing to God and a blessing to others. We also need not subject ourselves to the opinions of others, in that God is our judge. While lateral critiques may help us glimpse the needed truth about ourselves, we finally hold that sense of conviction before the divine light of Christ—the work of the Holy Spirit—sifting the weightier content from the rest, clarifying what is worthy of affirmation and also what needs to be changed.

Additionally, the Holy Spirit also convicts us of righteousness, and this has additional benefits. If we can look to the Spirit of truth for affirmation, we need not prop ourselves up in ego-asserting ways. Rather, we can simply rest in the authentic affirmation that comes from divine approval. As a result, then, we also become less dependent on praise and affirmation from others, as being affirmed in the truth becomes more important than popularity or lateral confirmation. Therefore, when the Holy Spirit works in our lives, setting us free from what is hidden from us, or even our tendencies to deny the truth about ourselves, this transformative work results in liberation—both personally and socially. We become less enslaved to our hopes of what we wish we were, and we become liberated from seeking the affirmation of others, because the One Voice beyond the many has spoken. And that word is gracious and good.

Therefore, as we come to see more clearly the truth about ourselves, we become liberated from fear, anxiety, condemnation, and pride. Seeing ourselves as fallen-yet-beloved of God makes all things new in terms of transformation. We become grateful for grace, and we thus become more fully enabled to extend God's grace to others. We become less defensive and more self-assured, not because we have no inadequacies, but because we are embraced in the grace and truth of God wherein all things are reconciled in heaven and on earth—even in our own lives. I imagine this is why Jesus invites his followers to extend the same measure of grace and forgiveness that they have themselves received (Matt 6:12; Luke 11:4), and embracing the love of God becomes key to extending that same measure of love to others (1 John 4:7-8).

[1] Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham developed this model, described more fully in Joseph Luft, *Of Human Interaction: The Johari Model* (Palo Alto, CA: National Press Books, 1969).

[2] Carl Rogers, *Client-Centered Therapy* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1951).