WHAT IS TRUTH?

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Introduction

In John 18:38 Pontius Pilate asks Jesus what truth is. The reason behind Pilate's question is not altogether known. Perhaps he was mocking Jesus (Calvin, 18:212). Or, Pilate might have asked the question as a judge wanting to know more about the case he was judging. Even perhaps Pilate was inquiring about truth as a learner who indeed wants to know it (Henry, 5:1187). Whatever reason Pilate had in mind for asking Jesus what truth is, he did not wait long enough to hear the answer. Many people in the so-called Christian community today are doing the same thing as Pilate did. They are walking away from the only person who can answer the ultimate question, the question of truth.

The purpose of this article is to take a look at what the Scriptures teach concerning truth in contrast to what Postmodernism teaches about truth. In order to accomplish this purpose it will be necessary first to understand the Postmodernist position on truth. Then, the use of the word *truth,* and its cognate words, will be surveyed in the Old and New Testaments. In conclusion, the Postmodernist view of truth and the Biblical view of truth will be compared.

The **Truth according to Postmodernism**

The headline for this section is a little misleading because there is no truth according to Postmodernism. While in the Modernist movement truth could be learned through the examination of facts, in the Postmodernist movement there are no facts. There is no distinction between "truth-claims" and fiction (Pomo, 2). Truth only exists in our heads (McCallum, 6). Postmodernists revel in contradiction because they are inherent to all assertions of truth (Pomo, 3). Richard Rorty, who is a prominent Postmodernist philosopher, said the following: "There is no truth. We should give up the search for truth and be content with interpretations. Philosophy is simply a continuing conversation about truth" (Philosophers, 2).

The impact of the lack of absolute truth is devastating to many areas of practical learning. For example, Postmodernisin sees the family as a system forming different personality roles which later cause problems to society (McCallum, 3). Postmodernism also believes that a religious tradition or philosophical system commits acts of cultural tyranny if it promotes the "fiction" that there is one, unified, and absolute truth (McCallum. 4). Because truth is in the eye of the beholder, so to speak, all cultures should be empowered to preserve their unique cultural reality. Any effort to reform a culture by preaching the Gospel is really repression, domination, and colonizing of one group by another (McCallum, 4). One last example is how Postrnodernism defines Biblical interpretation. Interpretation depends, not on what the text says or what the author intended, but on how the reader reacts to a text. The meaning is constructed

or created by the reader (McCallum. 5).

The Truth according to the OT

The Hebrew word אמת (*emet),* and its cognate words, is the word that the Bible translators have traditionally rendered "truth." However, this word has a much larger range of meaning than the English word "truth." The Person who acts in אמת (*emet*) is one who can be trusted (Gen. 24:49; 42:16; 47:26; Josh. 2:14). A witness of אמת (*emet*) is one whose testimony can be trusted because it corresponds to the facts (Pr. 14:25). Actions, speech, reports. or judgment are אמת (*emet*) because they are reliable (Dt. 13:14; 22:20; 1 Kg. 10:6; 22:16; Pr. 12:19; Zech. 8:16). If a seed is a seed of אמת (*emet*), its quality is trustworthy (Jer. 2:21). A peace that is based on אמת (*emet*) endures because it is truthful (Jer. 14:13; Ladd, 301).

The most important use of אמת (*emet*) in the Old Testament is in describing God, that is, the character of God. Very often אמת (*emet*) is coupled with חסד (*hesed*; covenant faithfulness), "which designates God's loyalty in fulfilling his promises and his covenant" (Ladd, 301). God showed his אמת (*emet*) and חסד (*hesed*) by leading Abraham's servant to find a wife for Isaac (Gen. 24:27). Again, God displays his *hesed* and *emet* in allowing Jacob to prosper in Laban's house (Gen. 32:10). God's *emet* and *hesed* were majestically displayed in giving the covenant at Sinai (Ex. 34:6). In addition, God shows his *emet* by punishing the wicked (Ps. 54:5). Therefore, the God of *emet* that the Old Testament describes (2 Chr. 15:3; Jer. 10:10) is a trustworthy, reliable God. The God characterized by *emet* is not an abstract God, but concrete and absolute.

The last use of אמת (*emet*) that will be discussed here is when אמת (*emet*) is associated with God's people. Those who fear the Lord are called a people of *emet* (Ex. 18:21; Neh. 7:2). When the general call of the gospel goes out, people are called to serve God with *emet* (Josh. 24:14; 1 Sam. 12:24). God always acts according to *emet,* but men respond with wickedness (Neh. 9:3 3). The people of God are called to walk in *emet* (1 Kg. 2:4; 2 Chr. 31:20; Ps. 26:3; 86:11; Isa.; 38:3). Thus, when used in association with God's people אמת (*emet*) "becomes essentially *the revealed will of God*" (Ladd, 301).

Truth according to the NT

As seen above, the definition of truth in the Old Testament is less abstract than the English definition of truth. When the Old Testament saints heard the word *truth,* they would think of something that was trustworthy, reliable, faithful. Two passages in the New Testament follow the same pattern as the Old Testament: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (Jn. 1:14); "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." (Jn. 1:17). "Grace" and "truth" in these two passages are the equivalent of *hesed* and *emet* in the Old Testament. However, the New Testament carries the definition of truth a step further.

The Greek word that is usually translated as truth is ἀλήθεια (*alethela*). Etymologically, this word means openness, what is not concealed (from ἀ and λήθω; Hodge, 436). Ἀλήθεια (*aleihela*) is the word used by Pilate when he asks Jesus what truth is. An exhaustive analysis of the use of ἀλήθεια (*alethela*) and its cognate words is not feasible at this time. Thus, the discussion will be limited to the book of John, because John's definition of truth accurately reflects the whole New Testament's definition of truth.

John portrays the Old Testament as not an end in itself but a witness to the truth that is in Christ (Jn. 5:33). Now the God of truth (אמת, *emet*) of the Old Testament is fully revealed in the person of Christ. Therefore, when Christ says "I am the truth" (Jn. 14:6), he is declaring that he is the full revelation and "embodiment of the redemptive purpose of God" (Ladd, 303). When Pilate asks Jesus, "What is truth?", the answer to his question is standing right in front of him. With the knowledge that Jesus is the truth, one can better understand several of Jesus' statements about truth. When Jesus proclaims, "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (Jn. 8:32), he is declaring that freedom is found in the intimate knowledge of the Son of God and who he is.

Not only does the noun *aletheia* refer to Jesus, but also the adjective *alethinos* (true) points to Jesus as the truth of God. In John 6 Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven." Who is the <u>True Bread</u> if not Jesus himself? Christ also reveals himself as the <u>True Vine</u> (Jn. 15:1). Jesus is true because is the Son of the True God (Jn. 3:33; 7:28; 8:26). Because Jesus is the truth, whatever proceeds from him is true. The words his speaks are true (Jn. 8:40, 45). His ministry on earth bears witness to the truth (Jn. 18:37). The Spirit that proceeds from him is the Spirit of truth (Jn. 14:17; 15:26; 16:13). Finally, true salvation is found in Christ (Jn. 3:21).

Biblical View of Truth Comparcd to Postmodernist View

The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments declare that there is one, absolute truth which is found in God. On the other hand, Postmodernism teaches that there is no truth, just a collection of interpretations. The Bible sets forth God's authoritative decrees that must be followed by all people; whereas Postmodernism suggests that there is no overall rule to be followed, but each culture possesses its own truth. The Bible demands attention because all the accounts in it are true. Conversely, Postmodernism teaches that the Bible is a collection of stories, and that the reader decides what they mean. Lastly, the Bible proclaims that absolute truth is embodied in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, in whom salvation is found. Postmodernism declares that if one teaches that Jesus is the truth, he or she is an oppressor and a tyrant.

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