

'All Greek To Me' : Truth

ἀλήθεια alētheia

Surely we don't need any explanation of what the word 'truth' means? On the other hand, there are currently so many claims to 'truth', often contradicting each other, that perhaps it will be useful to take a few minutes to clarify our understanding.

For those of an older generation (and I include myself), the idea that there can be different versions of truth seems like an absurdity. "Either it is true or it isn't" would be the immediate reaction. I remember my shock and surprise many years ago when someone first said to me that my Christian faith might be true for me but it wasn't true for them. They were not saying that my faith was built on untruth, simply stating that there could be different truths.

I began to understand the concept of relative truth. Or, perhaps more accurately, I began to understand that some people considered truth to be relative, not absolute, and that you could choose what truth to believe without needing to know how accurate it might be. That, just because you believe one thing and I believe the opposite, it doesn't mean that one of us is 'wrong'. The theory is that both of us can be 'right' at the same time. 'Truth' becomes subjective (depending on my own response to it) rather than objective (always the same, irrespective of any response or lack of it).

Believers who are trying to communicate the Christian message often find this relativism bewildering. It seems to cut away the ground from under our feet, as 'true and false' are so central to the gospel, together with an understanding of moral 'right and wrong'. How can anyone understand the need for forgiveness if there is no such thing as right and wrong?

Equally, how can we even begin to think about forgiveness if there is no-one to do the forgiving? It is no coincidence that the rejection of absolute truth and absolute values (right and wrong) are results of the rejection of a personal God. Or, perhaps accepting that he might exist, believing that mankind can get along very nicely without him and can make any improvements that may need to be made without his intervention.

All of this is basically modern philosophy and, although many people may believe these things in theory, in practice everybody is familiar with the feelings of guilt when they do something wrong, and feelings of outrage when someone else gets away with deception.

Francis Schaeffer wrote many books in which he tackled the difficulty of communicating the Christian message into the climate of modern philosophy and, if you really want to delve deeper into that, I recommend reading them. Perhaps *The God Who Is There* would be a good one to start with, but none of them are light reading!

An interesting phrase that Schaeffer coined is 'the mannishness of man', by which he meant **'Those aspects of man, such as significance, love, rationality and the fear of non-being, which mark him off from animals and machines and give evidence of his being created in the image of a personal God.'** People may choose to disagree about whether there actually **is** a personal God, but most of us would not reject our own significance, nor our capability for love and rationality, and the fear of death ('non-being') is very deep-rooted in all humanity.

For those who may reject a personal God and absolute standards such as 'right and wrong' and 'truth and lies', this 'mannishness' poses a real problem. Without absolute standards, and especially without a personal Creator, our own personality and significance become illogical. If we adopt this philosophy, it leaves us stranded as meaningless beings in a meaningless universe, where nothing makes any ultimate sense.

Most people don't live that way. Whatever they may say that they believe in theory, in practical daily life they behave as though all individuals have significance, and happily embrace their own

capacity for love and rationality. We usually tuck away ‘the fear of non-being’ in a corner, pretending it’s not really there, but it is still active in all our efforts of self-preservation!

All of this may seem a long way away from looking at the word for ‘truth’ in New Testament Greek. We may tend to think of truth, especially perhaps so-called ‘religious truth’, as dry, dusty and theoretical; theological and doctrinal and somewhat removed from real life. This word has some surprises in store!

First of all, it is a ‘negative’ word. What do I mean by that? We have English words like ‘hopeless’, ‘sightless’ and ‘soundless’, which describe people, things and situations where there is no hope, no sight or no sound. There are many more examples, of course. We describe something by saying what it is NOT like, which gives us a negative but clear picture.

In Greek, instead of tacking ‘-less’ on the end of a word, they added ‘a-’ to the beginning of a word. We have some examples that have come across into English use, such as ‘aseptic’ (not septic), ‘asynchronous’ (not synchronised) and ‘anonymous’ (not named). The Greek word *alētheia* comes from adding ‘a-’ to the word *lanthano* which means ‘to escape notice’,¹ so the basic meaning of *alētheia* is ‘something that does not escape notice’! Obviously, the related words which are translated ‘true’ and ‘truly’ share the same basic meaning. So the meaning of ‘true’ shifts quite a bit, almost equating to ‘self-evident’ or even, perhaps, ‘blindingly obvious’!

So, when Jesus says “*I am the way, and the truth and the life; no-one comes to the Father but by me*”,² what does he mean by ‘truth’? Something that does not escape notice, **an inescapable fact**. This is a long way removed from dry and theoretical ‘religious truth’.

It is also a very long way from ‘relative’ or ‘subjective’ truth. Jesus is not saying that he is some sort of philosophy that we can accept or reject, an idea that we can hold in our mind, with which we can either agree or disagree. His reality does not depend on our response; he is objectively present, actually there, whether we acknowledge him or not. (That’s another reason why I like Schaeffer’s *The God Who Is There*: the title points clearly to the objective reality of God.)

So perhaps a more complete translation of this word would be ‘reality’. That places it firmly in the real world, not in some philosophical theory, and gives no-one any ‘wriggle room’ to try to avoid it.

A connected word is *alētheuō*, which is used in just two places in the New Testament and is translated as either ‘to speak’ or ‘to tell’ the truth. But in fact there is nothing in the word about ‘speaking’. A more literal translation would be ‘truthing’, but of course that is not an English word. ‘Being truthful’ comes a little way towards it, but perhaps ‘being real’ is closer still. So Paul writes to the Galatian churches and says “So have I become your enemy by being real with you?”³ and encourages the believers in Ephesus by writing “but being real in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into him who is the head, even Christ.”⁴ Truth – reality – in practice!

We might have been tempted to define truth as the absence of lies. Jesus confronts us as the Truth, the Reality, the Inescapable Fact. He reflects the Name of God revealed to Moses at the burning bush, ‘I AM WHO I AM’, YHWH – The One Who Is.⁵

Dave Taylor December 2022

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¹ Used in the New Testament in **Mark 7:24, Luke 8:47, Acts 26:26, Hebrews 13:2, 2 Peter 3:5,8.**

² **John 14:6**

³ **Galatians 4:16**

⁴ **Ephesians 4:15**

⁵ **Exodus 3:13-15** See also ‘Who Are You Talking To?’ from www.justonecandle.uk