

The Nature of Truth—Part One

By Dr. Norman L. Geisler

(excerpted from *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Baker Books, 1999), used by permission)

Pilate asked: What is truth? Philosophers from Socrates to the last century answered: Is it *absolute*? Is it *knowable*? And does it correspond to a referent or, in the case of meta-physical truth, does it correspond to reality?

The Importance of the Nature of Truth

The nature of truth is crucial to the Christian faith. Not only does Christianity claim there is absolute truth (truth for everyone, everywhere, at all times), but it insists that truth about the world (reality) is that which corresponds to the way things really are. For example, the statement “God exists” means that there really is a God outside the universe, an extracosmic Being. Likewise, the claim that “God raised Christ from the dead” means that the dead corpse of Jesus of Nazareth supernaturally vacated its tomb alive a few days after its burial. Christian truth claims really correspond to the state of affairs about which they claim to inform us.

The Nature of Truth. *What Truth is Not...*

Truth can be understood both from what it is and from what it is not. There are many inadequate views of the nature of truth. Most of these result from a confusion between the nature (definition) of truth and a test (defense) of truth, or from not distinguishing the result from the rule.

Truth is not “what works.”

One popular theory is the pragmatic view of William James and his followers that truth is what works. According to James, “Truth is the expedient in the way of knowing. A statement is known to be true if it brings the right results. It is the expedient as confirmed by future experience.” That this is inadequate is evident from its confusion of cause and effect. If something is true it will work, at least in the long run. But simply because something works does not make it true. This is not how truth is understood in court. Judges tend to regard the expedient as perjury. Finally, the results do not settle the truth question. Even when results are in, one can still ask whether the initial statement corresponded to the facts. If it did not, it was not true, regardless of the results.

Truth is not “that which coheres.”

Some thinkers have suggested that truth is what is internally consistent; it is coherent and self-consistent. But this too is an inadequate definition. Empty statements hang together, even though they are devoid of truth content. “All wives are married women” is internally consistent, but it is empty. It tells us nothing about reality. The statement would be so, even if there were no wives. It really means, “*If there is a wife, then she must be married.*” But it does not inform us that there is a wife anywhere in the universe. A set of false statements also can be internally consistent. If several witnesses conspire to misrepresent the facts, their story may cohere better than if they were honestly trying to reconstruct the truth. But it still is a lie. At best, coherence is a negative test of truth. Statements are wrong if they are inconsistent, but not necessarily true if they are.

Truth is not "that which was intended."

Some find truth in intentions, rather than affirmations. A statement is true if the author intends it to be true and false if he does not intend it to be true. But many statements agree with the intention of the author, even when the author is mistaken. "Slips of the tongue" occur, communicating a falsehood or misleading idea the communicator did not intend. If something is true because someone intended it to be true, then all sincere statements ever uttered are true—even those that are patently absurd. Sincere people are often sincerely wrong.

Truth is not "what is comprehensive."

Another idea is that the view that explains the most data is true. And those that are not as comprehensive are not true—or not *as true*. Comprehensiveness is one test for truth, but not the definition of truth. Certainly a good theory will explain all relevant data. And a true worldview will be comprehensive. However, this is only a negative test of whether it is true. The affirmations of that view must still correspond with the real state of affairs. If a view was true simply because it was more encyclopedic, then a comprehensive statement of error would be true and a digested presentation of truth automatically would be in error. Not all long-winded presentations are true and concise ones are not all false. One can have a comprehensive view of what is false or a superficial or incomplete view of what is true.

Truth is not "what is existentially relevant."

Following Soren Kierkegaard and other existential philosophers, some have insisted that truth is what is relevant to our existence or life and false if it is not. Truth is subjectivity. Kierkegaard said: truth is livable. As Martin Buber stated, truth is found in persons, not in propositions.

However, even if truth is existential in some sense, not all truth fits into the existential category. There are many kinds of truth, physical, mathematical, historical, and theoretical. But if truth by its very nature is found only subjectively in existential relevance, then none of these could be truth. What is true will be relevant, but not everything relevant is true. A pen is relevant to an atheist writer. And a gun is relevant to a murderer. But this does not make the former true nor the latter good. A truth about life will be relevant to life. But not everything relevant to one's life will be true.

Truth is not "what feels good."

The popular subjective view is that truth gives a satisfying feeling, and error feels bad. Truth is found in our subjective feelings. Many mystics and new age enthusiasts hold versions of this faulty view, though it also has a strong influence among some experientially oriented Christian groups.

It is evident that bad news can be true. But if what feels good is always true, then we would not have to believe anything unpleasant. Bad report cards do not make a student feel good, but the student refuses to believe them at his or her academic peril. They are true. Feelings are also relevant to individual personalities. What feels good to one may feel bad to another. If so, then truth would be highly relative. But, as will be seen in some detail in the next article, truth cannot be relative.

Even if truth makes us feel good—at least in the long run—this does not mean that what feels good is true. The nature of truth does not depend on the result of truth.