

Encountering Truth: A Biblical Perspective

John Wesley Taylor V
Southern Adventist University

The clatter of a mob shattered the morning calm. An accused man, noble and serene, stood before the Roman magistrate. It was the moment for judicial action. Pilate faltered. The verdict became a question: “What is truth?”¹

Pilate’s query has echoed through the corridors of time. It has become increasingly relevant in a world of growing confusion, a world steeped in strife and stereotypes, a planet concerned with relevance and rubbish. The question reaches us, how do we, as Christians, delineate truth? How do we identify and ascertain truth? How do we establish a biblical foundation for our encounter with truth?

These questions are particularly relevant in the postmodern world—a decentered, pluralistic society that has proposed the death of objective truth, preferring to think of “a diversity of truths” or simply “truth for me.” Michel Foucault, an avant-garde philosopher and sociologist whose contributions figure prominently in the postmodern shift, suggests that even the concept of truth itself is dangerous—that “truths” are merely the agendas of special interest groups with economic clout or political power, who use these ideas, packaged as advertising, propaganda, or mass media, to bully others into believing whatever the privileged find convenient.² Meanwhile, other postmodernists, such as Richard Rorty,

¹ John 18:38. All biblical passages quoted, unless otherwise indicated, are from the New King James Version, copyright 1979, 1980, 1982 Thomas Nelson, Inc., Publishers.

² Michel Foucault. *Madness and Civilisation: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. R. Howard (London: Routledge, 2001), and *Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan (London: Routledge, 2002). Further discussion may be found in Millard J. Erickson, *Truth or Consequences: The Promise and Perils of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001).

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

argue that we should give up the search for truth altogether and be content with mere interpretation of data, without endeavoring to assess their truth value.³

Clearly, given our contemporary context, the concept of truth merits special attention, particularly from a biblical perspective. In this essay, we will seek to highlight the significance of truth for the Christian worldview, identify core tenets in the Christian view of truth, and examine the multi-faceted process of receiving God's truth. Finally, we will discuss the dilemma of error and the role of the Holy Spirit as guide and guardian of truth.

The Significance of Truth. Why is truth of consequence for the Christian? As believers, we are counseled to speak the truth, to make decisions based on truth, to live truth-focused lives, and to be sanctified through the truth.⁴ We are to "buy the truth and not sell it,"⁵ binding it about our necks and writing it upon our hearts. We are to worship in the spirit of truth, "rightly dividing the word of truth."⁶ Furthermore, Ephesians 5:9 declares that truth is a fruit of the Spirit, while Philippians 4:8 suggests that for the Christian, truth is the point of departure for all other intellectual pursuits.

Truth, moreover, is a characteristic of all who enter God's kingdom: "Open the gates, that the righteous nation which keeps the truth may enter in."⁷ The apostle John identifies the returning King as "Faithful and True" and describes the New Jerusalem as a sacred place where there is no violation of truth.⁸

In essence, truth is vital, directly influencing our lives. We act upon what we believe to be true, thus shaping the way we live. Truth also affects how we see ourselves. The belief in the divine creation of humankind, for example, joined with the doctrine of the Incarnation, provides a basis for human status and worth. At the end of the day, truth is what matters, judging what we experience and what we do.⁹

³ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1979). Also, "Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism," in R. Hollinger (Ed.), *Hermeneutics and Praxis* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame UP, 1985).

⁴ Ref. Eph 4:25; Zec 8:16; 1 Pet 1:22; John 17:17.

⁵ Prov 23:23; see also Prov 3:3.

⁶ John 4:24; 2 Tim 2:15.

⁷ Isa 26:2.

⁸ Ref. Rev 19:11; 22:15.

⁹ See Ps 96:13; Isa 42:3; and Rom 2:2.

TAYLOR: ENCOUNTERING TRUTH: A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

Tragically, however, humanity, particularly in the postmodern world, has lost the centrality of truth—it has “fallen in the street,” trampled in the bustling thoroughfare.¹⁰ Scripture cries forth, “Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem; see . . . if you can find a man . . . who seeks the truth, and I will pardon [the city].”¹¹ Sadly, though perhaps predictably, none was found.

God: The Essence of Truth. As is often the case with God, Christ answered the truth question before it was asked. He declared, “I am the . . . truth.”¹² On another occasion, Christ prayed to His Father, “Thy word is truth.”¹³ Furthermore, Scripture affirms that all God’s “work is done in truth.”¹⁴

Here then is the bold biblical delineation: *God is truth*. His nature, His very spirit, is truth. Consequently, truth is, at its core, a Being. Furthermore, if God is the essence, the embodiment of truth, it follows that all God says and all God does is truth. His words and His works are but revelations of His nature.

Here then is found the Christian response to Pilate’s question. The Word—whether spoken, written, illustrated, enacted, or incarnate—is Truth.

Consequently, for the Christian, truth exists as a divine revelation. It is authoritative, provided by One who has not only examined all the evidence, but formed the evidence.¹⁵ Thus, the multitude who had gathered on the hillside to listen observed that Jesus taught “as one having authority,”¹⁶ the inherent authority of the Word.

In sum, the Christian worldview holds that God is trustworthy and that His revelation of truth is objective and reliable.¹⁷ Human beings must therefore interact directly with the divine repositories of truth, revealed through Scripture, through God’s creation in all of its dimensions, and in the person of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, we are to communicate

¹⁰ Isa 59:14.

¹¹ Jer 5:1; Hos 4:1.

¹² John 14:6; see also Deut 32:4.

¹³ John 17:17. Similarly, Ps 119:142,151 declare “Thy law is the truth” and “All thy commandments are truth.”

¹⁴ Ps 33:4. Nebuchadnezzar likewise acknowledged, “Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, all of whose works are truth, and His ways justice” (Dan 4:37).

¹⁵ John 1:3; Col 1:15-16

¹⁶ Matt 7:29

¹⁷ John 17:17; 1 Cor 1:9; 2 Pet 1:19

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

confidence in the trustworthiness of the divine revelation of truth—a “more sure word . . . which [we] do well to heed.”¹⁸

Tenets in the Christian Perspective. When one accepts that God is the very essence of truth, what does this suggest? What might be the ramifications of this perspective? There would seem to be, in fact, a number of implications.

1. *For the Christian, truth is anchored in the supernatural.* Truth begins with God, not with man.¹⁹ The Creator is ultimately the Source of all truth. Consequently, truth does not originate within nature, nor is it initiated by mankind. Human beings only discover truth; they do not create it.

2. *Truth is eternal because it resides in God.* Psalm 117:2 states that God’s truth “endures forever.”²⁰ What does this mean? Because truth is eternal, it existed before the mind of man, and hence the mind can neither create nor destroy truth. We can only choose to accept it or to reject it, to abide in the truth or to abandon truth to reside in error.²¹

As Christians, we should remember that nothing can be done “against the truth, but for the truth.”²² Human beings simply cannot obliterate truth. The world had its best chance at Calvary and failed miserably.

Our role, then, as Christians is invitational, rather than confrontational. We do not have to so much “defend truth” from annihilation, as to extend the invitation to accept God’s eternal truth.

3. *Because God is the ultimate origin of truth and God does not change, truth is unchanging.* God-centered truth is absolute and universal in scope—stable across time, place, and person.²³ In contemporary culture, relativism is pervasive, with many individuals maintaining that truth

¹⁸ 2 Pet 1:19. Such confidence in the trustworthiness of divine truth arises, as will be more fully explored, from the interplay of faith, reason, inquiry, reflection, and personal experience—all within the context of God’s character and of His will revealed in Scripture.

¹⁹ Jas 1:17; John 1:3,17

²⁰ See also Ps 100:5.

²¹ This is a vital distinction, for John 8:44 indicates that Lucifer did not abide in the truth, and therefore there is now “no truth in him.”

²² 2 Cor 13:8

²³ God’s unchangeableness is described throughout Scripture (e.g., Mal 3:6; Jas 1:17). Similarly, the stability of God’s truth is also established (e.g., Ps 100:5; Isa 43:9; Matt 5:18; Heb 13:8; 2 Thes 2:12).

TAYLOR: ENCOUNTERING TRUTH: A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

is in a state of perpetual flux—a matter of opinion, social convention.²⁴ While circumstances do change, and there is brokenness and fragmentation evident in many aspects of life, the Christian worldview is able to provide a framework that offers stability and security.

As Christians, we can help postmodern individuals find foundations for their lives, enduring ideals that can provide a basis for living. We can share with them an understanding that the solidity of truth contributes to a personal sense of identity, direction, and belonging.

4. *All truth possesses unity because it comes from the same Source.* Since God is one, truth is one, for God is truth.²⁵ Truth, therefore, will always be in harmony with itself wherever and whenever it is found. Anything that contradicts truth is error or reveals a problem with finite human understanding.

There are perhaps several implications. (a) To know God is the key to seeing life as a meaningful whole. (b) While there is always the danger of starting with a false premise or of forcing the evidence, the greater the scope of evidence and the better its fit, the more adequate its justification as truth. (c) We should avoid creating false dichotomies within God's truth. These could include the severance of mercy and justice, the disconnecting of piety and action, or the partition of faith and learning.²⁶

5. *Truth is infinite because God is infinite.* Our circle of knowledge is surrounded by the vast universe of our ignorance. The endless extent of God's truth lies as yet virtually undiscovered.

Just as the perimeter of a circle (i.e., our contact with the unknown) increases as the area of that circle enlarges, so the more Christians learn of God's truth, the more they realize how much there is yet to know—and the more humble they will be. It's when the circle is small and our

²⁴ Jean-François Lyotard (1984, translated) proposed, for example, that truth is but an expression of the perspective of a given community. What individuals envision and accept as truth is thus dependent upon the community in which they participate. This relativity extends beyond one's perceptions of truth to its essence—a stance in which “there is no absolute truth” (Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], 8).

²⁵ See Deut 6:4; 32:4; Ps 31:5.

²⁶ This suggests that we see all of life and learning in relation to God. It also reminds us that we must beware of overspecialization and knowledge fragmentation and forge both interdisciplinary and life connections. Most crucially, however, this perspective asserts that we must not create a spiritual/secular dichotomy. Rather, we should view each subject and topic as within the pattern of God's truth.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

contact with the unknown is reduced that we are tempted to think that we “know everything.”

How presumptuous then it would be for us to declare, at any time, that we have now arrived, that we now possess all the truth. Christians, then, do not have “all the truth,” but ultimately all they have will be truth.²⁷

6. *The Christian understanding of truth must be progressive.* It is not enough to stand in the truth—we are to *walk* in the path of truth.²⁸ This concept of “walking” implies new horizons. It is a call to learning and to growth.

To change the metaphor, the term “rooted and grounded in the truth” (utilized in Eph 3:17) denotes that a plant is vibrant, receiving continual nourishment, growing in the truth.

While truth does not change, our relationship to truth should develop. We recognize that our understandings of truth are but “works in progress”—that new dimensions of truth should continually²⁹ open before us.

7. *Because God is the Source of all truth, all truth is ultimately God’s truth.* Scripture states that “every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights.”³⁰ This suggests that human beings are to view each dimension of their lives—work, study, relationships, recreation, etc.—as an extension of God’s truth.³¹

²⁷ This progression from partial conceptions of truth to more clear, although still finite understandings seems to be referred to in 1 Cor 13:12.

²⁸ Growth in truth is a concept found repeatedly throughout Scripture: Ps 25:5; 26:3; 43:3; 86:11; Eph 4:15; 2 Pet 3:18; 3 John 4.

²⁹ Hodges discusses at some length the progressive nature of perception and revelation. He notes, for example, that we perceive God’s redemptive purposes more fully as the history of the world unfolds before us (B. H. Hodges, “Perception is Relative and Veridical: Ecological and Biblical Perspectives on Knowing and Doing the Truth,” in H. Heie and D. L. Wolfe (Ed.), *The Reality of Christian Learning*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

³⁰ Jas 1:17; see also John 1:17.

³¹ This premise is more fully developed in Arthur Holmes’ work, *All Truth Is God’s Truth* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1977). In a later work, Holmes proposes that all truth is either about God, about God’s creation, or about things that God knows but never Himself created—like the technological and artistic possibilities he left for us to bring to actuality (“Toward a Christian View of Things,” in A. Holmes (Ed.), *The Making of the Christian Mind* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1985]).

TAYLOR: ENCOUNTERING TRUTH: A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

It also reminds us that we should beware of exclusivity in the claim of truth. While Christians have truth, they do not, in the Christian worldview, have a monopoly on truth. Rather, because God makes His sun shine on the evil and on the good and would have all come to a knowledge of the truth,³² non-believers also discover truth.

What is the difference then between the Christian and the non-Christian? The non-Christian stumbles across concepts of truth in his journey through life, while the Christian recognizes the Source of that truth.

In Christian education, for example, we recognize that truth can be discovered and expounded by secular minds and that these explanations can form viable components in the curriculum. At the same time, students should be brought into direct contact with the Source of truth, there discovering personal insights into God's character and his plan.

As we have examined the biblical paradigm of truth, it seems evident that certain principles are foundational. Truth, in essence, begins with God and not with man. It is revealed and not constructed.³³ It is discovered and not determined by a majority vote. It is authoritative and not merely a matter of personal preference. It is feeling that should conform to truth, rather than truth to feelings. Ideas are not true solely because they are practical; rather, they will ultimately be of value because they are true. In the final analysis, divine truth influences each dimension of our lives as we recognize that all truth is indeed God's truth.

Receiving the Truth. A biblical perspective of truth, however, implies not only principles, but also process. How do we obtain God's truth? Through reason? Through revelation? Through a combination of both? What is the role of faith, of inquiry, and of reflection? What is the place of experience? These matters seem to be particularly relevant for the Christian.

Divine revelation. God desires to reveal truth continually to humankind. Knowing would be unattainable, were it not for the self-initiated, self-revealing nature of God.³⁴ Divine revelation is the channel through

³² Ref. Matt 5:45 and 1 Tim 2:4.

³³ "Truth is regarded [by many] as a kind of pudding, or brew, which you concoct from human opinions. . . . But truth is more like a rock than a pudding—a rock which you lay bare by scraping away the soil. And the soil is largely compounded of human prejudice and passion" (Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind: How Should a Christian Think?* [Ann Arbor: Servant, 1963], 113).

³⁴ Paul notes that human knowledge is the result of truth "freely given to us by God" (1 Cor 2:12).

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

which God communicates true facts and principles to human beings.³⁵ This revelation of truth is foundational and includes (a) God's creation³⁶ in each of its dimensions, (b) the Holy Scriptures, and (c) Jesus Christ, "God with us."³⁷

These "words" of God provide an ascending order of revelation in which later revelations do not displace the earlier avenues, but rather complement each form with richer meaning. In the Christian worldview, for example, we recognize that the intrusion of sin has distorted our understanding of the truth revealed through God's works, both in nature and in human society.³⁸ Consequently, the Scriptures portray in detail the truth about the untruth.

Ultimately, however, truth is a person. Christ is the fullest revelation of truth—"the express image" of the divine.³⁹ This revelation through Christ, anchored in Scripture and expanded through a personal relationship with God,⁴⁰ responds to the human condition in a way that surpasses any other presentation of truth.

Consequently, we, as human beings, must come into personal contact with divine revelation, exploring and examining God's truth revealed in nature and in human society. We should also see the Holy Scriptures as foundational in clarifying the contours of God's truth and discern its

³⁵ John Wesley's quadrilateral for truth included revelation, tradition, reason, and experience. This relationship should not be construed as equilateral, however. Wesley maintained that divine revelation was foundational and superseded all other elements (Outler, 2000).

³⁶ Although sometimes denominated *natural truth*, as opposed to *revealed truth*, God's creation is also a purposeful revelation of His character and of His plan for the universe and for humanity. See Ps 19:1-3; 85:11; Rom 1:20.

³⁷ Matt 1:23. Note that truth is revealed through the three-dimensional Word: God's creative works—the Illustrated Word (Ps 33:4; 19:1; Jas 1:18); Scripture—the Written Word (Ps 119:105,160; John 17:17); and Christ—the Living Word (John 1:14,17; 14:6).

³⁸ We must be careful not to create a Thomist synthesis of nature and special revelation. Even in Eden, special revelation was required in order to know who is God and how human beings are to relate to the world. Similarly, natural revelation was insufficient to understand the nature of man, of the Sabbath, or of the tree in the midst of the garden (Gen 1:26; 2:2-3,16-17). How much more is special revelation needed now given the distortions brought about by sin. In essence, Scripture is the foundation for understanding the world around us. Without the guiding role of the spoken and written Word of God, nature leads to idolatry (Rom 1:22-23).

³⁹ Heb 1:3. Paul further develops this concept in 2 Cor 4:6: "For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

⁴⁰ Luke 24:27; John 5:39; 17:3

TAYLOR: ENCOUNTERING TRUTH: A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

relevance for our lives.⁴¹ Above all, we are to personally encounter Jesus Christ and experience with Him a vibrant, truth-affirming relationship.

Reason. While revelation, in each of its forms, is God's channel for truth, it does not replace human thought, nor does it bypass reason. Divine revelation is to be studied, accepted, and applied. Reasoning power is, therefore, a gift from God to help us understand truth.⁴²

As Christians, we are to be prepared to give a reasoned explanation of the beliefs that we hold.⁴³ In the early church, the Christians in Berea were commended for not blindly accepting Paul's teaching, but rather they "searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so."⁴⁴ Throughout His ministry, Christ encouraged His listeners to engage in analytical thinking.⁴⁵ Even the prophet Jeremiah was not always certain when he had received a revelation until he had checked it against the evidence.⁴⁶ Divine revelation thus informs our reason, which in turn evaluates the authenticity and the meaning of that message.

In short, reason is a God-given tool to assess the validity of the messages we receive and to interpret their significance. In so doing, the goal of reason is understanding,⁴⁷ rather than proof. Reason is not omnipotent—the beguiling allure of rationalism and the Enlightenment project.⁴⁸

⁴¹ Jo Ann Davidson insightfully discusses this foundational role of Scripture in her essay "Word Made Flesh: The Inspiration of Scripture," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 15/1 (2004): 21-33.

⁴² The fact that such a revelation is entrusted to fallible but rational human beings is eloquent testimony to God's confidence in the rational powers He gave us and in our ability to make reasoned judgments (see Holmes, 1977).

⁴³ Ref. 1 Pet 3:15.

⁴⁴ Acts 17:11.

⁴⁵ Examples may be found in Matt 16:13-15; 18:12; 21:28-32; 22:42-45; Luke 7:24-26; 13:2-4.

⁴⁶ Jer 32:6-8.

⁴⁷ Just because one does not understand something, however, does not preclude it from being true. There are statements that seem to inherently defy human logic, such as these paradoxes: "When I am weak, then I am strong." (2 Cor 12:10); "Having nothing, and yet possessing all things." (2 Cor 6:10); "Whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all." (Mark 10:44); and "Whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it" (Mark 8:35). Other apparent anomalies include Christ's humanity and divinity (Col 2:9; 1 Tim 2:5), the relationship of faith and works (Eph 2:8; Phil 2:12), as well as God's mercy and justice, man's free will and God's sovereignty, and God's love and human suffering.

⁴⁸ The epistemological effects of the Era of Enlightenment are further discussed in Edward E. Zinke, "Faith-Science Issues: An Epistemological Perspective," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 15/1 (2004), 63-90. A perceptive analysis of the relation-

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Rather, human reason can be trustworthy, but only within limits.⁴⁹ This recognition keeps us from enthroning intellectual pride and safeguards us from deifying reason.⁵⁰

Faith. Faith is also a gift from God.⁵¹ While neither a source nor channel of truth, faith is an openness to God's revelation of truth. In so doing, faith performs a key role in the acquisition of truth.⁵² Faith, however, goes beyond the mere discovery of truth. It is also a sincere and whole-hearted commitment to live the truth.⁵³

Contrary to popular perception, faith and reason are not antagonists. Faith is not merely an emotion; rather, it incorporates both cognitive and volitional elements. Faith, for example, is linked to trust, and trust rests on evidence of trustworthiness.⁵⁴ Such evidence is clearly found in Scripture—"faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."⁵⁵ Further confirmation of God's faithfulness is provided in the natural world and through His involvement in our lives.⁵⁶

Regardless of the source, however, this determination of credibility and dependability involves analysis and assessment, a careful examination of the evidence.

Faith thus takes the known and responsibly extends belief toward the unknown.⁵⁷ It thinks not merely in terms of probabilities, but of possibilities. In that sense, faith bridges the gap between evidence and certainty—"For I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him."⁵⁸

ship of faith, reason, and choice may be found in Humberto M. Rasi, "Faith, Reason, and Choice: Loving God with All Our Min," *Christ in the Classroom*, 31B (2005), 337-354.

⁴⁹ A number of passages in Scripture delineate these limitations; for example, Job 11:7; Prov 30:18; Rom 11:33.

⁵⁰ Warnings to this effect may be found in Ezek 28:17 and Rom 12:3, among others.

⁵¹ Eph 2:8 reminds us that faith operates within the context of grace, "a gift from God."

⁵² Jas 1:5-6, for example, clarifies that wisdom comes as the result of the believer's prayer of faith.

⁵³ Jas 2:17; see also Rom 2:8.

⁵⁴ Ps 40:3, for example, states that our testimony of God's trustworthiness can cause others to trust God. In a similar vein, Heb 10:23 indicates that steadfast faith results from confidence in God's faithfulness.

⁵⁵ Rom 10:17.

⁵⁶ Matt 6:25-30; 16:8-10.

⁵⁷ Thus, faith is the basis of things that we hope for, the evidence of things that we have not seen as yet (Heb 11:1).

⁵⁸ 2 Tim 1:12. Through faith, founded on Scripture, the Christian can be *confident* that God was the creator of life on this earth, that we are in the midst of a great contro-

TAYLOR: ENCOUNTERING TRUTH: A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

Note, however, that faith requires an object—it is confidence in something, trust in someone. You cannot, however, trust someone you do not know.⁵⁹ In order to trust an individual, you must get to know him or her personally; and in order to get to know someone, you need to spend time together—talking together, doing things together. The basis then for understanding and accepting God’s truth is to spend time with God.

In sum, all must live by faith. The atheist, for example, cannot prove that God does not exist. His very laws of science do not allow him to prove the non-existence of anything. He chooses to believe that there is no God. The question is simply, “Where will you place your faith?”⁶⁰

Inquiry. Faith cannot bypass difficult questions. Rather, faith is exploratory. It both informs and motivates inquiry. It is true that we see dimly,⁶¹ but just because the glass may be imperfect doesn’t mean that we should not strive to discover all the truth that it is possible for us to learn.

Inquiry is a divine directive. “If you seek wisdom as silver, and search for her as for hidden treasures; then you will understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God.”⁶² Scripture, in fact, abounds with individuals of faith who exercised the spirit of inquiry.⁶³ The intent is to identify truth—to “hold fast what is good.”⁶⁴

Christians should therefore be encouraged to question, to probe beneath the surface. They should understand that truth loses nothing by investigation. Rather, both reason and faith are strengthened by the scru-

versy between good and evil, that Jesus Christ was God incarnate—dying in our place and soon to return to grant us eternal life in His presence. The Christian can also experience the certainty of God’s love, the forgiveness of sin, and the assurance of salvation. For biblical passages that allude to this confidence, see Ps 66:19; Prov 22:17-21; Jer 32:41; Dan 2:45; Matt 5:18; 18:3; 25:40; Mark 9:41; 10:15; 10:29-30; 11:23; Luke 1:1-4; John 3:3-5; 5:24-25; 6:7; 14:12; 16:23; Acts 2:36; 17:31; Rom 6:5; 1 Thes 1:5; 1 Tim 6:7; 2 Tim 3:14; Heb 10:22; 11:13.

⁵⁹ Ps 9:10 reminds us that “they that know your name, O Lord, will place their trust in you.”

⁶⁰ In 1 Cor 2:5, Paul urges us not to place our faith “in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.”

⁶¹ Ref. 1 Cor 13:12

⁶² Prov 2:4-5. See also Eccl 1:13; 2 Tim 2:15.

⁶³ For example, Job (Job 29:16), David (Ps 77:6), the Bereans (Acts 17:11), and the prophets (1 Pet 1:10).

⁶⁴ 1 Thes 5:21

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

tiny of research and refined in the crucible of analysis.⁶⁵ At the same time, however, we should recognize that inquiry has its limitations and that even a careful application of scholarship or of scientific methodology is not a guarantee of truthful conclusions.⁶⁶

Reflection. In order to understand truth, we must seek out opportunities for reflection. Although truth, in the Christian perspective, is neither an internal construction nor relative,⁶⁷ it is nonetheless personal. “Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good.”⁶⁸ God’s truth is to be individually recognized, understood, and applied. “You desire truth in the inward parts, and in the hidden part You will make me to know wisdom.”⁶⁹ This internalization of truth requires time, however, for thought and for meditation.

Scripture encourages us to set aside space in our hectic lives for reflection.⁷⁰ Phil 4:8, for example, reminds us: “Whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on

⁶⁵ Clark and Gaede identify two extremes: “Comfortable Saints” and “Doubting Thomases” (R. A. Clark and S. D. Gaede, “Knowing Together: Reflections on a Holistic Sociology of Knowledge,” in Heie and Wolfe). Comfortable Saints focus on the premise “now we see” (1 Cor 13:12), conveniently neglecting the qualifier “in a mirror dimly.” These are advised to evaluate their beliefs more critically and to be open to the possibility that they may have embraced error. On the other hand, Thomases, immobilized by doubt, focus on the phrase “in a mirror dimly” to the exclusion of “now we see.” These must exercise faith, recognizing that there is reason enough to warrant belief in God and that they are more justified in trusting the Christian worldview than any other.

⁶⁶ See Job 11:7 and Ps 64:6. Although in research we endeavor to safeguard the truth-value of our conclusions, we recognize that we can never arrive at certainty. We can never declare, “Research has proved. . . .” Rather, we must state our conclusions under conditions of estimation and approximation, in terms of probability, possibility, and plausibility. We speak only in terms of evidence—indications that bear “witness to the truth” (John 18:37; 3 John 1:12).

⁶⁷ Clark and Gaede point out that relativism is based on a logical error: While cultural diversity is indeed evident, one cannot legitimately infer from the fact of diversity that there are or can be no universal values or beliefs—no more than a difference of opinion among different people as to what happened would mean that nothing happened.

⁶⁸ Ps 34:8

⁶⁹ Ps 51:6

⁷⁰ Passages that provide this admonition include the following, among others: Job 1:8; Ps 63:6; 77:6; 119:15,27,148; 145:5.

TAYLOR: ENCOUNTERING TRUTH: A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

these things.” In His own ministry, Christ valued quiet time for reflection and urged His disciples to do likewise.⁷¹

Experience. Truth is not merely an abstract entity, a theoretical construct. Rather, truth is to be personally experienced. It must be lived. The concept of “present truth”⁷² suggests that truth is to be made relevant to our circumstances. It should influence our attitudes, our priorities, and our actions.

Truth, then, is not only descriptive, but prescriptive—providing both meaning and direction. There is a distinct difference, however, between knowing or believing the truth and desiring and doing the truth. The devils, for example, know and believe,⁷³ but they do not love nor live the truth.

Christ’s followers, however, must have a love for the truth.⁷⁴ We should be passionately concerned about truth. We are to yearn for fuller understandings of truth. We are to be convinced that God’s revelation of truth is but the portal to a more abundant life.⁷⁵ Then we can declare, “I delight to do Your will, O my God, And Your law is within my heart.”⁷⁶

We are also to apply God’s truth to our lives. Truth is more than words; it is action.⁷⁷ Indeed, it is the personal acceptance and application of truth that makes the Christian different from the unbeliever. Living God’s truth serves to open new understandings of truth. “If anyone wants to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God.”⁷⁸ We know the truth as we live the truth. Perhaps the question is not so much, “How long have you been in the truth?” but rather, “Is the truth in you?” Are you living the truth?⁷⁹

⁷¹ Specific incidents may be found in Matt 14:23; Mark 1:35; 6:31.

⁷² Ref. 2 Pet 1:12

⁷³ Ref. Jas 2:19

⁷⁴ As Paul urges in 2 Thes 2:10.

⁷⁵ John 10:10. To adopt this perspective, I must be convinced of two fundamental truths. (a) God knows everything [Ps 139:2-4]. (b) God cares about me [John 3:16]. If (a) is true but (b) is not, God might be an omniscient tyrant who delights in torture. If (b) is true but (a) is not, God could be benevolent, but bumbling—one who wishes me well, but is simply misinformed. If both are true, however, whatever God tells me to do or not to do is what I would choose if I could see everything as He does.

⁷⁶ Ps 40:8.

⁷⁷ See Matt 25:34-36; John 17:19; 1 John 1:6; 2:4.

⁷⁸ John 7:17; see also 1 John 1:8.

⁷⁹ Nearly half of the references to “truth” in Scripture place it in parallel with love, obedience, mercy, or righteousness. Truth, therefore, incorporates a moral, life-transforming dimension.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Thus, while we recognize that God's truth is not individually relative, it is to become individually *relevant*. As Christians, we should help others discover that truth is deeply meaningful on a personal level. They should come to see truth as relational, forming a living link with Christ and with the community of believers. In essence, to "know the truth" is not merely a detached, cognitive process, but a personal experience with God, an encounter that radically transforms our life.

The Problem of Error. As we have seen, God, the Source of truth, communicates truth of His own initiative to human beings.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, while God desires all "to come to the knowledge of the truth," He does not lock in human thought or free will.⁸¹ Men and women must still interpret and apply truth to the contexts of their lives. In this process, it is indeed possible to arrive at false conclusions, to exchange God's truth for a lie.⁸²

This problem of error raises important issues. How is it that men and women can receive true facts and principles from God and then come to false conclusions? Why does error haunt our quest for truth? What is the remedy for this distressing state of affairs?

First, we should recognize that the problem seems to reside in our finitude, our fallenness, and in Satan's intentional distortion of God's truth.

Cause: Our Finitude. "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!"⁸³ "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts."⁸⁴ While God and His truth are infinite, we, as created beings,

⁸⁰ For example, Dan 2:47 and Rev 1:1.

⁸¹ 1 Tim 2:4; see also Job 24:15.

⁸² Ref. Rom 1:25. Note that the difficulty resides with humanity, rather than with God. "As God allows man to sin without causing his sin and being to blame, so God allows man to err without causing his error and being to blame for that" (Holmes, 1977, 54). Holmes further suggests that God permits us to err in order that we might understand both our finiteness and our need for growth.

⁸³ Rom 11:33.

⁸⁴ Isa 55:9.

TAYLOR: ENCOUNTERING TRUTH: A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

are finite,⁸⁵ with inherent limitations in our perceptions and understanding.⁸⁶

The reality of human finiteness would seem to lead to certain implications. (a) A fixation on empirical certainty does not seem to be suitable for human beings, due to our sensory limitations, the inherent complexity of the world around us, and the impracticality of always suspending judgment until all the facts are in. Apart from God, we would find ourselves forever searching and yet “never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.”⁸⁷ (b) While God’s truth is absolute and objective, our perspective on truth is constrained, our knowing is context bound. Our perceptions and understanding depend on our point of view and our focus, as well as on our prior knowledge, experience,⁸⁸ and expectations. When Peter received the vision of the unclean animals, for example, he did not at first understand its meaning. Only upon arrival at Cornelius’ house did Peter discern God’s truth.⁸⁹ Context would consequently seem to be a key factor in receiving and sharing truth.

Cause: Our Fallenness. While some error is the result of human finiteness, sin and unbelief are also implicated.⁹⁰ In the beginning of this world’s history, Eve was not satisfied with her finiteness—she wanted to know like God. This rejection of her status as a created being led to moral rebellion and ultimately to believing a lie.⁹¹ In a similar manner, our acceptance of a secular, humanist worldview warps our perception of God’s truth and results in false conclusions about God and about our role as His creation. In essence, our fallenness leads us to distort and misuse truth in self-serving ways. Our minds are easily blinded by “the god of

⁸⁵ Ps 8:5, for example, states that human beings were created, in their perfect state, “a little lower than the angels,” who themselves are limited beings (e.g., Matt 24:36).

⁸⁶ Scripture does not offset all our finiteness, nor was it intended to do so, for it is not an exhaustive revelation of all things, but rather a *sufficient* revelation of what is essential for faith and practice.

⁸⁷ 2 Tim 3:7

⁸⁸ Hodges notes, for example, that our perceptions are constrained by prior experience. On one hand, lack of prior experience may make the pickup of available information difficult or impossible. On the other, prior experience may set up expectations that cause us to “see” what is not there.

⁸⁹ Acts 10:9-17, 34-35

⁹⁰ “Just as in the problem of evil we identify both moral causes and natural causes, and thereby distinguish moral evils like crime and war from natural evils like earthquakes and cancers, so in the problem of error we must distinguish the moral causes of error from its natural causes” (Holmes, 1977, 52-53).

⁹¹ Ref. Gen 3:4-6

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

this age.”⁹² In this condition, we see only the here and now, and leave God and eternity out of our reckoning.

Cause: Satan’s Distortion. There is, however, a more subtle scheme. When Paul was evangelizing in Philippi, a certain slave girl, “who brought her masters much profit by fortune-telling,” followed after Paul and his companions, calling out, “These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation.”⁹³ After she continued doing this for many days, Paul rebuked the evil spirit in the name of Jesus Christ and commanded it to come out of her. Why would Paul do that? After all, what the girl was proclaiming was true! Simply, the people of Philippi knew the girl and her trade of divination and sorcery. As the girl seemed to know Paul and was providing free publicity, the on-lookers would conclude that both were from the same league. In essence, Satan had mutated God’s immortal truth into an immoral lie.

Depicting the cosmic conflict between good and evil, John describes a great red dragon, who is “the Devil and Satan,” that employed its tail to ensnare “a third part of the stars of heaven.”⁹⁴ Isaiah 9:15 suggests that this tool was Satan’s tale of lies—his misrepresentation of God’s character and His plan for the universe, which he has adeptly marketed to the human race.⁹⁵

As Christians, we are to work concertedly to unmask the diabolic deception of God’s truth, helping others to see God as He truly is and to understand the contours of God’s plan for their lives. We are to highlight the consequence of truth—that it is relevant to our lives, influencing our beliefs, values, decisions, and actions.

Here then is the essence of the problem: While God imparts truth to men and women, our finiteness, our fallenness, and Satan’s manipulation of God’s truth can lead us to false understandings. Faith, reason, inquiry, reflection, and experience are all necessary, but insufficient. The problem, of course, is that we then tend to impute the truth of the data to the truthfulness of our conclusions, and frequently we are not even aware of our error.

⁹² 2 Cor 4:4; see also 2 Pet 2:2; 3:16.

⁹³ Acts 16:16-18.

⁹⁴ Rev 12:4,9.

⁹⁵ Passages such as Gen 3:1-5; Rev 12:9; 18:23; 19:20; 20:8, among others, describe this “marketing scheme” in some detail.

TAYLOR: ENCOUNTERING TRUTH: A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

Is the situation hopeless? The answer to the problem of error appears to reside in humility, in crosschecks, and, most significantly, in the role of the Holy Spirit.

Remedy: Humility. Given our finite and fallen condition, we are admonished “not to think of [ourselves] more highly than [we] ought to think.”⁹⁶ We are also reminded that “the humble [God] guides in justice, and the humble He teaches His way.”⁹⁷ Consequently, we should express our understandings of God’s truth without dogmatism and with care. Scripture seems to resonate with this tentative nature of knowledge—“we see through a glass darkly” and “we know only in part.”⁹⁸ Not even the greatest scientist or the most erudite theologian can claim to have arrived at a full understanding of truth or to have a definitive grasp on knowledge. Humility is warranted. Each of us has but a subset of the larger picture, with ample room for learning and growth.⁹⁹

Remedy: Crosschecks. “Where there is no counsel, the people fall; but in the multitude of counselors there is safety.”¹⁰⁰ Linked to humility and to the contextual nature of understanding is the recognition that we each have much to discover and to understand and that crosschecks with fellow searchers serve to broaden our limited perspectives. This shared nature of truth implies that we can all learn from each other, regardless of belief or background, provided that we, as Christians, can connect that knowledge back to its Source and apply it to our lives through the “truth-filter” of His Word.

⁹⁶ Rom 12:3.

⁹⁷ Ps 25:9; additionally, Prov 11:2; Isa 57:15; Jas 4:10.

⁹⁸ 1 Cor 13:12.

⁹⁹ In essence, while the Christian worldview maintains that universal truth does indeed exist, it also recognizes the human constraint of partial knowledge and the potential for flawed interpretation. As a result, no one can claim infallibility. Even when we speak of the infallible truth of Scripture, we cannot claim infallibility for any of our own understandings or interpretations of Scripture. Rather, we must model authenticity and humility. This includes recognizing the limits of one’s knowledge, being honest about one’s weaknesses, and expressing the tentativeness of one’s conclusions. It implies passing provisional judgment, evidencing openness to correction, and demonstrating a passion for continued growth. It also suggests that sometimes one must bow before prophetic clarification of truth, even if it runs counter to culture, common practice, or personal preference.

¹⁰⁰ Prov 11:14.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

This concept of inter-member checking may have special application within the community of believers.¹⁰¹ In apostolic times, for example, differences of opinion arose as to which requirements should devolve upon Gentile Christians. In response to the crisis, as recorded in Acts 15, the apostles convened a Council in Jerusalem, discussed the various points of view, searched the Scriptures together, and then issued a statement of doctrine which was communicated to the believers. This episode illustrates the value of multiple perspectives in detecting truth and of the community of faith in determining truth. It also reminds us that even leaders and scholars—like the apostles Peter and Paul—need to submit their (tentative) conclusions to careful evaluation and critique.

At the same time, while recognizing the positive role of crosschecks, we should be aware of the risk of “group think” and of a “herd mentality,” recognizing that even consensus is not a guarantee of true interpretations. Clearly, something more is required.¹⁰²

Remedy: The Holy Spirit. According to Christ’s words, the Holy Spirit performs a crucial role in a correct understanding of truth: “When He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth.”¹⁰³ It seems that God has given His Spirit as a shield to insulate us from the warped interpretations of a secular worldview, to deflect Satan’s manipulative attacks on truth, and to enable us in our finitude and fallenness. This function of the Holy Spirit as guide and guardian of truth is vital in helping us to arrive at correct understandings of truth—true conclusions about God, His character, and His plan for our lives.

There could be a number of implications. (a) The Holy Spirit enables us to receive the “mind of Christ”¹⁰⁴—seeing life as God sees it. (b) We should not engage in intellectual activities independently of God. Regardless of the topic studied, we rely on God’s Spirit to help us perceive truth and interpret information correctly. “Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know

¹⁰¹ In 1 Tim 3:15, for example, Paul indicates that the “church of the living God” has a special role in laying the foundation of understood truth.

¹⁰² Acts 15:28, for example, states that it “seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us.” Both the role of inter-believer crosschecks and of the Holy Spirit are further addressed in Richard M. Davidson’s essay “The Bible: Revelation and Authority” (The Foundation for Adventist Education, 2000. http://fae.adventist.org/essays/26Bcc_017-055.htm [accessed May 11, 2008]).

¹⁰³ John 16:13; see also John 15:26; 1 Cor 2:10; 1 John 5:6.

¹⁰⁴ Ref. 1 Cor 2:14-16; Phil 2:5.

TAYLOR: ENCOUNTERING TRUTH: A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

the things that have been freely given to us by God.”¹⁰⁵ (c) As Christians, we need to formulate means through which the presence and influence of the Spirit may be enhanced in the church, in our homes, and in our lives, identifying attitudes and activities that help us be open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

In sum, while our finitude, our fallenness, and Satan’s intentional distortion of God’s truth can indeed lead us to false conclusions regarding God, His character, and His plan for our lives, God, in His infinite wisdom and mercy, has provided effective remedies. These include humility, cross-checks with fellow believers, and, most crucially, the role of the Holy Spirit as guide and guardian of truth. These elements enable us to arrive at correct, although still limited, understandings of God’s truth.

Conclusion

The infinite, eternal pattern of God’s truth lies at the heart of the Christian worldview. As Christians, we are to affirm that God is trustworthy and that His revelation of biblical truth is reliable. Through the rubric of our lives, we are to model that God’s Word is relevant and far-reaching in its application. Given the limitations of our finite and fallen condition, we should also be open and frank to the fallibility of human interpretations of truth, emphasizing the triangulating role of Scripture, the community of believers, and the Holy Spirit.

Finally, we should understand the relationship of truth and freedom. We do not so much need freedom in order to discover truth, as we are to reside in truth in order to experience freedom. Truth, in fact, offers the only freedom. “And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”¹⁰⁶

Above the tumult of the mob, the eternal Judge stands serenely. It is the moment for the judicial action. He speaks and the verdict resounds throughout the universe. Truth has triumphed! Divine truth has set us free! Throughout eternity, God’s children will live and flourish in the universe of Truth.

John Wesley Taylor V is Professor of Educational Philosophy at Southern Adventist University. jwv@southern.edu

¹⁰⁵ 1 Cor 2:12.

¹⁰⁶ John 8:32.