

## ESSAY

## Pondering Truth and Love in Christian Life

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My colleague had just finished delivering a public lecture on the challenge that intersex persons—those born with a mix of male and female organs, chromosomes, and hormones—present to the church. A perturbed member of the audience was expressing his disapproval of her call for the Christian church to understand, affirm, and welcome them. “Truth matters,” he declared, waving his finger. “Love matters,” she countered, steeling her spirit. They were both right of course, though hardly in agreement, and they stopped short of debating any possible priority or primacy of truth and love in Christian life. Undoubtedly, both matter enormously. But does one come before the other chronologically? Is one more important than the other? Is one more attainable than the other?

### Truth

Some Christians argue that truth matters more, usually having in mind the propositional truth employed by the rationality of theological doctrine and philosophical apologetics. Propositional truth is any supposition or hypothesis put forward that is true rather than false. Christian theology is the use of reason to interpret the Bible and advance arguments that establish Christian beliefs and practices. Christian apologetics is the use of reason to defend Christian faith based on the principles of logic and the evidence of history, and to advance arguments that establish the plausibility of Christian faith. In this sense, both theology and apologetics are based on rationality and focused on the pursuit of truth about God, humans, and the universe.

Truth thus conceived and perceived is said to correspond to the objective facts of reality—the way things really are—and is grasped when we give mental assent to them. In this view, knowing such truth is a prerequisite for, and an enabling of comprehending what constitutes love. Hence, to speak the truth in love (Eph 4:15) requires that we first be certain about what is true before we can ascertain what is loving in any situation. We must first discern what is true before we can determine how to assert that truth lovingly. Furthermore, calling

others to what we hold to be true is then itself an act of love (2 Cor 2:4), even if it must be “tough love” that the other resists or even resents. In this view, truth is clearly deemed to be foremost, the supreme Christian value beyond any Christian virtue. True love, in its subservient place, is therefore always surrendered to truth. Indeed, to speak untruth or anything less than the whole truth on any contentious matter is to be unloving. Love is only that which practices truth and “rejoices in it” (1 Cor 13:6). The combative Protestant reformer Martin Luther indirectly references Paul in Romans 12:18 when he encapsulated this view as “Peace, if possible, truth at all costs” (Tess 2018).

Notably, propositional truths about material or natural facts of our physical bodies and environment are more accessible, and with greater confidence, than truths about abstract or normative facts of our social psychological selves and socio-cultural environment. The modern positivist ontology and objectivist epistemology exercised by the natural sciences are frequently more persuasive than the constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology of the social sciences. Furthermore, truths about the metaphysical or super-empirical realm are simply that much more difficult—indeed, impossible—to verify or falsify. As the meta-theoretical perspective of critical realism explicates (Bhaskar 1975; Wright 2004), only the “mechanisms” in the smallest inner concentric circle of the “empirical” realm can be verified or falsified. While evidence can be marshalled to support claims regarding the mechanisms in the middle circle of the “actual” realm and in the largest outer circle of the “real” realm where metaphysical or super-empirical claims occur, they cannot be verified or falsified. Consequently, and unfortunately, there is no complete consensus on truth in any realm. Indubitably, all forms of truth-telling—historic, scientific, intuitive, principled, rational, metaphorical, mythological—are constantly contested. And theological truth is no exception.

As evidence for what he termed “pervasive interpretive pluralism,” sociologist Christian Smith (2011) listed thirty-four books outlining multiple Christian views on various doctrinal and ethical issues, such as the “four Christian views on this” or the “five Christian views on that.” He also listed fifty-seven separate, deep disagreements about truth on major matters among earnest and educated Protestant evangelicals alone, creating tens of millions of possible unique combinations. And that was fourteen years ago, with more having emerged since then due in large part to exacerbated political polarization within the church. Globally and historically, when free from colonization, there have long been multiple forms of theological orthodoxy present in various Christian traditions, all “located answers to located questions in located situations” (Ward 2017:573). When all who self-identify as Christian are included—Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and late-coming Protestants, in the cultural East and West, in the Global North and South—perhaps the only agreement is on the four-part Christian metanarrative of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration, in which God is somehow central to each of the four scenes.

A further problem is that, contrary to the Quaker commitment to “speak truth to power,” claims of objective truth often function problematically as acts of power in themselves. If power is the ability to exert one’s will despite resistance, as classical sociologist Max Weber distinguished it from authority, then such objective truth claims seek to overpower all in their path, without empathetic regard for any in their path. Consequently, emphatic assertion of such truth claims can easily become confrontational, even adversarial—truth wielded as a weapon, and at all costs—whereas the practice of empathetic love leads more fruitfully to interpersonal reconciliation, restorative justice, and authentic peace. Acts of love abstain from reverting to raw power, much like Jesus, the Prince of Peace, modelled. Indeed, truth claims are often divisive in ways that love is not, as the multiple branches and myriad denominations of Christianity make manifest. Discrepant claims of truth have severely fragmented Christianity to the bemusement of non-Christians, as the contest of truth claims too often degenerates into both internal and external power struggles. On the other hand, though they continue to disagree on the practical character of love, the call to love is one of the few biblical imperatives that has both united Christians and benefitted non-Christians.

More profoundly, when the notion of objective truth is used as the driving force of love, it tends to turn the person who is the object of that love into just that, an object held at some personal distance, some “thing,” “out there.” The “othered” person is objectified as the fortunate recipient of our admirably principled moral duty as we perform the role of a “good Christian.” Therefore, at bottom, it’s more about us, more about our virtue than about the other, who becomes rather incidental to our oh so generous goodwill. Like too much merely financial philanthropy, such love remains primarily self-centered and self-expressive of the giver, settling for only superficial relationship with the receiver, failing to find any significant mutuality with the receiver, and ultimately leaving each other alienated strangers in every real, practical sense. Such love is as vacuous as most Facebook friends, and in the end, remains unkind, lacking the “kind”ness of simple human solidarity, because its object is effectively dehumanized in the process.

Epistemologically, objective imperialism in the extreme is the belief that Christians have complete command of absolute truth and are called and empowered to use it to build an empire, as most egregiously expressed by the Doctrine of Discovery. Clearly, such a notion should not be confused or conflated with the biblical concept and character of the Kingdom of God. However, subjective relativism in the extreme is the equal but opposite dead end, the notion that there is no universal truth, because knowledge is relative to the limited nature of the subjective human mind and its conditions of knowing. Thankfully, most Christians acknowledge that they see through a glass darkly, which is arguably a more biblical sense of truth, a third open middle road that avoids both these dead ends.

Culturally, in the Middle East where and when the Bible was written, truth primarily meant relational trust and loyalty—being “true” to the other—and only secondarily honesty or accuracy of factual content. In those cultures, truth was personal, and to know the truth was to be in living, loving relationship. Affectively, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel maintained that “it is impossible to find Truth without being in love” (1973:45). In other words, love is both the experiential prerequisite and the experiential method for finding truth, not merely the way we practice truth. And volitionally, according to Quaker educator Parker Palmer (1993), we find truth by pledging our troth, by covenanting our loving fidelity. In other words, we accept as true only what we have already come to love. So, for example, for the person who first loves reason, truth is rational. But for the person who first loves the non-rational, truth is spiritual. And for the person who first loves relationship, truth is behavioral (Hiebert 2020). So, is lived Christian faith (Ammerman 2021) rational, spiritual, or behavioral? At the very least, Christianity calls for a more expansive concept of truth.

When Jesus says “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn 14:6), it is best understood as referring to the character of his person and relations with others, not just propositions *about* his identity and role in the cosmic drama. Jesus does not claim that he *knows* the truth, but rather that he *is* the truth, and a person is not a proposition. Jesus incarnates truth, and calls us to incarnate him in turn, that is, to embrace him, not just propositions about him, to emulate his way of life, not just believe creeds about his life. Therefore, when Pilate objectifies truth and famously asks Jesus “What is truth?” (Jn 18:38), he simply gets the question wrong. He would have come closer to truth had he asked “who is truth,” especially with the embodiment of it standing before him.

Overall, though some Christians argue that truth matters more than love, their conceptions of truth are often too narrow, and always too problematic. What then of love?

## Love

Truth and love, it turns out, are equal and interwoven, even co-dependent and co-terminus. After all, Jesus was full of both grace (love) and truth (Jn 1:14), and unlike modernist Christians, early Christians did not separate them. Even belief did not refer to the intellectual content of faith, or those ideas about God that one holds to be true. In early English language, to “believe” (*leubh*) was to “belove” something or someone. Belief was a personal relationship forged in love, not the granting of intellectual assent to propositional truth claims. Moreover, given the greater biblical emphasis on love, truth that does not come from love and lead back to love is not truth to begin. As popular author Jeremy Myers (2011) put it, “Truth without love is harsh judgmentalism and dogmatism. Love without truth is blind sentimentality.... If you find yourself justifying what you are going to say or do ‘in the name of truth’ or ‘in the name of love,’ you are probably being neither truthful nor loving.”

This centrality of love to truth is less familiar than the centrality of love to the two greatest, summative commandments articulated by Jesus (Mk 12:30-1). Notably, he calls us to love God **with** our heart, soul, mind, and strength—mind here often unhelpfully conflated with reason today. But he calls us to love our neighbor **as** ourselves. The two little prepositions are crucial to the big difference. Because God is the holy wholly other, as Swiss theologian Karl Barth put it, and we are utterly unlike God, we cannot love God **as** ourselves, but only **with** our human attributes and capacities. However, we can and are commissioned to love other humans **as** ourselves, that is, empathetically. That means placing ourselves in their shoes, feeling their pain, and seeking their good as they would from their vantage point, just as we seek our own good from our own vantage point.

Take for example the neurodiverse student whose brain functions somewhere on the spectrum of neurocognitive differences, complicating their sensory processing, social anxiety, and focus of attention in the classroom despite their best efforts. Or consider the racialized student who has resigned themselves to erroneous generalizations about aspects of distinct people groups and no longer expects equal engagement in the classroom with those of self-racialized others who justify and defend their privilege or deny its existence.

To truly love another human being, we must understand them (“stand under” them), not depersonalize them by simply making them the object of pre-determined actions we label loving according to our definitions of truth. We must love from the other-centered outside in, not from the self-centered inside out. When we do something to or with or for another person in what we intend as love, but are actually doing it primarily to assure ourselves that we are a good, caring person, or to avoid feeling guilty for being a bad, uncaring person, then we are actually doing it for ourselves, not for the other person. Social psychologists term that egoism, not altruism. And that is not love, regardless of its potentially positive effects on the other person.

For our engagement with the other to be true love, we must find ourselves in the other, and engage in what the Jewish German philosopher Martin Buber (1997) termed an “I-You” (*Ich-Du*) relationship, not merely an “I-It” (*Ich-Es*) relationship. I-You relationships recognize the mutuality of human “kind”ness in each other, and practice the authentic equality and genuine openness of true dialogue, where both selves are at stake, where neither self is totalizing nor capitulating, and where each self is holding the other accountable. In contrast, I-It relationships objectify the other person, manipulating or targeting the other as some “thing” in need of our truth. The two persons then merely carry on alternating monologues that talk at or past each other, never being vulnerable to the other. Hence, “I-It” relationships are thereby at root unloving.

It is therefore insufficient to love others merely volitionally from a safe distance as performance of our principled moral duty and role as Christians. Until we intentionally, vicariously, and continuously experience the internal cognitive and emotional state of the other as much as possible, we cannot fully love them. And in cases like the neurodiverse other, the racialized other, or the intersex other, we must imaginatively occupy their physical state as well; we must see and feel the world as they do. Unfortunately, there is a very real and troubling possibility that the practice of such cognitive and affective empathy as a means to love may be negatively correlated with the practice of rationality as a means to truth. In other words, the more we prioritize rationality as a means to truth, the less able we are to love empathetically. Notably, Jesus' disciples were recognized and identified by the relationality and vulnerability of their love (Jn 13:35), not by the autonomy and supremacy of their truths. And when others drink of that love, they are drawn to those truths.

Christian living may well be more about the right affections of orthopathy—the passionate love for neighbors and hospitality for strangers—than it is about the right doctrine of orthodoxy, or the right practice of orthopraxy (Mather 2020). And just as to love is to find ourselves in the other, to be Christian is to find ourselves in the holy wholly other. In the words of Jewish French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, the face of the other is the portal to the holy (Bloechl 2009). Love, it turns out, is the means to Christian truth because love finds the deepest truth not just in other humans, but finally in God. Perhaps the ultimate irony of truth is its dependence on love.

During the National Day of Prayer Service at the Washington National Cathedral in Washington after the recent presidential inauguration, the Right Rev. Mariann Edgar Budde from the Episcopal Diocese of Washington concluded her sermon by identifying three foundations of national unity—dignity, honesty (about truth), and humility (about truth)—and by appealing for mercy for sexual minorities and immigrants. “May God grant us the strength and courage to honor the dignity of every human being, to speak the truth to one another in love, and to walk humbly with each other and our God for the good of all people” (Budde 2025).

When the full grasp of truth on this side of heaven eludes us, as it always will, the faithful practice of empathetic love should guide us, as it always can. As the Apostle Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 13, even if we could master all truth, without love we would still be nothing. And though we know only in part, even that incomplete knowledge will come to an end. But love never ends. “In the essentials unity, in the non-essentials liberty, in all things charity” is an adage erroneously attributed to Augustine. The proverb is no help in adjudicating which truth claims are essential, but it leaves no doubt that love is the essence of everyday Christian life. At its core, love matters more.

## Persons

Each person is a bio-psycho-social-spiritual being, a complex combination of physical, psychological, social, and spiritual realities. What is true about individuals physically, psychologically, and socially has been increasingly unpacked by the modern natural and social sciences over the past few centuries. What is true about persons spiritually has not so much been revealed recently, as continuously explored and elaborated by luminaries both scholarly and mystical throughout human history. Significantly, individuals have varying degrees of awareness of what is true about themselves and others, none have complete knowledge of themselves and others, and many lack important knowledge of themselves and others. Such lack of knowledge then not only limits the individual's self-concept, but by routinely being projected onto others, compromises the individual's ability to love others deeply.

For example, take the complicating physical-psychological truth of persons born with neurodiversity. Whereas neurotypical persons fall within the average range of neurocognition, neurodivergent persons fall somewhere on the spectrum of neurocognition. Some divergences, such as autism, have been classified as mental disorders despite the differences not necessarily being pathological (Dwyer 2022). Indeed, differences are not necessarily deficits, some occasionally even functioning as “superpowers,” as Elon Musk exemplifies. Nevertheless, neurotypical persons frequently unlovingly deem neurodivergent persons as having a bad attitude, or not trying hard enough, when in fact their abnormal behavior is not a product of their negative mindset or lack of effort, but rather their sheer cognitive capacities. When oblivious to the truth about themselves, neurodivergent persons frequently judge themselves likewise. Yet both the neurotypical and the neurodivergent person have difficulty empathizing with the other—the double empathy problem (Milton 2012)—the challenge, as always, being how not only to grasp the truth about self or the other, but also to love the self or other.

The established structure of higher education is obviously a particular challenge for neurodivergent students. Socially, they often struggle with loneliness, anxiety, and depression. Academically, they often struggle when their divergent learning styles are confronted with standardized assessment procedures which fail to recognize their potentially particular giftedness (Clouder et al. 2020). As the saying goes, if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will spend its whole life believing it is stupid. Adopting a social model of diversity which examines how persons are treated by others, in contrast to a medical model which views the neurodivergent as pathological and needing to be cured, many universities have now implemented programs to facilitate their accessibility and support. Commendably, universities thereby recognize the truth of neurodivergence and practice respect for the neurodivergent person by providing focused interventions and accommodations for such students.

The physical-social truth of persons born with physical features that have been categorized as racial and consequently demeaned is another example. First mapped by physical anthropologists who created the initial conceptual categories of Caucasoid, Negroid, and Mongoloid based on similarity of physical appearance, the very concept of race is now outdated and obsolete (Mason 2024). Genetic variation within any one category of people is truly as great as variation between categories; in reality, the human species is another spectrum of physical characteristics in which three or three hundred categories could be drawn. Scientists have now concluded that there are no objective criteria in general, and there is no biological basis in particular for categories of race, and thus have turned to the concept of racialization, which is the political process of ascribing racial identity to persons. Race, they conclude, is a vacuous, false thing (noun), whereas racialization is a loaded, human process (verb) recurrent throughout history.

Obviously, racialization has a long, complex, and torturous history. And the indubitable truth of racism past and present is that it has committed some of the most horrific and still recent collective crimes of history, from slavery to genocide. Citing cases is unnecessary here, but during the Philippine-American war of 1899-1902, poet Rudyard Kipling famously exhorted Americans to colonize Filipinos because it was “The White Man’s Burden” (1899) to civilize “your new-caught, sullen peoples, half devil and half child.” Demonstrably, racism remains real at multiple levels today: the intra-personal level of internalized beliefs and feelings; the inter-personal level of prejudice (pre-judgment) shown between individuals; the institutional level of discriminatory policies and practises within social institutions; the systemic level of ongoing racial inequalities maintained by society. Notably, racism also remains rife in universities, from prejudicial attitudes to discriminatory actions, from interpersonal student microaggressions to professorial stereotyping of students to ethnocentric curricula to inequitable institutional funding, all of which is unloving. In sum, race is not a truth, and racialization and racism are not love.

A third example is the often more surprising truth of persons born with both male and female physical features. There are approximately thirty types of intersex persons located somewhere on this third physical spectrum (Ainsworth 2015). Some have various combinations of visible external genitalia, but some have XXY or XYY sex chromosomes, or a unique combination of testes and ovaries as gonads, or a mix of the WNT4 gene and the RSP01 gene that determine sexual organ development, all of which are externally invisible and probably never revealed to and known by the individual possessing them. Only one type (congenital adrenal hyperplasia) represents a physical medical emergency in a newborn, but despite their genital tissues being healthy, intersexuals are routinely stigmatized, pathologized, and subjected to medical intervention at great psycho-social cost to and tormenting psycho-social confusion of the person. Permitting no room for sexual ambiguity, a binary opposition of



maleness and femaleness is imposed as much as possible via surgery and hormonal interventions.

Lacking modern physiological evidence, anthropological accounts alone cannot document the percentages of intersex people cross-culturally. But it is likely that they are among the *hijras* of the Indian subcontinent, the *kathoeys* of Southeast Asia, and the *bissu* of Indonesia who are considered a perfect combination of male and female with special spiritual powers, like the two-spirited Indigenous peoples of North America. Historically known as hermaphrodites in Euro-American societies, no attempts to alter them were made in the Greco-Roman world. Nor did Jesus belittle the three types of eunuchs he identifies (Matthew 19), the first being congenital and likely intersex, but he instead welcomed them into the service of the Kingdom, adding “let anyone accept this who can” (v.12). Indeed, going back to the beginning, it has been hypothesized that the first human created may have been intersexual. In Genesis 1:27, if taken literally, God created *ha adam*, the earthling, in his own image, not *ish* who later became the male when *ishah*, the female, was separated from him, thereby creating two poles of a continuum, not sexual dimorphism. Clearly, intersex bodies are then also temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19). As intersexual Catholic priest and scholar Sally Gross stated so simply, “I am a creature of God ... and intersexed people are created, no less than anyone else, in the image and likeness of God” (Hiebert 2022).

*Conclave* is a multiple award-winning 2024 film based on a 2016 novel by Robert Harris about one fictitious instance of the factual sequestered process of Catholic cardinals electing the next pope. Spoiler alert: the narrative ends with Vincent Cardinal Benitez eventually being elected Pope Innocent XIV, and the shocking revelation after his election is that he is intersex. He then recounts his unawareness that he had a uterus and ovaries until his recent appendectomy, and after initially offering to resign from the priesthood and booking a laparoscopic hysterectomy, he reconsidered and chose to keep his female organs, stating “I am what God made me ... I know what it is to exist between the world’s certainties.” The film ends with a live lost turtle being rescued from the marble Vatican floor and placed in a secure Vatican pool, intersex turtles having gonads that contain both male and female structures.

Neurodiversity, racialization, and intersexuality are physical truths of persons not yet fully understood. All their psychological, social, and spiritual realities are even less well understood, and imposing arbitrary categories on physical spectrums for the purpose of conceptual clarity is unhelpful. Granted, it is enormously difficult to avoid mentally assigning people into different groups, because doing so facilitates thinking by providing easy, ready-to-use, cognitive schemas of them. Indeed, every word is a category of thought. Nevertheless, categorization also lamentably facilitates unloving prejudice (pre-judgment), stereotyping, discrimination, and ultimately self-fulfilling prophecy.

Sociologist Christian Smith (2010) articulated and rank-ordered thirty emergent capacities of persons in five ascending categories from rudimentary existence capacities to highest order capacities. Truth-seeking is listed in the category of highest order capacities, but interpersonal love is the highest capacity of all. Whether the truth about persons is clear and known to themselves or others, or not, all neurodiverse, racialized, and intersex persons have all human capacities, and must be loved as such. All Christians in academia are called to both intellectual humility in their truth-seeking and affective compassion in their loving. And when we do not know our students well enough personally to meaningfully love them, we can still show loving kindness to them as our humankind. The Dalai Lama got his priorities in good order when he shared that “I’d rather be kind than right. You can always be kind.”

In Micah 6:8, to love kindness is listed at the center of the three foundational requirements of God. In Galatians 5:22, kindness is listed at the center of the nine fruits of the Spirit. And while all people other than psychopaths and sociopaths are capable of kindness, Christians are commanded not merely to practice random acts of kindness, but to clothe themselves in kindness (Col 3:12). Metaphorically then, loving kindness should be what our students and neighbors constantly see first when they meet us in the classroom or in everyday life. And in truth, loving kindness may well be definitive of Christlikeness. God forbid that our scholarly “truths” about persons get in the way of loving them.

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