
ESSAY

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 both male and female physical features – 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. There is no doubt that they 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?

Some Christians do 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 statement or proposition put forward that is true rather than false. Christian theology is the use of reason to interpret the Bible. It advances arguments that establish Christian beliefs and practices. Christian apologetics is the use of reason to defend the Christian faith based on the principles of logic and the evidence of history. It advances arguments that establish the plausibility or believability 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, first knowing such truth then enables us to comprehend what constitutes love. Hence, to speak the truth in love (Eph 4:15) requires that we first know what is true before we can ascertain what is loving in any particular situation. We must first discern the “what” before we can determine the “how.” 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 has to 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 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 follows: “Peace if possible, truth at all costs.” Truth at all costs, including peace.

It is worth noting that propositional truths about material or natural facts of our physical environment are more accessible, and with greater confidence, than truths about abstract or normative facts of our socio-cultural environment. Truths about the metaphysical realm are that much more difficult to verify or falsify. Some would say it is impossible. And unfortunately, there is no complete consensus on objective truth in any realm. Actually, all forms of truth-telling – historic, scientific, intuitive, principled, rational, metaphorical, mythological – are constantly contested. Theological truth is no different. As evidence for what he terms “pervasive interpretive pluralism,” Christian Smith lists 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.” Smith also lists the following major matters on which earnest and educated evangelicals alone disagree.

Here is his theological list: inerrancy, providence, divine foreknowledge, Genesis, divine image in humanity, Christology, atonement, salvation, sanctification, eternal security, the destiny of the unevangelized, baptism, the Lord’s Supper, charismatic gifts, women in ministry, the millennium, and hell.

Here are some additional issues of disagreement: creation and evolution, the nature of depravity and original sin, the role of good works in salvation, the status of Old Testament laws, the salvation of Jews, the significance of Mary, the legitimacy of creeds and confessions, the nature of conversion, the perseverance of the saints, the nature of life after death, the legitimacy of ordained ministry, faith and reason, faith and science, the morality of slavery, the ethics of economics and wealth, the legitimacy of private property, the nature of social justice, proper worship protocols, tithing, church discipline, dealing with the weaker brother, drinking alcohol, corporal punishment, capital punishment, pacifism and just war, asceticism, celibacy, divorce and remarriage, marital submission and equality, birth control, abortion, homosexuality, the anti-Christ, divinely chosen nationhood, swearing oaths, the ontology of church, believers’ relations to culture, church-state relations, and the nature and purpose of the Bible itself.

That is fifty-seven separate, profound disagreements about truth within evangelicalism alone, creating tens of millions of possible unique combinations. And that was five years ago, with more having emerged since then. When all who self-identify as Christian are included – meaning Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and late-coming Protestants, in the east and the west, in the north and the 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 function as acts of power in themselves. If, as Max Weber taught us, power is the ability to exert one’s will despite resistance, then such objective truth overpowers all in its path, without regard for all in its path. Consequently, the assertion of such

truth can easily become confrontational, even adversarial – truth wielded as a weapon, and at all costs – whereas the practice of love leads more fruitfully to restorative justice and authentic peace. Acts of love abstain from reverting to raw power, much like Jesus, the Prince of Peace, did. Indeed, truth claims are often divisive in ways that love is not, as the myriad branches and denominations of Christianity make manifest. Discrepant claims of truth have severely fragmented Christianity to the bemusement of non-Christians. The practice of love on the other hand, is one of the few dynamics that have united Christians and benefitted non-Christians. The contest of truth claims too often degenerates into power struggle.

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. We then enact our calling willfully and devotedly, though at times merely as the role performance of a “good Christian.” Therefore, at bottom, it is more about us, more about our virtue, than about the other, who becomes rather incidental to our oh so generous charity. 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. In the end, such love remains unkind, lacking the “kind”ness or oneness of simple human solidarity, because the object of such love is effectively dehumanized in the process.

Thankfully, there is a different, arguably more biblical sense of truth, one that does not succumb to either the dead end of objective imperialism or the equal but opposite dead end of subjective relativism. Objective imperialism is the belief that Christians have complete command of all objective and absolute truth, and can use it to build an empire. Such a notion should not be confused or conflated with the biblical concept and character of the Kingdom of God. Subjective relativism, in contrast, is 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. But there is a third way, an open road that avoids both these dead ends.

The Christian anthropologist Paul Hiebert noted that, to the Middle Eastern cultures in which the Bible was written, truth meant primarily relational trust and loyalty, and only secondarily, honesty or accuracy of factual content. Truth to those cultures was personal, and to know the truth was to be in a living, loving relationship. The rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel maintained that “it is impossible to find Truth without being in love.” In other words, love is the prerequisite for finding truth. Love is the method of finding truth, and not merely the manner in which we practice truth. According to Quaker educator Parker Palmer, we find truth by pledging our truth. In other words, we accept as true only what we have already come to love. So, for example, to the person who first loves reason, truth is rational. To the person who first

loves the non-rational, truth is spiritual. And to the person who first loves relationship, truth is behavioral. So is Christian faith 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 to refer 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 that he *is* the truth, and a person is not a proposition. Jesus incarnates truth, and calls us to incarnate him in turn, to embrace him, not propositions about him, to emulate his life, not creeds about his life. When Jesus says “you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (Jn 8:32), it is in living and loving as he did that sets us free. Living and loving as he did gives us both the negative freedom that is *free from* enslavement to sin and the law, as well as the positive freedom that is *free to* be his disciples. 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.

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 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” 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 to love is not truth to begin. As Jeremy Myers 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 being 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 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 person with dementia who desperately wants to keep their world the way they have known it and can remember it, and desperately needs to retain some sense of personal agency and dignity in living. Or consider the person whose gender socialization and ethnic enculturation renders them incapable of what is otherwise normative.

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. We must love from the other-centered outside in, not from the self-centered inside out. When we do something with, or to, or for another person in what we intend as love, but we are actually doing it primarily to assure ourselves that we are a good, caring person, or to avoid guilt 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 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 real equality and 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. They manipulate or target the other as some “thing” needing our truth. They carry on alternating monologues that talk at or past each other, never being vulnerable to the other. And they are thereby at root unloving.

It is therefore insufficient to love others merely volitionally from a safe distance as our principled, moral duty and role as Christians. Until we continuously, vicariously experience the internal cognitive and emotional state of the other, we cannot love them fully. And in cases like the intersexed other, the racialized other, or the demented other, we must try to vicariously occupy their physical state as well. As much as possible, we must see and feel the world as they do. Unfortunately, there is a very real and problematic possibility that the practice of such cognitive and affective empathy as a means to love may be inversely correlated with the practice of rationality as a means to truth. In other words, the more we use rationality as a means to truth, the less able we are to love empathetically. 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. 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. 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.” 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.

When the full grasp of absolute truth eludes us, as it always will, the faithful practice of empathetic love should guide us, as it always can. As Paul in 1 Corinthians 13 reminds us, even if we could master all truth, without love, we would still be nothing (1 Cor 13:2). And though we

know only in part, even that incomplete knowledge will come to an end. But love never ends. There is an old adage erroneously attributed to Augustine: “In the essentials unity, in the non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.” That proverb is no help in establishing which truth claims are essential. But it leaves no doubt that love is the essence of Christian life. At its core, love matters more.