

A MENNONITE THINKS ABOUT KNOWING

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This edition published 2014.

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FOREWARD

Cultures organized around anything other than Jesus Christ generate false gods that embody the dominant features of that culture. Sometimes these gods are given visible form, such as the Cannanite gods of Baal and Ashtoreth, while at other times they exist as ideas. We live in a western European culture that for centuries has enshrined to idolatrous levels the human ability to discover truth. While the idol is crumbling, it still stands. Meanwhile the current dominant culture is erecting other idols by elevating skepticism and tolerance to be the new controlling values. Both the crumbling god and the rising gods are idols that have grown out of questions and assumptions concerning knowledge.

I want to explore the questions that have driven both reason and skepticism to god status in Western thought.

What is truth?

Can we know what is true?

Why can we know?

How can we know?

The answers often given to these questions invite us to place our confidence in places other than God. As Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, the mindset of the dominant culture has a way of shaping the worldview of any member of that culture. We will be conformed to these patterns unless we actively participate in God's work of mind renewal. How does the heart and mind that is shaped by a Christian grasp of reality answer these questions of knowing? That is the issue to which we turn our attention.

1

WHAT IS TRUTH?

SUBSTANCE AND DESCRIPTION

I am the way, and the truth, and the life.

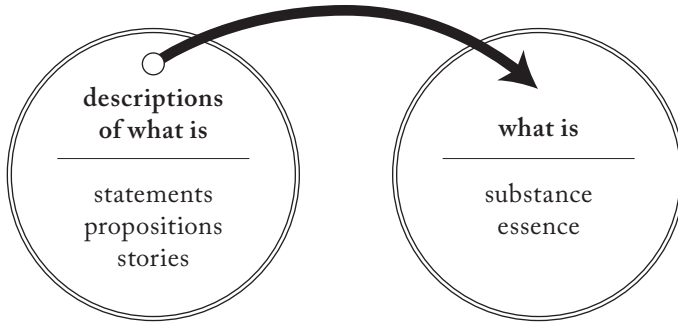
John 14:6 NASB

The functional answers to the questions of truth, knowledge, and knowing are foundational for any way of life. The liberal-fundamentalist controversies of the early twentieth century centered on these questions. The current postmodern and emergent church ferments are primarily debates about truth. For all of us, our view of truth is a controlling value that touches all other aspects of our lives.

What is truth? A definition commonly accepted by both Christians and modernists is that truth is “accurate descriptions of what is.”¹ For example, Reformed philosopher Ronald Nash says that truth is “the property of propositions that correspond to the way things are.”² According to this view, there is what is and then there are descriptions of what is. When the descriptions of what is correspond to what is, we have truth.

1. For example, “on the Empiricist view, a statement (theory) is true, when it is an accurate description of the world as it really is independently of human understanding.” and “truth is conceived as a property of accurately stated words”

2. Ronald H. Nash, *Life's Ultimate Questions: An Introduction to Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 228.



I will explore several good reasons for accepting this understanding of truth and then note that this understanding does not offer a full explanation.

First, John quotes Jesus using the Greek word for truth in this way when He says, "I tell you the truth" (John 8:45 NIV, and 16:7 NASB). He was affirming that truth about realities can be stated in words and communicated to others.

Second, this definition recognizes that our descriptions of reality are a primary way we interface with reality. True descriptions are vital for healthy and fruitful interaction with what is. The pilot, for example, whose instruments give an accurate picture of the position of his plane is able to stay aloft even when his senses are certain the instruments are wrong. On the other hand, wrong descriptions of reality can be harmful and even deadly. The chef who calls a poisonous mushroom edible cannot by his erroneous description change reality, much to the discomfort of those who eat at his table. But not only do we have true and untrue descriptions of reality; often our descriptions are inadequate as well. These inadequate descriptions of reality insulate us from meaningful engagement with reality. For example, the animist who describes God as constantly needing satisfaction lives differently than the one who understands God to send the rain on the just and the unjust. Willard says:

Our daily experience, under pressure from many quarters, constantly keeps us from thoughtful living and ‘dumbs us down’ in many ways, especially theologically. But the resulting lack of adequate ideas and terminology does great harm to our faith. It insulates our real life from what we say we believe. We cannot, even by a miracle, believe a blank blur, much less act on it... To trust in God, we need a rich and accurate way of thinking and speaking about him to guide and support our life vision and our will.³

A third affirmation of this definition (that truth is the description of what is) comes to us from the claim that the Scriptures are truth. As Christians, we believe they accurately describe the way things are;⁴ thus, they are carried forth in our creeds and doctrinal books. The huge collection of Christian creeds and statements of faith speaks loudly of our belief that what is can be put into words, but perhaps even more loudly about our value of accuracy in the statements we make about what is.

These thoughts demonstrate that truth can be understood and communicated through words. However, when truth is understood only or even primarily in this way, it does not adequately reflect the biblical perspective. Jesus uses the word truth to refer not only to correct descriptions of reality but also to reality itself.⁵ Perhaps the clearest example is His statement, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6 NASB). Jesus is not only the exact representation of God;⁶

3. Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (New York, HarperCollins, 1998), 64, 65.

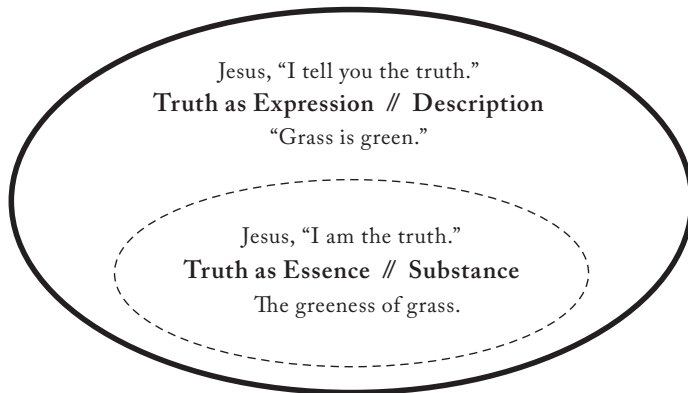
4. 2 Timothy 3:16

5. *Itself* is used here as a placeholder. This is not a declaration as to the nature of truth, whether personal or impersonal.

6. Hebrews 1:3

He is God.⁷ Similarly, Paul uses the word truth to refer to reality itself in the repeated phrase “knowledge of the truth”.⁸ Thus, the writers of Scripture seem to use truth in ways that encompass both the substance of reality and descriptions of reality, sometimes emphasizing one and sometimes the other.

It follows that our understanding of truth should encompass both the substance (the thing itself) and the accurate description. Consider the color of grass. If I say grass is green, I am making a statement about the color of grass and that statement can properly be called truth. In addition, the greenness of the grass itself is also truth. If I say ice cream contains milk, I am making a statement that is true, if and only if, there is indeed milk present in ice cream. I am speaking truth. The word truth can also be used to describe the reality itself: the milkness of ice cream. When Jesus says, “I am the truth,” He is using the word in this second sense; and when He says, “I tell you the truth” (John 16:7 NASB), He is using it in the first sense.



7. John 1:1

8. 1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Timothy 2:25; 2 Timothy 3:7; Titus 1:1; Hebrews 10:26

SUBSTANCE AND DESCRIPTION

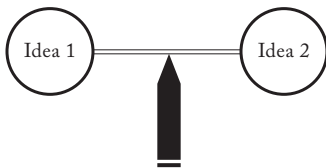
If truth is understood only or even primarily as description, epistemological definitions begin to fall short. We then think of truth as impersonal facts, objective to both God and man. Our understanding of the Gospel is limited to true statements to think about and affirm. Proper confidence, perceived in this light, is the possession of true statements. Knowing is reduced to a mental activity and defense of truth is confined to logical arguments.

When we understand that truth includes what is as well as descriptions that align with what is, we affirm the essential nature of Christianity. This affirmation anchors truth in a person who is competent to make statements that reveal that person. This understanding of truth anchors the Gospel in the activity of a God who speaks reliably about that activity. Consequently, our confidence rests in the God who communicates and makes us capable of receiving this communication. Furthermore, we understand knowing as encompassing relationship with God, which, since essentially He is God and we are His, includes obedience to Him in response to what He has said to us. Instead of limiting our defense of the truth to logical arguments, we offer love as the preferred apologetic.

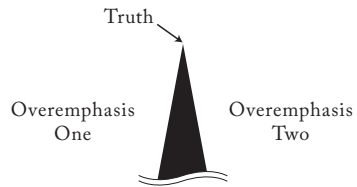
	Description	Substance & Description
Truth	Impersonal facts objective to God and man	One who is competent to make statements that reveal that person
The Gospel	True statements to think about and affirm	The activity of a God who speaks reliably
Proper Confidence	Possession of true statements	Rest in God who communicates and makes us capable of receiving this communication
Knowing	Mental activity	Relationship with God, which includes obedient response to His speaking
Defense of Truth	Logical arguments	Love

These two facets of truth, substance and description, are related ideas that we must work to handle appropriately if we are to move toward reality in our thinking and acting. Therefore, I will take a detour and discuss how to integrate related ideas.

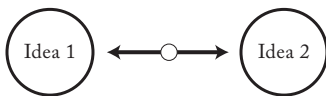
Beliefs about some aspects of reality do not exist independently but are interrelated. Some beliefs complement each other, while other beliefs are in conflict with each other. Often beliefs seem to come in pairs such as the sovereignty of God and the freedom of man, the goodness of God and the existence of evil, right living and right thinking. Over the years, a number of models for relating paired ideas have been proposed and are widely used. Perhaps the most popular is the balance model which promotes keeping two related ideas in proper proportions so that neither gets out of balance. An often cited weakness of the balance model is that it suggests a blending of ideas that results in tepid, lukewarm expression. The tension model attempts to address this weakness by emphasizing the need to embrace true ideas with passion and let them exist in dynamic, engaged tension with other ideas that are embraced with passion. Two other frameworks, the knife-edge and ditch model, focus on the errors that come from emphasizing one idea to the exclusion of related ideas.



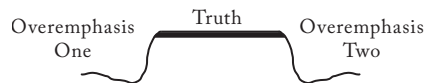
BALANCE MODEL



KNIFE-EDGE MODEL



TENSION MODEL



ROAD-DITCH MODEL

Many models have the inability to show when one idea or belief is more basic, primary, or fundamental than the other. The model that I will use throughout this paper is that of first and second things. This model addresses the question of comparative value. In addition, it attempts to avoid the either-or and versus language that so easily presents itself when discussing related ideas. Instead of one thing versus another, I will speak of one thing and another. While the model may address some problems, it, like all models, has limitations. I will not explore the limitations but will give an extended explanation of the model.

There are many beliefs that must be held in proper relationship with other beliefs in order for them to align with reality. The first and second things model is an attempt to illustrate the proper relationship between two beliefs, ideas, or values that should not exist independently of each other or be separated, but in which one should provide an anchor, a focus, and a context for the other.⁹ For example, Christians believe that God is transcendent over the creation.¹⁰ We also believe that God is present, or immanent, in His creation.¹¹ Both ideas are affirmed by Scripture and Christian tradition. The first and second things model affirms that both are true and also that one of the two provides the necessary anchor and context for the other. In this case, transcendence is the first thing and immanence a second. A second example may be more helpful for our present topic: being good and doing good. It would not be difficult to amass mounds of biblical data in support of both calls. The question is not which one is the Christian call, for they both are, but which one is more basic.

9. Not all ideas have this kind of relationship. For example, some ideas are antithetical.

10. Isaiah 55.8 (NASB): “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Neither are your ways My ways,” declares the LORD.”

11. Colossians 1.17 (NASB): “and in Him all things hold together.”

Which one anchors the other? There is near universal support that it is being good. As Jesus said, “A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of” (Luke 6:45 NIV). The proper relationship is for both being good and doing good to be valued in proper emphasis. With increasing correspondence and consistency between the two, doing contributes to our becoming and being is free to express itself truly.

Now that I have given some examples, I will return to further definition. In the first and second things model, one of the beliefs is a first thing. Therefore, it has a place of priority, focus, and emphasis. The related belief that should not be separated from or substituted for the first thing is the second thing. If the first and second things are in conflict, the first thing must prevail.

The first and second things model gives a picture of the relationship of beliefs that fits reality. The model also helps us see relationships between beliefs that do not describe reality. There are three of these:

Reversal: the second thing is made a first thing and becomes the most important

Confusion: first and second things are defined as the same thing

Separation: second things become optional and then unimportant and then counterproductive. This approach continues to value first things, but without second things, they are often incomplete or even problematic.

Let us return to the question of God’s nature to illustrate each of these three inappropriate relationships. Using

the first and second things model, we have said that His transcendence is a first thing and His immanence is a second thing. Reversal makes immanence the anchoring attribute and our immediate experience of God trumps what He has said about Himself. A student once illustrated this reversal when remarking, "I know God through my journals and prayer walks, not through the Scriptures." If we confuse God's otherness with His omnipresence and believe them to be synonymous, our understanding of God veers toward a pantheistic, all-is-God and He-is-me brand of pop-religion. Separating immanence from transcendence leads to a functional deism, resulting in a view of God that denies His knowledge of people, His sustaining of the universe, and His miraculous interventions.

Our model helps us think about the unreal relationships between doing good and being good. If being good is a first thing and doing good is a second thing, how does reversal, confusion, and separation create unreal relationships between the two? Reversal claims that doing good covers over the presence of evil. Such a person might point to his good deeds defensively, as if they made his sinfulness acceptable or at least not as problematic. We can also confuse being good and doing good by believing the claim that if we do good, we are good. Jesus is very clear that this is a problem:

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people

as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness (Matt 23:25-28 NIV).

James refers to the same problem:

With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? (James 3:9-11 NIV).

Separation of the two claims that the only thing that matters is being good. With time, the claim grows to include an antipathy toward doing good. I once heard of a minister baldly state you can either get your thinking right or your living right, not both. This is separation. The ancient (and present) gnostic forms of antinomianism that teach the absolute goodness of the spirit while deeming irrelevant what is done with the body is another face of this separation.

The detour is finished. We merge back onto our route by affirming that the two facets of truth, substance and description, are first and second things. Truth as what is (essence/substance) is a first thing. Truth as accurate description of what is, is a second thing. For our understanding of truth to approach the Truth, these two must not be confused, must not be separated, and must not be reversed. In exploring these three possibilities, I will limit my thoughts almost exclusively to the discussion of Christ and the Scriptures.

Confusion: Equating First and Second Things

The substance is not the same as the description. The map is not the same as the town. The scientific treatise on oxygen is not a gas. The Scriptures are not Jesus. However,

true descriptions have tremendous power. Maps that accurately point the way to a destination are valuable. Accurate understanding of the properties of oxygen can be utilized in industry, the medical field, and scientific exploration. And acquaintance with the Scriptures is protection from following the many fantastic distortions of Jesus. Thus, the power of positive affirmation is widely observed. This very power inherent in description, however, opens the confusion of description and reality.

The problem of confusion seems to be more functional than analytical. Consider several examples.

Jesus scolded the Pharisees with the words, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life” (John 5:39, 40, NASB). The Jewish leaders were confusing the testimony about life with Life Himself.

At another time, Jesus had these words to say to the people who were following Him and believing in Him: “If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:31, 32 NASB). We often read this to say, “You will become aware of true descriptions about reality and these truths and principles will allow you to live in freedom,” much like the person who learns how to make money on the stock market and that knowledge allows him to become financially free. This reading confuses description with substance. Further in this passage, it becomes clear that Jesus is locating truth in Himself and not in special unattached information, and that it is not this information that is bringing freedom but Himself.¹² It is also clear that He is using the word knowing to refer to an experiential involvement that pushes beyond merely perceiving facts.

12. “If therefore the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed” (John 8:36 NIV).

This confusion is indicated when reality is given the same character or value as its description. Description tends toward the impersonal, unconscious, informational, and objective dimensions of reality. Scientific naturalism understands reality in precisely those terms.¹³ Christians err similarly when the Gospel is described as affirmations of eternal truths. Under the influence of modernism, the church has tended to communicate, however unintentionally, that propositional formulations of the Gospel are the Gospel. Some of the emergent church fervor is a reaction to this distortion.

Separation: Making Second Things Optional

A second common problem regarding the two dimensions of truth (substance and description) is the separation of the two, viewing one or the other as optional or even oppositional. Sometimes in an emphasis on substance, the Scriptures are seen as unimportant or even unnecessary. Conversely, it is possible to so focus on the Scriptures that we obscure or totally lose sight of the Living Word. It is proper and important to distinguish while not totally separating substance and description. In similar fashion, while one's body and soul are distinguishable, it is inadvisable to try to separate them.

In Christian circles, the problem of separation occurs at several levels. On one level, true descriptions of reality are viewed as valued luxuries but not vital. Genuine experience is what counts. Examples include some forms of mysticism and Pentecostalism as well as much of today's pop Christianity. Again, I am reminded of a former student who acknowledged that the Jesus she knew was from her journaling and prayer walks and not the Scriptures.

At another level, true descriptions of reality are actually seen

13. I suspect that confusing descriptions of reality with reality is part of the legacy of enlightenment enshrining objective observation as the only reliable means to knowing truth.

as a hindrance to knowing truth. Both extreme mysticism and antinomianism make this kind of separation. This separation is illustrated by a school mother who said, “If you only knew my Jesus, you wouldn’t care about [matters of practice taught in Scripture.]”

Separation at any level results in distortions of truth. It is instructive that God uses the same word, *Logos*, translated “word”, to refer both to Christ and the Scriptures.¹⁴ Christ and all He has made and done and said is the substance, and the Scriptures are true descriptions of the substance. Furthermore, Jesus does not make a strong distinction between Himself and His words. He uses “abide in my word” (John 8:31 ESV) as parallel to “abide in me” (John 15:4-7 ESV). His instruction to abide in His words calls us to a state of submitted responsiveness to Jesus Himself; “Then you are my students indeed.” In a similar way, we find an intrinsic, inseparable link between God and His Word. When He speaks, the effect is not merely description but new reality. In a lesser way, our speech, too, adds to the substance.

Why might we make this separation? Pride, selfishness, unbelief, and wanting our own way are all potential culprits. We sometimes want reality to be different from what is. But the simple fact of our limited understanding and corresponding dependence on the Truth often results in inconsistencies between our words (descriptions) and reality. This inconsistency easily pushes us toward a greater separation of these two categories than warranted. Of course, when God speaks, no such inconsistency is present.

Reversal: Putting Second Things First

A third problem regarding substance and description is reversal, giving description a place of transcendence.

14. John 1; Hebrews 4:12

The ancient Greek thinker Gorgias is famous for saying that there is nothing to know, and if there were we couldn't know, and if we could we couldn't communicate it. Inadvertently this affirmation, while denying substance, leaves the description intact. Skepticism and relativism raise serious questions about the accessibility of reality, leaving us only with verbal reconstructions that are the new reality or quasi-reality, since no description adequately matches reality. The irony is that this rejection of the ability of description to align with reality leaves description as the last player left standing.

Perhaps it is better to use the word truth to refer to what is and refer to descriptions of what is with words as truth-claims or beliefs.

In Christian thought, "truth" is the whole truth, encompassing the whole of what is. Christians agree with the postmodernist that words cannot fully describe what is even in simple life forms, much less in describing the Life-Giver. Still, Christians accept that statements can be made about simple life forms as well as the Life-Giver that are true and accurately express what is to the extent they are able. These are sometimes referred to as truths. Thus, we as Christians disagree with the assumptions of the postmodernist that because expression is incomplete, it is true only in the relative sense, and that everyone's concept of what is, is equally valid and equally true. These assumptions effectively reduce what is to the unknowable and elevate expression above reality. This reversal leads to spiritual, intellectual, and experiential chaos. In human experience, what is has always been the anchor for descriptions of what is, enabling us to explore and describe new frontiers of learning as well as correct wrong descriptions. The earth is a sphere that orbits the sun. That truth eventually corrected the descriptions of the earth as a flat plane upheld on the shoulders of elephants.

Were we to try to function with reversal, elevating description above reality and making every person's description equally valid, we would have to abandon all research; there would be no premise for law and order; and there would be no substantial difference between history and fantasy. Functionally, this would enable me to ignore today a bill I created yesterday (say, by the purchase of a new car) if I did not perceive it as something I owed; the reality of my purchase could be trumped by my perception that I already paid for it, or that it was a gift, or that it floated down from the sky into my garage. Reversal is chaos.

2

WHAT IS? A MAP OF REALITY

In the beginning was the Word.

John 1:1

I have argued for an understanding of truth anchored in the substance of what is inseparably linked to true descriptions of what is. So, what is? What kind or kinds of things exist? Jesus' best friend, John, answers the question. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being" (John 1:1-3 NASB). Christianity teaches that at the source of all existence is God, and He is personal, relational, and rational. The implications for our questions are significant.

He is personal. Truth is someone.

He is relational. Truth is someone to know.

He is rational. Truth is a mysterious, unfathomable, transcendent Being who speaks and we understand. As someone has said, "The God who made man's mouth can speak his language."

We desire to know truth. We seek it. We commit ourselves to following wherever it may lead. And when we find it, it is not a code of ethical rules, an incantation written in stone, the secret knowledge of the cosmos, an

impersonal force, or limited to an assortment of facts. What we easily think of as the inanimate, passive object of our pursuit turns out to be Someone who is aware of us long before we are aware of Him, who is pursuing us with a desire and commitment that ours only mimics, and who is entirely competent to bring us into knowing Him.¹⁵

Picture the surprise of the scientist who discovers that the substance in the test tube has made him, given him the desire to pursue this study, and even equipped him with the tools to know. The substance is holding him, not he the substance. When we plumb the depths of what is, we come to God Himself.

For the question “What is truth?” to be more comfortable than “Who is truth?” is indicative of the influence of non-Christian forms.

Now, having come to Him who is, we find that from Him springs more that is. “All things came into being through Him” (John 1:3 NASB). This personal, relational, and rational God has created a world that is sustained by Him and marked by His nature. All that is comes from God; but not all that is, is God.

Nature exists. Virginia Stem Owens differentiates between the Creator and creation thus:

We speak words; God speaks things. He opens what we suppose to be his metaphorical mouth, and out tumble trees, viruses, moons. From his lips pour blood and water and wisps of clouds. Tsetse flies and ptarmigans trip from his tongue. Whereas we can only say ‘is’ or ‘equals,’ he utters the essential verb ‘be.’ Let there be.¹⁶

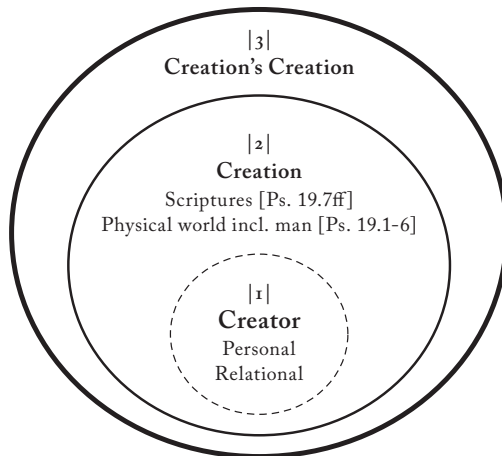
15. Psalm 139, Proverbs 2

16. Virginia Stem Owens, *And the Trees Clap Their Hands: Faith, Perception, and the New Physics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 59.

And, unique among this second level of reality, man exists. Men and women, created in God's image, are also personal, relational, and rational. In our limited way, we are like Him.

Furthermore, Scripture exists. The Scriptures are another expression of God. They are inspired by God.¹⁷ They not only describe what is, they are a part of what is. Like the creation and like humans, the Scriptures are a secondary reality: coming from God and expressing who He is, but not identical with God.

There is a third dimension of reality of what exists which could be termed "creation's creation." God has created beings that share something of His capacity for creation. God's speech at creation indicates this. "Let us make," reflecting God's own intention, is paralleled with "[you] be fruitful and multiply," reflecting His intention for us. Children and poems and cars and tree houses and novels and nations and plows and businesses are part of what exists. This is the category of things made by man and marked by the nature of man.



17. 2 Timothy 3:16

And so we have three categories of what is, all sourced in God but distinguishable from each other.

Category 1: Creator

Category 2: Creation

Category 3: Creation's Creation

Truth, then, is not objective to God; that is, it is neither above nor below God but rooted in God Himself. God is Truth. If truth were above God, some cosmic reality that God is beholden to, then God would not be God. If truth were below God, then truth would be arbitrary (i.e., God could decree something other than that which is true and good.)

Truth as essence, however, is objective to humans in categories one and two. Truth is, and beliefs (descriptions of what is) do not change what is. Human beliefs about the Creator (category one) and the creation (category two) do not change those realities. Believing that the earth is flat does not change the reality either way. Believing that I will not fall if I jump out of a high-rise motel window does not prevent the fall from happening. Believing in the existence of God does not mean that He exists, and disbelieving in Him does not mean that He does not exist.

In the third category, truth as essence is more subjective. It is different from one person to another. Here our beliefs may have an effect on what is. Our beliefs about the church, beauty, and worship influence the kinds of church structures we build. Beliefs about sexuality affect choices concerning marriage, conception, abortion, and child-raising. Of course, since we are interacting with God and His creation (objective reality) in all of life, our subjective way of seeing things is constantly being challenged by the objective reality of what is. After fifty years of church experience, a Christian may view church and church-building quite differently than in his early years.

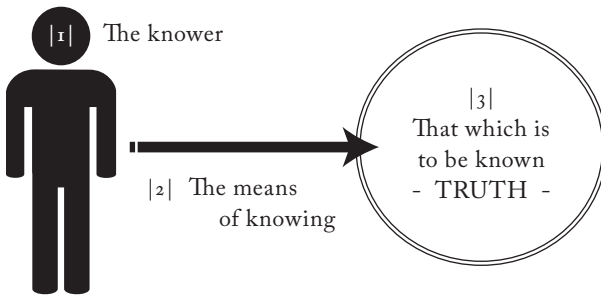
Some reality, then, is independent of human belief (objective) while some is at least partially human dependent (subjective).

3

KNOWING: COMING TO TERMS WITH REALITY

You will make me to know wisdom.
Psalm 51:6b NKJV

Knowing involves at least three things. First, there must be a knower: one who comprehends. Second, there must be the means by which we come to know, e.g., observation, revelation, etc. And third, there must be something to be known, which we apprehend as truth.



If substance is first and description secondary, how does it inform our understanding of knowing?

First, it informs our definition of knowing. If truth is first and fundamentally a Person, then knowing truth will involve the kind of knowing common to relationships: direct encounter with a person that involves growing awareness, an experiential involvement that goes beyond but does not

bypass thinking about what is to be known. Lesslie Newbigin describes this type of knowledge:

But there is another kind of knowing which, in many languages, is designated by a different word. It is a kind of knowing that we seek in our relations with other people. In this kind of knowing we are not in full control. We may ask questions, but we must also answer the questions put by the other. We can only come to know others in the measure in which they are willing to share. The resulting knowledge is not simply our own achievement; it is also the gift of others.¹⁸

Knowing on this level then is not mere awareness (i.e., I can know about people without knowing them), but is also not devoid of awareness (i.e., I can't know without awareness). It is the difference between seeing a great dinner and enjoying one. It seems that these two components of knowing, encounter and awareness, are first and second things that generally parallel substance and description. An encounter is at the level of first things, and awareness is at the level of second things.

If reversed, mere awareness is given an unjustified weight. For example, awareness may content itself with knowledge about God and making affirmation of orthodox beliefs without obedient surrender to God or entering into relationship with Him.

Encounter and awareness can also be confused, giving the delusion that knowledge about God is equivalent to knowledge of God. The writer of Proverbs captures some of these ideas. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding" (Proverbs 9:10 NASB). Fear and knowledge of, not knowledge about,

18. Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, & Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 10.

are experiential terms. If Christ is the source of all that is, then knowing anything without knowing Him is incomplete, much like thinking milk comes from the grocery store is technically correct but essentially wrong.

Or the two dimensions of knowing might be separated. In the enthusiasm for authentic encounter with God or with the realization of the inadequacy of statements alone, we might begin to devalue true descriptions. We may question the necessity of the descriptions and even become skeptical of the value or possibility of true descriptions.

A second and related way that the substance-description model informs our understanding of knowing is that the context for knowing is relational. “For the LORD gives wisdom; From His mouth come knowledge and understanding” (Proverbs 2:6 NASB). Knowledge is not something that is self-acquired; it is given in relationship.

In one of His last prayers on earth, Jesus reflected this reality of knowing when He said, “Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17:3 NIV). We can use many adjectives to describe the life of God: eternal, magnificent, glorious, eye-opening, transforming, etc. But this life is truly known only in relationship with the Father and the Son, as the Apostle John went on to explain:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with

the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ (1 John 1:1-3 NIV).

John speaks of proclaiming the life of God (description) so that his readers might enter into fellowship with God and know His life (substance) in relationship. John closes his letter with almost identical concepts, worded slightly differently: “We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true by being in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life” (1 John 5:20 NIV). Jesus opened our understanding by both description and substance to the reality of the life of God. The Father is truly known to those who are “in His Son Jesus.”

Third, the substance-description model informs our methods of knowing. We come to know what is primarily through observation and participation. Observation is adequate for learning knowledge about something or someone. Participation is required for learning knowledge of. We can observe a good meal and make many accurate statements about it, but participating in the meal will give a more informed knowledge. When we actually participate, we will be able to describe not only the kinds of food, different courses and amounts, and table conversation; but we will know the seasonings, texture, and temperature of the various foods. We can share with others the overall experience of the meal, the conversations we had, how we felt throughout, and how the meal affected us physically, emotionally, and relationally. Participation-level knowing is full-orbed.

It is the difference between reading about carpentry and building a house. Few would care to hire a man to build a house whose only knowledge of carpentry was from

books, even if those books had excellent, full-color, accurate pictures and diagrams. We would want a carpenter whose knowledge of carpentry included years of participation in the craft because there are dimensions of knowing that come only through pounding nails, measuring distances, using saws, reading prints, and actually building houses.

Similarly, knowing people involves both observation and participation. Watching people often tells us a lot, but our observations are always filled out and sometimes drastically modified by actually living with people.

The substance-description model helps us a fourth way by giving a way to think about our descriptive forms of truth. Two primary forms we use to describe truth are proposition and story. These two forms come in a variety of genres: essays, news articles, outlines, poetry, narratives, histories, parables, etc. I will consider proposition and story as forms of description in greater detail in the next section.

Fifth, the substance-description model informs evaluation of sources of truth claims. The sources of descriptions of reality (truth-claims) include the Scriptures (revelation from God) and science (humans' study of physical reality). Because Truth ultimately is a Person, Christians take the expressions of that Person as true, and thus trust the Scriptures above the best observations of humans (science), which do change with fresh discoveries. At the same time, we acknowledge that knowing the truth of the Scriptures involves interpretation and is never perfect; sometimes the observations of reality show that our interpretation of Scripture was incorrect and needed adjustment. I will further explore the relationship between the Scriptures and science in the section entitled *Confidence*.

4

DESCRIPTION: KNOWING BY DESCRIBING

I tell you the truth.
John 16:7 ESV

As noted earlier, there are two primary forms to describe with words the knowledge of the truth: proposition (statement) and story. To think about these two forms, let us compare and contrast them in a chart.

	Proposition	Story
Definition	Use of words to describe what is as succinctly and unambiguously as possible	Use of words to describe what happens
Strengths	Allows for clear, precise, and arguable description	Allows for personal identification. Captures a fuller orbed picture of reality.
Weaknesses	Has difficulty capturing all aspects of reality. e.g., emotion, mystery.	Tends toward ambiguity of meaning.
Example	God created the physical world. The king died. Then the queen died.	In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The king died. The queen died of a broken heart.

To further differentiate, I will compare a proposition and a story from the Bible that describe the same reality.

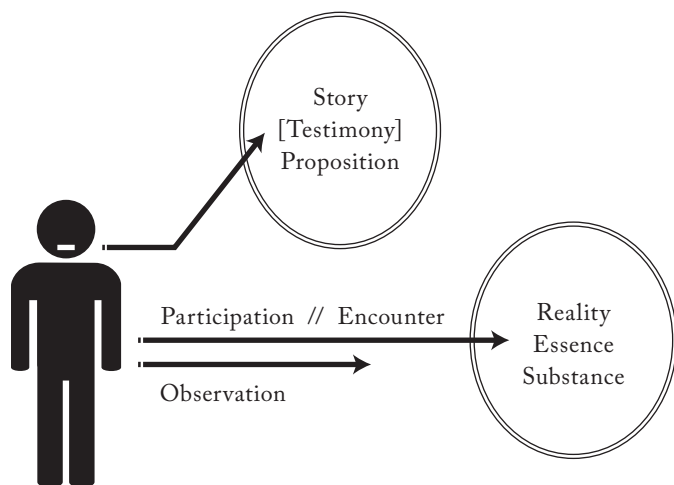
Proposition: Jesus cares for people.¹⁹

Story: The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” “No one, sir,” she said. “Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.” (John 8:3-11 NIV).

While the story and proposition communicate a similar idea, the distinction is obvious. The proposition is straightforward and unambiguous. The story is close, personal, emotive, and compelling. The Scriptures use both methods of description to reveal what is. We should not draw too sharp a distinction between the two since stories cannot be told without proposition and even the barest proposition contains elements of story. The current reaction against proposition in favor of story is, I think, unfortunate in this regard and is a distraction from the greater call to a knowing that is anchored in authentic encounter with God. It is good to value both story and proposition. It is good to submit ourselves to the

19. I Peter 5:7

stories and propositions given directly by God. It is good to develop our skills in using story and proposition to continue the call to extend the knowledge of God to all nations. Story and proposition are both methodologies for description and point to, but are not, the more fundamental substance. Story and proposition belong to the category of description rather than encounter. Both have the capacity to move toward encounter and participation. The Scriptures employ and thus affirm both approaches; Romans is offered along with the Gospels.



In their enthusiasm for story, the postmodern generation, including the conservative Anabaptist younger generation, could be on a trajectory to inappropriately devalue the role of propositions. The shift toward greater emphasis on story is understandable. The Enlightenment urged honing the rational and logical skills of the head perhaps to the neglect of, or even disdain for, emotive and intuitive functions of the heart. Proposition lends itself naturally to the logical expression of ideas. But ironically, the rise of rational thought and logical proofs also gave rise to skepticism. Ultimately, rational thought

expressed in faultless proposition does not express full reality. The emphasis on logical proposition has been found wanting both in the experience and the expression of some of the fundamental dimensions of the human heart. Neither rational descriptions of God nor rational arguments against Him can fill the human yearning for love or quiet the urge to worship.

And so, the movement toward story pushes us toward dimensions of our humanity that rational thought misses. Still, we must remember that story is only another form of expression. Emphasizing story doesn't necessitate involvement or participation in the story. A Sunday school teacher could thrill his class with the way the story of Jesus in the synagogue fits into the larger story of God's redemptive intentions for the world; yet it could largely be a mental exercise rather than encounter for the teacher.

We as Christians need to pay attention to the questions of the postmodernists, starved on a diet of propositions and weary of the false hopes of rationalism. They can help us see the power and breadth of story. The Judeo-Christian tradition is rich in both the things God has said and the things He has done, and we must beware of setting the one against the other.

I have considered two forms commonly used to describe truth: proposition and story. Another way to describe or express knowledge of the truth is by living it: practice. This nonverbal approach seems to have become the preferred form by us as Anabaptists to perpetuate our beliefs. This reliance has its own strengths and weaknesses.

5

CONFIDENCE: CAN WE KNOW THAT WE KNOW?

You shall know.

John 8:32 ASV

Can we know truth for certain? If so, why? What is a proper basis for confidence? I suggest that the basis for confidence in knowing is often inappropriately placed in either the means of knowing or the capability of the knower.

The views toward truth, knowing, and confidence are summarized in an illustration from the book *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be*, by Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh. They imagine three umpires meeting after a day at the park. As they reflect on the day's activities, one ump declares, "There's balls and there's strikes, and I call 'em the way they are." Another responds, "There's balls and there's strikes, and I call 'em the way I see 'em." The third says, "There's balls and there's strikes, and they ain't nothin' until I call 'em.'"²⁰

The first umpire, representative of a modernist understanding of truth, affirms that truth indeed exists and that we can know it: "There's balls and there's strikes, and I call 'em the way they are." But these definitions of truth and knowing are

20. J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 31.

different from those previously explored in this paper. Here truth is limited to what can be observed, and the certainty is in the observation. When considered this way, only truth about the physical realm is considered to be truth. Christians can buy into this by splitting physical reality from metaphysical reality and making truths about only the metaphysical realm the real truth. For umpire one, the definition of knowing includes only empirical, rational processes. But most importantly, the locus of confidence has been placed in the human knower's empirical and rational capability. Modern cameras and tracer equipment have shown that even an experienced umpire doesn't always see it as it really is, and therefore cannot "call 'em" with total accuracy.

The third umpire represents a reaction to, or perhaps development of, modernist thinking: "There's balls and there's strikes, and they ain't nothin' until I call 'em." Since the answer to the question of reality is either nonexistent or unknowable, then there is no need to answer or ask the question of whether we can know. A person who claims to know something that is universally true for everyone, everywhere, and anytime, marginalizes those who disagree. This view lacks confidence in anything other than local, pragmatic construction; its correspondence to what exists is uninteresting or unimportant since there is no basis for making that judgment.

The second umpire best represents a Christian perspective: "There's balls and there's strikes, and I call 'em the way I see 'em." There is both an affirmation of truth and recognition of the limitations we have as humans for knowing and describing exactly the way things are.

This brings us back to the question: if Christians admit that they are limited in their ability to know, on what basis do they have confidence that they do indeed know something—or anything? It is precisely here that the Christian worldview differs radically from the alternatives. Since the Truth is God

himself, the process of knowing is not dependent primarily on us as seekers. Ultimate Truth is not unconscious, impersonal hidden knowledge that we must seek and might find only if we are skilled or diligent enough. The Truth is a completely competent Communicator who has sought us and is seeking and speaking to us out of a heart of love.

He is speaking clearly, powerfully, and in many ways. The Truth has come to us most clearly through Jesus.²¹ He is the apex of God's revelation of Himself. God has also spoken powerfully through the Scriptures.²² The Scriptures are true. They are the Creator's communication to His creation. They speak infallibly about the fundamental questions of life and existence. God speaks through the church.²³ The church is referred to as the body of Jesus that discerns and carries out the mind of Christ on the earth. Jesus authorized the church to speak the mind of God: "Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 18:18 NIV). And

21. Hebrews 1:1-3a (NIV): "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being."

22. 2 Peter 1:20 (KJV): "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost." And 2 Timothy 3:16 (KJV): "All scripture is given by inspiration of God."

23. 1 Corinthians 2:10b-13, 16 (NIV): "The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. But we have the mind of Christ."

God also speaks through the creation.²⁴ Although the other means by which He has spoken are clearer than His voice in creation, what He says about His power and divine nature through creation is clear enough that all people on earth “are without excuse” (Romans 1:20 NIV).

God’s voice reveals that He is love.²⁵ He is committed to our good. It also shows that He is completely competent to communicate His truth to us.²⁶

Why can we know? Because God is and God speaks. A loving, communicating Being is able to teach us. Because of His ability, we can be assured that we will know enough. Proper confidence in the realm of knowing is based on God’s goodness and competence and not in our abilities as knowers. It is not based on our ability to think well, observe well, or intuit well. It is based in God’s faithfulness and brilliance as a teacher. In this as in every other area of life, we are called to trust God and not our efforts. While God through

24. Psalm 19:1-2 (NIV): “The heavens declare the glory of God ... they pour forth speech.”

25. John 3: 16 (NIV): “For God so loved.” And 2 Peter 3: 9 (NIV): “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” Heb 11:6 (NIV) “And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.”

26. Deuteronomy 4:29 (KJV): “But if from thence thou shalt seek the LORD thy God, thou shalt find him, if thou seek him with all thy heart and with all thy soul.” And Jeremiah 29:13 (KJV): “And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart.” And Isaiah 55:11 (KJV): “So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.” And John 16:13 (NIV): “But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.”

the Scripture repeatedly calls us to seek understanding and knowledge and wisdom, we are just as often reminded that the focus of our trust should not be our understanding, but to continually move our trust back onto Jesus. As the songwriter puts it:

My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness.
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,
But wholly trust in Jesus' Name.
On Christ the solid Rock I stand,
All other ground is sinking sand.

Edward Mote

The writer acknowledges the appeal of “sweetest frame” (compelling descriptions of reality) as a basis for confidence, but rightly calls for confidence only in the reality of God incarnate in Jesus. If certainty was anchored in descriptions of reality rather than in reality Himself, it would be more consistent with modernist thought than Christian thought.

How does this basis for certainty interact with the Scriptures? It is not so much the Bible itself that is the basis for our hope in God but the reality of the competent, compassionate communicator Himself. Despite all the questions of canonization, transmission, translation, and interpretation, there is basis for confidence that the Scriptures we have can be used by Him to bring us to conscious participation with Truth.

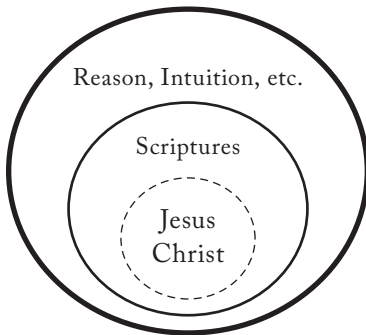
There is then a proper confidence for knowing that is anchored in God and His ability. How does this relate to the question of certain knowledge? Due to the influence of rationalistic philosophy and science, certainty has become a technical term indicating knowledge without possibility of error. Christians have felt the pressure to defend and prove their beliefs using this presuppositional framework. However,

almost nothing of significance can be proven beyond all shadow of doubt. Can I prove that the Bible is the Word of God? Can I know without any possibility of doubt that God exists, that Jesus is God, that Jesus rose from the dead? Can I know without any possibility of doubt that reason is a reliable guide to truth? Can I know without any possibility of doubt that my next drink of water will not kill me? For almost all important questions, it is impossible to prove with absolute certainty the truth of a particular truth claim. And yet we take the drink of water. It is possible to know with significant confidence many truths about the way things really are. The impossibility of proof does not mean we cannot know or should be agnostic. In fact, in many situations it is much more reasonable to believe than to avoid or deny belief, even without absolute proof. Humility involves admitting that we could be wrong even in areas that have overwhelming evidence. It does not mean believing that all competing truth claims are equally likely to be true.

For reality independent of humanity, the degree of certainty, passion, or confidence in a belief or truth claim does not affect in any way the truthfulness of the truth claim (e.g., a strong belief that Jesus rose from the dead in no way changes whether He did or did not). For reality that humans can influence, the degree of certainty in a truth claim may affect the truthfulness of the truth claim (e.g., if I think I am sick, I might become sick).

When the focus of confidence is God Himself, there is a basis for secondary confidences in observation, reason, and intuition. This competent, benevolent God has made a world that is accessible by observation and reason. He is Logos, a rational Being, and the world that sprang from Him is consistent with Him. Consequently, observation and reason are remarkably reliable for discovering the way

things are.²⁷ He is Logos, and the people He has made in His image have the ability to sometimes intuit correctly, observe accurately, reason validly, and communicate with each other. When the human knower and the means of knowing are the focus, confidence in the ability to know is uncertain. When Truth is the focus of confidence, we are given back reason, observation, and intuition as generally reliable avenues for growing in knowledge.



Before leaving the question of certainty, I will briefly consider two related issues. First, does this understanding of proper confidence mean that a believer will never doubt? The answer is no. As Charles Hodge said,

When we inculcate that faith ought to be certain and secure, we conceive not of a certainty attended with no doubt, or of a security interrupted by no anxiety; but we rather affirm, that believers have a perpetual conflict with their own diffidence, and are far from placing their consciences in a placid calm never disturbed by any storms. Yet, on the other hand, we deny, however they may be afflicted, that they ever fall and depart from that certain confidence which they have conceived in the divine mercy.²⁸

27. Psalm 19

28. Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*.

But if Truth Himself is the reason we can know, why doesn't everyone know? I believe God's ability to communicate with humanity is an invitation rather than an inevitability. God has made us with the ability to determine, to choose, to chart a path between options. This is a priceless gift that enables us to recognize and appreciate Truth and to choose Him, love Him, and worship Him forever. Alas, it has also been our downfall, for it has enabled us to choose against the Truth, to know and explore un-Truth, and to reject Him. The rich young ruler came to Jesus seemingly with the desire to know the good will of God for his life. But he had already set his heart upon what was not God, and his possessions had become for him a false god. When Jesus called this young man to cast down the god, to reject the un-Truth, the young man walked away unhappy, preferring to live by a lie, a distortion of reality, rather than embrace the only One who is worthy of heart devotion.²⁹

29. Mark 10:17-23

6

HOW? THE MEANS BY WHICH WE KNOW

Knowing Truth involves a learning process. The learning context that mirrors the nature of God is the most fertile for growing in the truth. God is personal. Learning, therefore, involves participation by the learner as a person of will, desire, and creativity. God is also relational, and real learning takes place as the learner engages in relationship with God, people, and all that God has created. Furthermore, God is rational. Learning involves thoughtful, careful reflection and judgment. Let's explore these three dimensions of knowing a bit further.

Learning is personal. It involves participation and engagement of all that I am: heart, soul, mind, and strength. This participation includes seeking and wrestling.³⁰ As the proverb goes, "Applying your heart to understanding... [if you] search for it as for hidden treasure... [you will] find the knowledge of God" (Proverbs 2:1-5 NIV). Such knowing and learning cannot be passive.

Furthermore, it includes commitment and obedience. Truth is not merely information to discover but a Lord to follow

30. There are two basic reasons we struggle, and they are opposites. On the one hand, we want to know and are committed to following. On the other hand, we don't want to know and are committed to not following.

and obey. Bringing a submitted will to the journey of truth is vital for progress on the path. Lesslie Newbigin says,

True knowledge of reality is available only to the one who is personally committed to the truth already grasped. Knowing cannot be severed from living and acting, for we cannot know the truth unless we seek it with love and unless our love commits us to action. Faith is the only certainty because faith involves personal commitment. The point has often been made that there is a distinction between the cognitive and the affective elements in belief, between “I believe that.” and “I believe in.” But faith holds both together; to separate them is to deny oneself access to truth.³¹

Augustine also emphasized the place of faith in knowing when he said, “Credo ut intelligam (I believe in order to understand).”³²

How easy it is to think that knowing involves only an intellectual assent! Without commitment and obedience, such knowledge is not simply useless; it is incomplete. German theologian Helmut Thielicke went so far as to say, “The non-committed have no right to ask any questions.

Søren Kierkegaard uses Jesus’s birthplace to illustrate the difference between understanding facts and the level of knowledge that includes commitment:

Although the scribes could explain where the Messiah should be born, they remained quite unperturbed in Jerusalem. They did not accompany the Wise Men to seek him. Similarly we may be able to explain every

31. Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 105.

32. Tract. Ev. Jo., 29.6

article of our faith, yet remain spiritually motionless. The power that moved heaven and earth leaves us completely unmoved. What a contrast! The three kings had only a rumor to go by. But it spurred them to set out a long, hard journey. The scribes, meanwhile, were much better informed, much better versed. They had sat and studied the scriptures for years, like so many dons. But it didn't make any difference. Who had the more truth? Those who followed a rumor, or those who remained sitting, satisfied with all their knowledge?

Such knowing calls for trust. "Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding" (Proverbs 3:5 KJV). The enduring temptation for disciples of Jesus is to redirect primary trust to places other than Christ. The places formed by the work of God are particularly alluring: the church, the Scriptures, or godly character and habits in our own lives.

Learning is relational. Knowing is a personal process that has been designed by God to happen in relationship between He and His students. Relationship with God and with the community of Christ's worshippers provides the context in which to move toward true understandings of reality.

Jesus talked about how relationship with Him enables us to know truth. "If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:31-32 NASB). James says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you" (James 1:5 NIV).

Relationship with Christ's worshippers also provides a way of knowing. The church of Jesus Christ is a means of God's grace of revelation, bringing us to greater vistas of knowing

especially in the experiential sense:

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-13 NASB).

It is important, however, to realize that the purpose of the community of believers is not primarily to serve one's individual pursuit of truth but to forge a group of people who collectively know and live the truth. The capacity to come to true understandings of reality and maintain those understandings is severely limited when living as individuals outside of community. Peter Berger writes about the need to have strong solidarity in the Christian community to avoid being pressed into the world's mold:

Unless a theologian has the inner fortitude of a desert saint, he has only one effective remedy against the threat of cognitive collapse in the face of these pressures: he must huddle together with like-minded fellow deviants—and huddle very closely indeed. Only in a countercommunity of considerable strength does cognitive deviance have a chance to maintain itself. The countercommunity provides continuing therapy against the creeping doubt as to whether, after all, one may not be wrong and the majority right. To fulfill its function of providing social support for the deviant body of “knowledge,” the countercommunity must provide a strong sense of solidarity among its

members (a “fellowship of the saints” in a world rampant with devils) and it must be quite closed vis-à-vis the outside (“Be not yoked together with unbelievers”); in sum, it must be a kind of ghetto.³³

We need to recommit ourselves to engage with the Scriptures and the burning questions of our times as communities and not merely individuals. We need to recommit to learning, growing, thinking, and living together. We need to recommit to a life that sees the church as the body, the smallest unit of sustainable life, and ourselves as cells, units of life not sustainable outside of the body.

Learning is personal and relational. It is also rational. Reason will not teach us everything that is true, but all that is of God is reasonable. The pursuit of understanding will involve disciplined, sober study and reflection. In the past, modernists placed too much hope in reason, and it has proven to be inadequate as a means of knowing. Unfortunately, the pendulum has swung in the opposite direction to the point of rejecting rational thought, even placing it on par with irrational thought. To the postmodernist, since truth cannot be fully known through rational thought, no rational idea is to be trusted over any other idea. Orthodox Christians believe this is wrong. That truth does not always appear to be reasonable does not mean it would be unreasonable if we knew all the facts. Too much trust in reason leads to pride and eventually to disillusionment. But too little trust in reason leads to nonsense. Christians believe that awareness of the limitations of reason and the imitations in understanding should result in placing ultimate trust in the One who is Truth. Thus, trust in reason will be limited even while we do not discard it. If we do not trust in the tools of rational investigation, they then become means of God’s grace in our lives.

33. Peter Berger, *A Rumor of Angels* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1969), 21, 22.

7

WHO KNOWS?

RECOGNIZING THOSE WHO KNOW

Who is wise and understanding among you?

James 3:13 NIV

Let us turn finally to think briefly about ourselves as knowers. You and I are knowers, personal beings with desire and capacity to learn, discover, think, evaluate, and believe. However, we are limited. As humans, we do not have the capacity to know all there is to know since we are created beings and not omniscient. In addition, as fallen humans, we are prone to error; not all that we “know” is true.

From the described framework, how can true knowledge be recognized? What evidence indicates that a person is moving toward true understandings of reality? If truth is first a substance, it follows that the evidence of knowing will be sourced in the substance of the knower: his character, truth in the innermost being. According to Kierkegaard, “If a person does not become what he understands, he does not really understand it. Perhaps the orthodoxy/orthopraxy debate misses the transcendent call to “orthobeing.” Neither right thinking nor right living is more fundamental than the reality of a transformed character. This transformation is evidenced by orthodoxy and orthopraxy.

How can we recognize transformed character? James asks

the question this way, “Who is wise and understanding among you?” His answer: “Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom” (James 3:13 NIV). One who knows and understands is evidenced by a fruitful life and humility.

These two evidences stand in stark contrast to widely accepted evidence of knowledge: intellectual brilliance, university training, and the ability to articulate. True evidence of knowing includes fruitfulness; the person who is moving toward Truth lives in a way that increasingly blesses and serves the people around him. Furthermore, he is humble. Movement toward true understanding does not make one arrogant, proud, or unteachable. Rather it produces a greater realization of one’s fallibility, need for the graces and insights of fellow Christians, and absolute dependence on God. “All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, ‘God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble’” (1 Peter 5:5 NIV).

We may conclude, then, that the one who is coming to know is not the one who can merely describe reality but the one whose being is aligning with Him who is Truth. This alignment will be observed in ways additional to fruitfulness and humility:

Gratitude: Greater understanding of what is leads to a more profound realization that everything good is a gift from God.
Trust in God: True understanding increases reliance on God and loosens confidence in the idols of scientism, rationalism, and our own abilities. G. K. Chesterton wrote that “without a gentle contempt for education, no gentleman’s education is complete.”³⁴

34. G. K. Chesterton, *The Common Man* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1950), 39, 40, quoted in G. K. Chesterton, *The Quotable Chesterton*, ed. by George J. Martin, Richard P. Rabatin, and John L. Swan (San Francisco:

Patience: Greater understanding is evidenced by increased patience, bearing up with a good attitude under pressure or inconvenience.

Love: Contrary to popular opinion, growing in knowledge and understanding brings the knower into greater and greater connection with other people. If learning produces alienation or aloofness from broken people and real situations and there is an overall reduction of depth and breadth of relationship, the learner is not moving toward the One who is Trinity, yet became flesh.

Obedience: John Henry Newman said, “Obedience to the light we possess is the way to gain more light—till we aim at complete, unreserved obedience in all things, we are not really Christians at all.” Hans Denck adds, “For whoever thinks he belongs to Christ must walk the way that Christ walked.”³⁵

Ignatius, 1986), 100.

35. Hans Denck, “The Contention that Scripture Says” 1526, quoted in Walter Fellmann, ed., *Hans Denck. Schriften. 2. Teil Religiöse Schriften* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann Verlag, 1956), 50.

8

CONCLUSION

Jesus, the very thought of Thee
With sweetness fills the breast;
But sweeter far Thy face to see,
And in Thy presence rest.
Jesus, our only joy be Thou,
As Thou our prize will be;
Jesus be Thou our glory now,
And through eternity.

Bernard of Clairvaux

These words paint clearly and succinctly a Christian understanding of reality, truth, and knowing. In this poem, we find a vision of reality that is unapologetically centered in Jesus Christ (“be Thou our glory now,/ And through eternity”). The writer also affirms that knowing reality is both awareness (“the very thought of Thee”) and even more substantively participation (“but sweeter far Thy face to see,/ and in Thy presence rest.”).

The Christian response to the questions of knowing and truth presupposes the existence of a benevolent, competent, and active Communicator from whom all that exists is sourced.³⁶ If we are wrong on any of these points—God’s existence (He is and is the source of all that is), benevolence (He loves

36. John 1:1

what He has made), competence (He is completely capable of communicating with what He has made), and activity (He actually is communicating)—then the Christian answer is meaningless. The ancient wise man wrote that the fear of God is where wisdom begins.³⁷ And it is here that our own view of truth must take root and permeate our entire life and understanding.

But merely making these claims about God does not automatically produce God-centered living out of truth. It is possible, even likely, to have functional views that are shaped more by the dominant cultural understandings than by the active, engaged renewing of the mind that aligns one's life with God. It is to this challenge that God invites us to engage with Him.³⁸

37. Proverbs 9:10

38. John 8:31-36

