

AGAPE WILLS TO LIVE HONESTLY (“IN TRUTH”)

JN 18:37-38; Ro 13:9; Ex 20:16; Ex 23:1-3; Heb 13:18

I. BY NATURE WE'RE PERSONS, NEEDING both TRUTH-IN-ITSELF as INDIVIDUALS and SHARED, COMMUNAL TRUTHS BINDING SOCIETY

- A. Individual well-being—Augustine: “truth is the food of the soul”
1. **Defining it a la Realism:** (1) *intuition* (seeing it as is in triangles, trees, justice; persons); (2) *correspondence* (idea-object, mind-reality) and (3) *coherence*—rightly deducing (e.g. mathematics)
 - a. Rejecting Nominalism evident in Humpty Dumpty’s—“When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less.” ‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you can make words mean so many different things.’ ‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master—that’s all.’”
 - b. Restricting Pragmatism, defining truth as what “works”—thus Marx, Dewey
 - c. Refuting Postmodernism (intellectual nihilism), denying truth—all “constructed” by thinkers, “the death of truth as we know it” (cf. McCallum’s *Death of Truth*)
 2. **Discerning it:** intuiting First Principles (e.g. Laws of Thought) & symmetry of reasonableness
 3. **Following it:** rightly reasoning (theoretical & practical; inductive & deductive; observing proper boundaries (e.g. mathematics, science, history, ethics all require different, appropriate methodologies); centrality of Logic (attuned to *Logos*) imperative—rightly ordering thoughts:
 - a. For centuries the *Trivium* (grammar; logic; rhetoric) was emphasized (John Wesley even urged lay-preachers to master basics needed to think rightly)
 - b. In *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, C.S. Lewis asked (lamenting school’s failure to properly educate): “Why don’t they teach logic in these schools?”
- B. Social well-being (*commonweal*) requires truthful discourse; grave ills follow dishonesty
1. NB George Orwell’s warnings (i.e. “War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, Ignorance is Strength” etc in *1984*)
 2. Learned professions (education, literature, law, ministry) especially obligated to pursuit & proclamation—N.B. Augustine’s stern warning re theological./ministerial dishonesty; “prosperity gospel” pernicious
 3. Media’s sacred obligation (sadly enough, routinely desecrated)
 4. Euphemisms’ destructiveness—e.g. “pro-choice,” not infanticide; “redistribution,” not theft

II. COMMUNION/COVENANTS ESTABLISHED BY KNOWING/TELLING/“LIVING IN TRUTH”

- A. **Knowing the Truth**—discerning, embracing what is
1. Admitted difficulties, given human finitude—errors, distortions, prejudices warp endeavors
 2. Acknowledged process (e.g. in science, history, philosophy, theology)—cf. Daniel 1-2
 - a. *Attitude:* openness to Being & truth re Being—science re material world; history re recorded past; philosophy re wisdom; theology re God of Revelation
 - b. *Activity:* preparation, study, maturation (cf. Daniel)—empirical/mathematical preparation for science; linguistic/documentary mastery for history; logic/tradition for philosophy; Scripture/Tradition/Reason for theology
 - c. *Attainment:* reasonable certainty re objects & explanations beheld—Aristotle’s potency/act; Newton’s Laws; details re Ancient American history; past developments & current insights for philosophy; Texts & Creeds & Consensus for theology
- B. **Telling the Truth**—“speaking the truth in love”—“telling it like it is” (‘60s mantra)
1. Admitted obstacles: fear, possible disgrace, peer pressures
 2. Needed courage—e.g. male/female distinctions; deficit spending; Christ the King
- C. **“Living in Truth”**—
1. “A man is as good as his word.”
 - a. Keeping Covenants—with God; with spouse (“troth”=truth); with parents & children—N.B. abiding by vows (not expressing momentary thoughts/feelings) most deeply truth-full
 - b. Keeping Contracts—business deals, syllabus for teacher-student bond;
 - c. Keeping Promises—informal, but important—with friends, associates, church members
 2. A “cloud of witnesses”—Dietrich Bonhoeffer; C.S. Lewis; Alexander Solzhenitsyn; Malcolm Muggeridge
 3. Ultimately: living with Jesus the (Logos/Word/Truth) Christ

THE DEATH OF TRUTH

Grant R. Osborne, Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, says: “Postmodernism is one of the most dangerous movements of the century for Christians, and all too many evangelicals are falling prey to its allure.” To rightly respond to it, he recommends *The Death of Truth*, edited by Dennis McCallum—a handy treatise for all of us. McCallum says postmodernism is mainly “a *mood*—a view of the world characterized by a deep distrust of reason, not to mention a disdain for the knowledge Christians believe the Bible provides. It’s a *methodology*—a completely new way of analyzing ideas. For all its diverse ideas and advocates, postmodernism is also a *movement*—a fresh onslaught on truth that brings a more or less cohesive approach to literature, history, politics, education, law, sociology, linguistics, and virtually every other discipline, including science. And it is ushering in a cultural *metamorphosis*—transforming every area of everyday life as it spreads through education, movies, television, and other media” (p. 12). Still more: “Postmodernism, as it applies to our everyday lives, is the death of truth as we know it” (p. 14), for it insists we *create* rather than discover truth, that reality is a social *construct* rather than a metaphysical *given*.

Thus we routinely hear expressions such as: “Truth is whatever you believe,” or “There is no absolute truth,” or “People who believe in absolute truth are dangerous.” Thus “personhood,” to abortion-rights advocates, is merely “a social construct” and thus as malleable as potter’s clay; humans are what they are by *definition*, not by *nature*. Though generally unsupported by evidence or logic, such statements nevertheless free folks from much concern for any consistency in thought or action. Even natural science is being challenged by postmodern advocates! Traditional concerns for objectivity, rationality, empirical data, have been discounted—all “reality” is subject to our construction

Postmodern educators promote this constructionist approach to reality. They especially find ways to build “self-esteem” in the process, for one’s essence is not a given—it’s a *construct* which can be reshaped and fine-tuned at will. Still more: since all persons are equal, all cultures are equal, and all constructions of reality are likewise equal insofar as they prove useful. Classrooms, consequently, should be “cooperative learning” centers where students and teachers construct useful readings of texts or laboratory findings. There are no “right” or “wrong” answers, since it all depends on one’s own (or one’s group’s) perspective.

Consequently “history” means the study of what various people *think* happened rather than what in fact took place. Moving in radical directions, postmodernists question the very possibility of verifiable historical events. In the judgment of E. H. Carr, a British historian: “The belief in a hard core of historical facts existing objectively and independently of the interpretation of the historian is a preposterous fallacy” (p. 131). Accordingly, various folks construct different versions of the past, and we have black history, labor history, women’s history, gay history, etc.—each setting forth self-serving stories, none of which is necessarily “true.” Consequently, a 1994 Gallup poll “showed that 33 percent of Americans think it possible that the Holocaust never happened” (p. 127). In legal circles, postmodernists, “best known as ‘anti-foundationalists’ or advocates of ‘Critical Legal Studies,’ claim the law has no objective basis” (165). We construct law just as we construct history, and “Law is whatever a society’s most powerful cultural group makes it” (p. 165). This stance has, apparently, become the dominant paradigm in law schools, if not yet dominant in the legal profession.

Given the influence of postmodernism, Evangelicals must get informed and thoughtfully respond, for “postmodernism is nothing less than the death of truth!” (p. 244). Without ignoring some of its salutary insights—slashing revelations of the failures of “modernism”—we must clearly discern the profoundly anti-Christian ramifications of postmodernism and staunchly defend truth, reason, and biblical revelation. This is a fine book, fitting its designed niche, helping believers understand and engage in the work of apologetics which is always part of the Christian mission.

PROMOTING REASONABLENESS

Professor Rick Kennedy has long pondered the proper way to research and reason, to think and write and teach history—especially as it comes to bear on the Christian Tradition. Early in his career he published an excellent article entitled “Miracles in the Dock: A Critique of the Historical Profession’s Special Treatment of Alleged Spiritual Events” wherein he mounted a vigorous attack on David Hume’s flawed rejection of miracles and called historians to recover an earlier, better way of doing history. Kennedy then expanded that argument in a scholarly monograph titled *A History of Reasonableness: Testimony and Authority in the Art of Thinking*.

To rightly reason on the basis of testimony and authority is no minor matter! Unless we can do so much that holds us together grows tenuous. “For leaders to act, for juries to decide, and for history to teach, people have needed to trust testimony and authority” (p. 4). From Aristotle on, thinkers and teachers concerned with education took seriously the role of testimony and authority. And inasmuch as Aristotle set forth many important definitions and distinctions in his *Topics*, we may take him (joining St Thomas Aquinas) as “The Philosopher” since he stands at the heart of the “classical tradition” so central to Western Civilization. There is a marked difference between what we “know from within ourselves and what we learn from others” (p. 13). Gifted children quickly become proficient in mathematics, seeing clearly what simply must be true. An adolescent can become a world-class mathematician or chess master, but few would want him to be the nation’s president! That’s because the things we learn from others, such as history and wisdom, must develop throughout a life rightly lived and are learned through dialectic (dialogical reasoning) and rhetoric (writing and speaking effectively) rather than logic and geometry. Much that we learn, Aristotle insisted, comes from others by way of testimony and authority. It is a form of “social” knowledge and is essential for “social” creatures such as ourselves. Throughout the past, a multitude of thoughtful human beings have discovered truths regarding God, man, and the cosmos that we can quickly appropriate by believing them, accepting their authority. He set forth the “pattern followed by most of the textbook writers discussed in this book, a pattern of writing about testimony from the perspective of honest people giving and receiving the best information available to them” (p. 16). Such knowledge, of course, is not nearly as self-evident and certain as Euclid’s axioms or sense experiences, and we must take care to be neither overly gullible nor dogmatically skeptical. But without such knowledge and capacity to reason well we would live seriously circumscribed and intellectual impoverished lives.

Influential educators, especially Cicero and Quintilian in ancient Rome, simplified, synthesized and prescribed the principles set forth in Aristotle’s *Topics*. Then Christian thinkers, such as Augustine, Boethius, and Cassiodorus, preserved this tradition of carefully evaluating and trusting testimony and authority; their works were used in schools throughout the Middle Ages. During the Reformation, Luther’s close associate Philipp Melanchthon “reached deeply into the works of Aristotle, Augustine, and the best Medieval theologians in order to strengthen not only the role of dialectic as the foundation to all aspects of the liberal arts curriculum but also as the foundation of a Christian reasonableness in general” (p. 117).

Things began to change, however, when 17th century thinkers such as Francis Bacon and Rene Descartes charted new directions more suitable to the budding scientific approach to truth that was concisely summed up in the newly-established Royal Society’s motto, “*Nullius in verba*” (On no one’s word). Bacon specifically sought to surpass Aristotle’s “common sense” philosophy, and Descartes endeavored to confine all knowledge to mathematical strictures. Thus Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (along with Newton a co-founder of calculus) could imagine settling “all disputes” through “computation” (p. 197). In the hands of David Hume, this approach easily led to the denial of most all testimony—especially when applied to miracles.

Consequently, C.S. Lewis’s lament in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (“Why don’t they teach logic at these schools?”) describes the plight of modern education. Philosophers following Immanuel Kant reduced knowledge to what can be subjectively discerned. The autonomous self stands alone, determining what is true, or good, or beautiful. In America, John Dewey insisted one learns singularly through personal experience, through “doing.” Reflecting the influence of such thinkers, today’s teachers promote “Critical Thinking,” encouraging even the youngest scholars to stand defiantly alone and decide for themselves what is true or good or beautiful for them. Rarely are they taught to trust authorities or historical testimonies or “common sense” traditions.

“LIVING IN TRUTH”

Vaclav Havel, the dissident playwright who moved from a prison cell to leading a liberated Czechoslovakia, said he'd given himself to “living in truth.” Such courage provides the stuff for martyrs and saints—and for heroic Havels and Solzhenitsyns—but today's culture seems marked more by a contempt for truth than a willingness to live in it. Fifty years ago Henry Luce declared: “The most dangerous fault in American life today is the lack of interest in truth.” Today he'd probably be even more concerned, for the mood has shifted from disinterest to denial. Lynn Cheney served as Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities from 1986-1992, asked, in *Telling the Truth*, “why our culture and our country have stopped making sense—and what we can do about it.” The book's theme comes packaged in an opening statement of George Orwell's: “Any attack on intellectual liberty, and on the concept of objective truth, threatens in the long run every department of thought” (p. 11). Cheney's stint as NEH chairman tossed her into the trenches of contemporary academic warfare, most evident in the furious struggle for federal grants. There she encountered (behind the various slogans and facades of gender, race, class, etc.) an intense power struggle for the soul of the university and, in the long run, the soul of the nation.

Thus, in her first chapter, she deals with “politics in the schoolroom,” documenting various educationists' assaults on America's patriotic traditions and the dignity of Western Civilization. What was once widely used as the title for a staple general education course has now become an object of derision. For example, The National History Standards, put together at UCLA and issued in 1994, celebrated the architecture and agriculture of the Aztecs but conveniently ignored their slave-gathering wars and temples devoted to human sacrifice. They failed to note that George Washington was America's first president or that James Madison drafted its *Constitution*. Joseph McCarthy, however, gets mentioned nineteen times! “Patriarchy” and men in general also take a beating in today's schools. Despite clear evidence that girls do better in schools, despite the fact that more women than men now attend college, those who orchestrate the educational establishment inject pro-female biases into textbooks and classrooms. Relativistic, womanly, “lateral” thinking, must supplant masculine “vertical” thought with its concern for “facts” and “objectivity.” An influential professor at Columbia University's Teachers College castigated competition, “norms of success, effectiveness, [and] efficiency,” insisting “there are no such things as ‘objective norms’” (p. 36).

That being so, it stands to reason that grades and standards which recognize excellence must be abandoned. Grade inflation results. One study shows that high school teachers gave twice as many C's as A's in 1966; 12 years later they were giving more A's than C's. In many colleges today, B's indicate “average” work. Harvard's William Cole blames “relativism” for this malady. “There's a general conception in the literary-academic world that holding things to high standards—like logic, argument, having an interesting thesis—is patriarchal, Eurocentric and conservative” (p. 38). Further clouding the integrity of the modern university, Cheney says, is “PC: Alive and Entrenched.” Campus radicals of the 1960's who screamed “free speech” have become thought police in the 1990's! Students who are never disciplined for drunkenness or fornication in dorms may be expelled for violating racial or sexual sensitivities. Profanity abounds—even seems approved—in college classrooms, but politically incorrect statements invite instant administrative action!

To understand such incidents, Cheney points us to Michael Foucault and his “post-modernist” epigones, whose assault on Western Civilization entails a thorough rejection of “externally verifiable truth” and objective reality. According to Yale's J. Hollis Miller, a Foucault follower, “A deconstructionist is not a parasite but a parricide. He is a bad son demolishing beyond hope of repair the machine of Western metaphysics.” Andrew Ross, an academic superstar of the 1990's, calls himself and like-minded colleagues ‘assassins of objectivity’” (p. 91). All truth and reality, Ross and Miller hold—indeed our very “self,” are social constructs. To change the world, therefore, one needs simply change the ways we think, the ways we choose to envision it.

To explain the loss of truth, Cheney closes her book with a focus on academicians who, like Havel, live in truth. She believes truth-telling must begin in the academy, for “it is from our colleges and universities that messages radiate—or fail to radiate—to schools, to legal institutions, to popular culture, and to politics about the importance of reason, of trying to overcome bias, of seeking truth through evidence and verification” (p. 198). Such professors are, unfortunately, rare in today's academy. But we need to find them, support them, and enable them to provide truly truthful guidance for our nation.