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"I Am the Truth": An Understanding of Truth from Christology for Scripture

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ALAN G. PADGETT

Art . . . is the telling of truth, and is the only available method for the telling of certain truths.

Iris Murdoch, The Black Prince

The history of the nature of Western art corresponds to the change of the nature of truth.

Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art"

We live in a world of many truths, which nevertheless hungers and thirsts for the truth beyond the shifting plain of human history. The postmodern and multicultural turn in contemporary culture has raised again, in a powerful way, the question of truth for any ethic or religion that claims to move beyond the particular. Truth is both abhorrent and attractive, despised and desired, condemned and lamented. What is truth? Who is it that does not ask Pilate's cynical question today, and in the same way seek to sit in judgment of Christ?

This chapter is about a confession, not a definition. What understanding of truth is adequate to the confession of the crucified Messiah as Lord and Savior — as the way, the truth, and the life? If only Christ could be
tamed by our postmodern pluralism and capitalistic pragmatism, so that he could simply claim to be a way among other ways, a truth among other truths, then all would be well. But Christ will not be so tamed and caged. Jesus Christ is Lord of all, or else he is a fake. The teachings of Christ, and his willing self-sacrifice for the redemption of the human race (not to mention his victory over death itself), allow no compromise with religious pluralism. His own deeds and words will not allow another option, however much our "spiritual" age would like him to conform to its religious eclecticism. So I begin with a confession, with the Christian confession: the messiah Jesus is the truth and the way and the life. The crucified God is the resurrection and the life; there is no other who can truly save. In keeping with this confession, the church also looks to sacred Scripture as truth, and it finds Scripture to be true. In this chapter I will seek an understanding of truth that is adequate to this confession.

I do not seek a definition of truth, although I will mention some in passing. Rather, I want to stand under the truth and receive (understand) what light it brings. I do not seek to define, encompass, and regulate what truth is. Rather, I seek an understanding of truth that implies or suggests many working definitions, spread across many academic disciplines, in whatever art or science we find ourselves at work for the love of truth.¹ I am forced to use the word "understanding" because I think it may be less confusing than other words; but my use of it here is idiosyncratic. By an "understanding of truth" I mean something less than a theory of truth, less even than a definition of truth. In my work in epistemology I have come to the conclusion that the differing disciplines of academe serve different interests, arise out of different traditions of inquiry, and have different rationalities.² There are, however, commonalities across disciplines, and our common human reasoning does provide one area of commonality. There are analogies, parallels, and "family resemblances" among the rationalities.


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of the special sciences. The workings of informal reasoning, for example, are similar but not identical in the various disciplines. By an “understanding of truth,” therefore, I intend this rather vague sense of truth across the disciplines. A more specific, definite, and clear definition of truth will need to be made within these differing (yet similar) traditions of rational inquiry. For this reason also, I do not seek a single and universal definition of truth.

The church needs to pay a little more attention to its own internal grammar and a bit less attention to logic, philosophy, and the sciences, in seeking to answer the question “what is truth?” This chapter is an exploration in internal and communal rationality, a quest for a Christian understanding of truth that may or may not work for others. I can only hope that such an understanding of truth might aid academics in other disciplines, especially those who are Christians, in seeking to understand what truth is in art, history, or biology. But such an effort in Christian scholarship is not my main focus here; rather, with many contemporary theologians, I seek to understand what truth means for theology (especially Christology) and the Christian theological interpretation of Scripture.

Christ the Truth: A Proposal

To begin with, I will simply propose that we understand truth as the mediated disclosure of being (or reality). Sometimes that truth will be mediated through everyday experience, or common sense, sometimes through the specifics of propositions. This concept of truth has its roots in Scripture and in Platonic philosophy. I find it in Augustine, Franz Brentano, and Martin Heidegger, all of whom were influenced by Christian and Greek thought. The value of this proposed understanding of truth is its flexibil-

3. See the appendix on informal reasoning in Padgett, Science and the Study of God.
It allows us to find truth in art and poetry, in spiritual experience and religious worship, as well as in logic and science.

For me, the most important source for the understanding of truth as the mediated disclosure of being is the Gospel of John. Truth (aletheia) is a key term in the fourth Gospel, and here it is already linked for us to Jesus. This truth is not simply information but the reality of the presence of God. John the Baptist bears witness to the truth, but Jesus is the truth (John 5:33, 14:6). As Bultmann rightly remarked, "So truth is not the teaching about God transmitted by Jesus but is God's very reality revealing itself — occurring! — in Jesus."5 Jesus is the truth because he is the Word made flesh: the reality of God's kingdom fully dwelling in a human life and body. Jesus is the revelation of God, the Word of God, mediated through human flesh and a genuine human life (death and resurrection). Jesus is the mediated (incarnate) disclosure or revelation of the being of God.

Here I fully agree with T. F. Torrance, who has argued for some decades for the importance of the homoousian of the Nicene Creed ("of one Being with the Father") as a key to the understanding of theological truth. In an important chapter on the nature of truth in his book Theological Science, Torrance rightly argues that we encounter in Jesus not the truth in ideas or words alone but the truth of God in the person of Christ.6 I cannot agree with Torrance, however, in his Barthian Christocentrism (at least in this early text), which causes him to claim that all theological statements are true only insofar as they are rooted and grounded in Jesus Christ. While Christ is indeed the truth of God made human, and thus the fullest and greatest of all revelations and all divine truths, it does not follow from this that Christ has revealed all truth (even all theological truth) in his human existence.

We can affirm the position of Torrance and Barth, however, in a certain sense. As God the Son, the Word is indeed the source of all truth. This is because, as God, the Word is the creator of all being (along with the Fa-

6. T. F. Torrance, Theological Science (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), ch. 4; see the earlier work by Barth, Dogmatics in Outline (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), p. 26, where he makes the same point about Christ: "To know Him is to know all."
ther and the Spirit). God the Son, therefore, in the tri-unity of God, is also the source of all other things that are (all other beings). Thus we can say that the Triune God (including the Son) is in some degree the source of all truth, because God is the source of all being. However, the Triune God is not the only being who makes truth known, and so God is not the source of all mediated disclosures of being. Torrance, following Barth, is right in some sense: all statements are true only insofar as they participate in some way, however distant, in Jesus Christ. My concern is that this statement is so easily misunderstood to mean that all theology must come directly from Jesus — or perhaps from the Bible. All truth is God’s truth, but truth does not come solely from the story of Jesus — the work of Christ — nor solely from Scripture. Theological truth can come to us in many ways and in various places when we have an expansive understanding of Jesus as the logos of God in human flesh.

So truth as the mediated disclosure of reality or being comes to us at various times and in many ways, including, for example, in poetry. Great poetry reveals much to us of the human condition, and thus it can indeed be a source of truth. To the extent that art reveals the truth, God is its ultimate source. Now certainly the life — including his ministry, death, and resurrection — of Jesus is the highest and best revelation of God. But while Jesus does reveal the heart of God and is of one being with the Father, Jesus is not the only truth. Rather, we should say that Jesus is the ultimate, final, and highest truth of God. This claim is compatible with the existence of other truths, known through other media.

I have proposed an understanding of truth, not a definition. Rather, I believe that explicit definitions of truth are best left to each academic discipline and tradition of inquiry. My hope is that the understanding of truth I propose will be broad and flexible enough to provide a kind of family resemblance for the slightly different explicit definitions of truth. Before turning to an understanding of truth for a theological interpretation of Scripture, I will give two examples — from poetry and analytic philosophy — of moving from understanding to definition.
True Words

Some theologians have been so enamored of the power and beauty of modern logic and analytic philosophy that they have sought to reduce all truth to true propositions. Torrance is correct in reacting strongly against this reductionism, for Christ is not a true proposition. As the quotations at the beginning of this chapter underscore, we need an expansive view of truth that includes art, religion, and ethics — as well as language. I intend those quotations to suggest a need for such a concept. Such creative arts as poetry or painting can and do convey truth, even though the truth conveyed in them is not often propositional truth.7 For poetry and other arts to convey truth, that truth must be more than true statements. It is often suggested, for example, that great poetry gives us insight into the human condition. Thus we might say that great poetry, in some cases at least, provides us with truth about being human. This insight is mediated by artistic and symbolic expression rather than by means of propositions, and it delights us as much as it informs us. Enough has been said about how poetry conveys truth about being human to suggest that the understanding of truth we are developing here can fit the nature of truth in poetry. Poetry, then, can at times provide us with a mediated disclosure of being — that is to say, poetry can be true.

We must not, however, wholly ignore true statements. Both poetry and propositions can be true words. Furthermore, a careful definition of truth is essential to any fully developed epistemology; therefore, philosophers need a good definition of truth in statements or propositions. Among the various proposals in this domain, I have been particularly impressed by William P. Alston’s work in his book A Realist Conception of Truth.8 His critical review of various antirealist notions of truth, particularly those found in Putnam and Dummet, is exemplary. Alston is clear from the beginning about his concern for “the sense of ‘true’ in which it


applies to beliefs, statements and propositions" (p. 1). He expounds and defends what he calls a "realist" conception of truth, of which the following is an initial version: "A statement is true if and only if what the statement says to be the case actually is the case" (p. 5). His terminology is to be preferred to the unfortunately named "correspondence" theory of truth of Bertrand Russell in 1912 — a metaphor that is most confusing. In the last hundred years it has sent philosophers looking for something that might "correspond" to a statement, and that is not really the point.

If we accept Alston's minimalist-realist conception of truth — which is a version of the definition of truth found in Aristotle and Aquinas — what about the understanding of truth we have been working with so far? Here I can only hint at an argument that would take much more space to work out in detail. A true statement tells us what is the case. If we think of "what is the case" as "reality," then a true statement tells us something about reality. We could say that a true statement "discloses something about reality" to us. And a statement is always expressed in a language: a true statement is thus a linguistic mediation of being or reality. As in poetry, truth in propositional form is also a mediated (particular, historical, finite) disclosure of being. Of course, a statement is a particular kind of linguistic mediation, and truth for statements will deserve its own special analysis. But we can fit a realist conception of truth for statements into the larger understanding of truth that I am advocating in this chapter. That is the main point.

My discussion so far has been merely suggestive of the direction we might take in epistemology or aesthetics. I wish now to turn to the main issue, that is, truth in Scripture.

Thy Word Is Truth

The Bible is the sacred Scripture of the Christian faith. It contains the holy writings of the Jewish people under the rubric of Hebrew Scripture, or the Old Testament; the witness of the apostles as the New Testament; and it materially contributes to the holy book of Islam, the Koran. Whatever the status of the Christian Bible in world religions, here we are approaching it as sacred Christian Scripture — thus as the book of Christ. This implies that the truth of Scripture is about our relationship with Christ, for a personal truth requires a personal relationship. In more traditional theological terms, the truth of Scripture is about salvation, understood as God's work in creation, community, and the Christian believer empowered by the Holy Spirit. Scripture is true when it mediates this relational, spiritual salvation-in-process.

The implication of this conception of the truth of Scripture (that it mediates Christ) is that the Bible becomes our guide to religious life simply because Jesus is our Savior and Lord. Hence I find myself very much in agreement with the chapters in this volume by Stephen Davis and David Bartlett, where I find corroboration of my suggestion concerning the truth of Scripture. Bartlett writes: "He [Jesus] is truth because he shows the Father. To know him as truth is to know that he is also the path that we are called to follow and the life to which that path leads. In other words, Jesus is the truth that reveals, the truth that leads, and the truth that redeems."10 The Bible is likewise true when it mediates this personal truth to us. Davis declares in his chapter: "If we take the Bible to be true, we trust it to guide our lives. We allow our lives to be influenced by it. We intend to listen where it speaks. We consider it normative. We look to it for comfort, encouragement, challenge, warning, guidance, and instruction. In short, we submit to the Bible and place ourselves under its theological authority."11 Once again, the understanding of the Bible as true because it mediates the living Word of God, Jesus Christ, makes sense of this claim.

11. Stephen Davis, "What Do We Mean When We Say, 'The Bible is True?'," p. 90 above.
I need to say immediately that I am not suggesting that we find Christ in every verse of Scripture. Rather, I would argue that, when we read the whole of the Bible as canonical Scripture, Christ stands at the center of the canon of Old and New Testaments and thus at the center of our biblical theology. When we put together the whole teaching of Scripture, Christ provides us with a key to understanding God’s Word, because he is the living logos. And in order for the church to gain a level of meaning in which it reads the whole Bible together — with Christ at the center — it will need to go beyond the original meaning of each text read in isolation. In an earlier essay I have argued that the church needs to reclaim for our time a fuller and more spiritual sense of the Bible. Instead of the medieval four-fold sense of Scripture, I propose that we develop a three-layered approach to biblical interpretation, seeking the conventional (historical or plain) sense, the canonical sense (Christ-centered), and the contemporary (or applied) sense of the text. If the truth of the Bible rests on these holy texts mediating the reality of Christ to us today in the community of faith, then this same community will require a level of meaning that goes beyond the original intention of the authors. And by simply reading all these texts together, we do in fact go beyond such a conventional meaning — to a larger, canonical one.

If we thus accept the truth of Scripture as a Christian community, we will see the Bible as true — true because, as these texts are illumined by the Holy Spirit, God’s Word still speaks to us today. But what about the question of historical reference? Can we be happy with merely a contemporary meaning that is divorced from history? The answer to this question, spoken to by theologians as diverse as Ernst Troeltsch and N. T. Wright, is that some “symbols” or theological truths disclosed in the text demand a real historical event behind them. We must beware of treating


the text in splendid isolation from history, for Christianity is a historical religion. At the same time, we should realize three relevant points: (1) not every narrative in the Bible was meant to be understood as factual history; (2) even when the genre of the text is history, we should not demand greater historical accuracy of these ancient texts than we would of other historical works of their time and culture; and (3) the truth we derive from a historical narrative in Scripture may not demand a historical reference. All of this is to say that, when we accept the truth of Scripture, we are not also accepting a narrow doctrine of inerrancy, which reduces truth to propositions. J. C. K. von Hofmann knew this already in 1860, in his lectures on biblical hermeneutics:

The saving truth which Scripture proclaims authoritatively to the Church does not consist in a series of doctrinal propositions, but rather in the fact that Jesus has mediated a connection between God and mankind. In the assurance of this comprehensive truth the interpreter . . . starts his work with the expectation that everything in Scripture will be an aspect of this truth.14

A logical reductionist conception of inerrancy undermines the truth of Scripture. Still, the truth of some biblical teachings demands a reference beyond the narrative world of the text itself. Biblical truth in certain historical narratives depends on a historical reference.15 The question of reference cannot be absorbed into the world of the text without losing the truth claims of the text itself. Of course, such texts do not have to meet modern standards of historical accuracy in order to convey the Word of God for us today. We can justly demand only that they make reasonable historical reference, given the standards of good history writing of their own time and culture. Yet the truth they convey in these cases needs to be rooted and grounded in reality, that is, in history. Examples of this would:

be God's liberation of Israel in the Exodus, the return of Israel from exile, and the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. If these events do not have some historical reality, then their truth is undermined. However, this is not true of the book of Jonah, for example, which was never meant to be a historical text. The truth of God found in Jonah does not demand that it describes a historical event: the truth in Jonah about human resistance and repentance and divine mercy is more like the truth found in the great artistic works of poetry and painting.

We began with what looks like a simple question: what do we mean when we say that the Bible is true? In this chapter I have been arguing, not for a theory or definition of truth, but for a Christian understanding of truth that would be true to our confession of Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life. I have thus proposed that, first, we understand truth in a general way as the mediated disclosure of being (or reality). For theology, then, Christ is the truth because he is the incarnation (i.e., the in-fleshment) of God's very being: God the Son living a real human life. Second, the Bible is true because the Spirit uses the words of the human authors and editors to mediate the Word of God (God the Son) to us in and by means of these texts. The Bible is true because it reveals God and God's plan for the salvation of Israel, the church, the whole human race, and all creation. I believe that this is what we Christians mean when we say that the Bible is true.