

The Truth, So Help Me God

WHAT DOES IT SAY about our society when a book entitled *The Day America Told the Truth* becomes a best seller? In this extensively researched volume about Americans' views and values on topics from God to money to intimate relationships we learn that:

- 91% of Americans lie regularly.
- When we refrain from lying, it isn't because we think it is wrong but because we are afraid we will be caught.
- We lie to just about everybody, but the better we know a person the more likely it is that we have told that person a serious lie.
- We lie to get power over other people. We want to control the lives of others.
- We lie because we don't like the way we are and want to shape the impressions of others.
- Two out of three Americans believe that there is nothing wrong with lying. Only 31% of Americans believe that honesty is the best policy.¹

All of this, rightly, leads the authors to conclude: "Lying has become a cultural trait of America. Lying is embedded in our national character.... Americans lie about everything—and usually for no good reason."²

If you think this is an exaggeration, ask yourself whether you would be willing to be hooked up to a lie detector and have those closest to you ask any questions they choose. Or think about how many times you have heard refrains like this (perhaps even in your own mind).... *But why tell the truth anyway? ... If I can lie about a child's age and get a cheaper rate ... If lying will save my job when jobs are hard to get ... If someone really doesn't want to hear the truth anyway ... If it will make me look good.... Really, what difference does it make? Especially if it won't hurt anyone.*

Why value truth? The answer is like life ... a little complex. Let's begin with defining truth.

Truth Is Real and Reliable

The basic characteristic of truth is that it con-

forms with reality.

When pilots are trained for an instrument rating, one of the significant issues is how to determine truth. When they are flying through a blinding snowstorm and their feelings tell them they are flying upside down, do they go with their feelings or with their instruments? What if their feelings tell them that their instruments are wrong? It is a life or death decision.

At issue is "What is true?" And by true we mean, "Which best conforms with reality?" Therefore, "Which is reliable?"

The same definition applies to mathematics and to courtroom testimony. $2+2=4$ is true because it reflects reality. If you have two oranges on the table and add two more and count the total, you have four oranges. A courtroom testimony about what happened during a bank robbery is judged by the jury to be true or untrue according to how well it fits with reality. True testimony matches the way things really were. True testimony is reliable—you can count on it.

Truth about anything can be relied upon. You can plan your future, make your decisions, live your life with truth because it is reliable, dependable, and matches reality.

The Greeks and the Hebrews saw truth in different ways. Greek philosophers thought of truth mostly as statements. You tell the truth. These true words fit with an abstract notion of what is truth. The Hebrews

thought of truth more as what a person does—life lived in a way that is dependable, reliable, and consistent with what is real.

Truth is all of this. What a person says is only a part of truth. Truth is also behavior, body language, relationships, promises—it involves all of life.

God Is True Because God Is Always Consistent With Reality

God is "the real thing." Everything He does and everything He says matches with the way everything is. There is nothing fake or counterfeit about God. God is always reliable. You can always count on Him.

The Bible is full of warnings about idols and

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false gods. You just can't trust them. They are not real, not true.

"You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below" (Exodus 20:3-4).

There is an old philosophic debate about the relationship of God and truth. Some have said that truth is whatever God says it is. If God said that $2+2=5$, then $2+2$ would equal 5. In other words, God determines truth. Other philosophers have argued that truth is greater than God. What makes God so good is that He perfectly conforms with truth as the highest standard of all.

It is beyond our time and purpose to seriously discuss such fine points here, except to say that there is no practical way to divide God and truth. Truth is who God is. Truth is what God does. God and truth are so inseparable that it is ultimately impossible to imagine or to have one without the other.

It's like imagining water without hydrogen or oxygen. If H₂O is what water is, then there is no such thing as water without oxygen—just as there is no such thing as God without truth, or truth without God.

Jesus said, "I am the way and *the truth* and the life" (John 14:6, italics added). God and truth are inseparable.

Truth Is Always Consistent With God

St. Augustine summed it up when he said that "all truth is God's truth." Because God always conforms with reality there is no truth that does not belong to Him. Truth is always consistent with God.

As Christians, then, we never should be afraid that some truth will somehow discredit God or that some archaeological discovery will prove God wrong. What God is and does always fits with reality and truth.

The original concept of "university" was "one truth"—from the Latin words for "one" (uni-) and "truth" (-versity). The student studying astronomy or physics was learning God's truth as much as the student studying philosophy or theology. Unfortunately, many schools that now carry the university title do not adhere to God as the center of truth. Contradictory beliefs and competing claims of truth are taught in the same institution.

These competing claims of truth are no reason for Christians to shy away from learning or to fear new discoveries. To the contrary, whenever and wherever truth is to be found or lived, it will al-

ways be 100% compatible with God because that's what truth is.

Show me your ways, O Lord
teach me your paths;
guide me in your truth and teach me,
for you are God my Savior,
and my hope is in you all day long.
(Psalm 25:4-5)

I'm sorry to say that the church has not always lived up to this biblical standard. There have been too many times when the church has valued beliefs more than truth.

Galileo discovered the truth that the earth revolves around the sun. He was a believer, a committed Christian, who studied God's creation to discover the truth about the way it worked. Yet the church condemned him because its own beliefs didn't match with the truth.

What a tragic thing when human beliefs are valued more than God's truth.

Valuing God Means Valuing Truth

Committed Christians always value truth. Or at least we should.

Christians have a long history of active research in science, philosophy, and the arts. It is a strange and inconsistent notion that science and Christianity are somehow contradictory. As long as science seeks the truth, science must be valued by Christians who believe that truth is always consistent with God.

For most of us, however, truth is less a heady search of science and philosophy and more a matter of daily dealing with truthfulness.

Because we value God, we value truth—and valuing truth means hating falsehood. Falsehoods are ungodly. Falsehoods don't match reality. Falsehoods are not reliable. Falsehoods are against God. Falsehoods do damage rather than good. Falsehoods are worthless; they have no value.

The implications continue. Because we value God and truth, we tell the truth. Truth honors God. Truth magnifies God. Truth pleases God. Truth is worth it. Truth has great value because it has God-value.

To understand the practical value of truth, compare it to money. Whenever the world gets into trouble, the value of the U.S. dollar goes up. In quieter times investors feel freer to invest heavily in foreign currencies. But in tumultuous times inves-

tors often move to the dollar. Not because green is a more secure color or because our currency is printed on better paper. The value is not in the money itself. The value is in the strength and stability of the United States of America. Over two hundred years of experience has convinced the world's investors that the United States is a country that will stay strong and predictable even when most other countries are plagued with revolution and economic disaster.

In a similar way, the value of truth isn't in the truth alone. Truth gets its value from God, who is reliable, strong, and stable, even when everything else in the universe unravels. Whenever we speak the truth, do the truth, live the truth, we trade and invest in the strength and stability of God himself. Every time we lie or trade in deceit, we are investing our lives in a currency that is as worthless as Monopoly money. We may feel wealthy for the moment, but we will soon discover that the pretend money of untruth has no value in the real world.

The wise author of Proverbs understood all this when he concluded that it is "better to be poor than a liar" (19:22). If someone lies and thereby gets lots of money, he is really poor because money isn't as valuable as truth. It is far better to have a pile of truth and be poor than to have a pile of money and be a liar.

Please don't think this is just a philosophic game playing with words. We are dealing with a basic decision about what we most value in life and why we value it. Truth isn't valuable for itself any more than paper money is valuable for itself. Truth is valuable because it is backed by God just as U.S. dollar bills are valuable because the government of the United States is behind them.

So, then, how do we do it? How do we live truth?

Truth From the Inside

In Psalm 51 the psalmist prays to God: "Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place" (51:6).

He rightly understood that God does want us to long for truth on the inside so that we will live the truth on the outside.

Matthew even records a debate Jesus had with the Pharisees about whether evil is what goes into

us or what comes out of us. The Pharisees had begun the debate by chastising Jesus because His disciples had broken "the tradition of the elders," not washing their hands before they ate. In wrapping up His conclusions for His disciples, Jesus said:

"But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man `unclean.' For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander." (Matthew 15:18-19)

Jesus explained that what people put into their mouths is not what makes them bad. Badness comes from inside. People who are bad on the inside will express their evil on the outside.

It is impossible to change a person from the outside in. True change from bad to good can be accomplished only from within. This is not to say that social reform and public laws of righteousness aren't important. They are important because we live in community with one another and need to have positive means to get along together. But never think that laws against murder or rape will make a person good on the inside. The best they can do is restrain a person who is a murderer or rapist on the inside from acting out that internal evil.

Basic to a Christian understanding of humanity and society is the realization that we must be changed as individuals on the inside in order to reform society on the outside. I think the following little parable says it well.

A politician with a preschool son couldn't get his work done because of the boy's constant interruptions and questions. Finally, the father tore a map of the world out of a magazine and cut it up into puzzle-like pieces. He set all the pieces on the table

with some plastic tape and told the child to put the world back together again. To the father's surprise, his son returned with the puzzle completed in about five minutes. When he asked how he did it so fast, the little boy explained, "It was easy, Dad. There was a picture of a man on the

other side. When I taped the man together, the world came together all by itself."

Because of sin, we start showing our inside

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selves very young. Some of the earliest manifestations are the lies children tell.

Every parent knows the frustration of dealing with a child who tells a lie—like the mother who was especially frustrated with her two young daughters. When she asked who broke the lamp in the living room, each pointed to the other and said, “She did.” Mom said, “One of you is not telling me the truth and I know which one.” She said that the liar had a little white pigeon sitting on her shoulder. Instantly, both of them turned to look at the shoulder of the daughter on the right.

Unfortunately, that approach will only work once. Also, in using this ploy Mom lied too, and it wouldn’t have taken her daughters long to figure that out.

Parents can sometimes force their children to tell the truth on the outside, but no child will ever grow up to be a truth teller without valuing truth on the inside.

Thousands of sermons have been preached to encourage telling the truth. Most have probably warned against the consequences of lying. There is a crucial difference, however, between telling the truth because we value truth and telling the truth because we are afraid we will be caught if we don’t. Ultimately, external warnings and threats will never turn a person who does not value truth from a liar into a truth teller.

Christianity, alone among the world’s religions, is not a religion of laws. Laws can only conform a person on the outside; laws never change a person on the inside. Laws are good for establishing and enforcing civil obedience, insuring that—for the most part—people get along with one another. Laws limit misbehavior and make us aware of our inner inadequacies. But laws can never change us on the inside. Even the Ten Commandments can’t do that.

Christianity is the message that we must be born again on the inside. When a sinner submits to the person and power of Jesus Christ, there is an internal transformation that alters his or her internal value system.

In computer terminology, we are reprogrammed with entirely new values. We are given God’s values. And one of those values is truthfulness.

The only way natural-born liars will ever value and live truth is from the inside out. And if a person consistently lives a lie, that is external evidence that there has been no internal transformation.

If you have a computer or calculator which repeatedly says that $2+12=17$ and that $4\times 4=83$, you

conclude that there is something wrong inside the computer. It needs a new chip. It should be reprogrammed. So it is with anyone who consistently lies. That person needs to become a Christian.

Becoming a Christian and being programmed to value truth does not change accuracy, but it does change intent. There is a difference. For example, I wear a battery-operated quartz wristwatch. When the battery runs down the watch stops. Sometimes I am unaware when that happens. In an instance like that, if you were to ask me what time it was and I told you it was 9:05 p.m. when it was really 9:25 p.m., I would be inaccurate but I would not be a liar. I intended to tell you the truth. I just had faulty information.

Valuing truth changes our intent, but it does not guarantee our accuracy. However, as Christians we will seek to be accurate. We will always desire to tell the truth even if for some reason we are mistaken.

Truth in Love

Those who value truth must never act as if truth can operate on its own, independent of other values, especially love.

The Bible clearly tells us that we should speak “the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15). This means that love must always govern the use of truth.

Several years ago I read a heartbreaking letter in Ann Landers’s column. It was from a man who had lived with years of guilt over a teenage prank. One evening he and his friends had voted on who was the ugliest girl in their school. Then one of them—the man who had written the letter—called the girl up and congratulated her on being voted the ugliest. Years later, he was still haunted by what he had done.

Technically what he had told that girl was true: the boys did vote and she was chosen. Truth? Maybe. But absolutely lacking in love.

Christians must always use truth lovingly. Truth should help, not hinder, build up, not destroy. Speaking and acting “in love” means that we always act in the best interest of the other person. There may be times, therefore, when the truth is not spoken, when it may be withheld.

There is a difference, however, between loving silence and damaging secrets. Unhealthy relationships are often perpetuated by secrets. For example, many alcoholic families have members who cover up problems by keeping secrets or by outright lying about the addict whom they love. When some-

one needs help, it is not usually an act of love to keep secrets that keep the help away.

Just as there are such dysfunctional families, there are dysfunctional churches that keep quiet about the sins of leaders as if that were some Christian virtue. The sin that is kept secret festers and grows until many innocent people are injured.

The Bible gives very practical counsel about the relationships of truth, secrets, sins, and confrontation. In Matthew 18:15-17, a formula is presented that begins with a one-on-one conversation. The Christian with the information goes directly to the individual who has sinned and speaks in a way that will help and restore rather than injure or perpetuate. If that doesn't work, the information is carefully shared with another responsible Christian who goes along for a second confrontation with the offender. If that doesn't work, the church or its leadership is brought into the confrontation. Notice that this is a use of truth in a measured, private, and loving manner. Others are not told until and unless absolutely necessary to help the person who needs help. When a positive response is received, there is no need to tell anyone else.

I remember one night when our children were young and our station wagon was packed with neighbor children we were taking home after a weeknight children's club program at church. One of the children started to tell all the others that the parents of one of their friends down the street were getting a divorce. Before he could blurt out the information, my wife kindly interrupted him, saying, "That is Johnny's information to tell." The information was true but it was private. The child whose parents were divorcing could tell his friends when he wanted to tell, but it wasn't another child's information to share. Truth, but private not public.

Whenever such guidelines are presented, someone will always raise new scenarios. The "what ifs" are endless. That is why we must always return to the rule of love. Always ask what is in the best interest of the other person and then do what will help most. Sometimes it will be speaking; sometimes it will be silence. Sometimes it will be very easy; often it will be very hard.

Just remember that truth never stands alone. Truth must always be spoken in love.

Confusing Truth With Importance

While "all truth is God's truth," not all truth is equally important.

Numbers 3:43 says that the total count of Levite

males over one month old when Moses was leader of Israel was 22,273.

John 3:16 says that "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

Both of these statements are equally true. But both are not equally important.

Christians, the church, and the world have made enormous mistakes by failing to distinguish levels of importance. We have fought wars, established denominations, and perpetuated family feuds over matters that may have been true but were relatively unimportant.

A usual prerequisite for formal ordination to the ministry of the Gospel is an ordination examination. Different churches use different approaches, although most include a public council where the candidate may be questioned about anything in the Bible, church history, theology, or ministerial practice. In many ways it is comparable to the bar examination for attorneys or board examinations for physicians.

When I was a seminary student, we had frequent classroom discussions about how to answer questions that might be asked on such examinations. One professor suggested that examiners might ask, "Do you consider the doctrine of eschatology to be important?" (Eschatology is the study of "last things" or prophecy of the future based on the Bible.) He then listened while students debated back and forth about the importance of eschatology. When we reached a deadlock, he shared his wisdom. He suggested that we respond to the examiner by asking, "Important for what?" In other words, prophecy may be important as a part of Bible study and interpretation, but it is not important for salvation and eternal life.

Baptism is another example. That which the Bible presents so positively has become a major source of division among many Christians and churches. A friend of mine who had served as a missionary put it in perspective for me with these words: "When they gather up all the Christians and you stand together in front of a firing squad about to die as martyrs for Jesus Christ, mode of baptism is not the topic of discussion."

This is not to suggest that God has multiple and contradictory truths about prophecy or baptism. Nor is this suggesting that these are not important Christian teachings. It is to say that they are not as important as the truth that God exists, that Jesus Christ is God's Son, and that eternal life is gained through

faith.

Some truths are unimportant (like the ancient debate over how many angels could sit on the head of a pin). Some truths are important. Some truths are very important. Some truths are extremely important. Some truths are infinitely important.

Family feuds have lasted for generations over differences about truths that really didn't matter. The same can be said about fellowship within the family of God. Some Christians have refused to fellowship with others because of truths as relatively unimportant as the angel count on a pinhead.

We should balance our wholehearted commitment to God's absolute truth with our love for our neighbors as ourselves and our application of God-given wisdom on what is more important and what is less important.

As Christians we want to be true, but we also want to rightly order our priorities. The Bible is enormously helpful in showing what is more and what is less important. God is generous in giving wisdom to those who ask for help in living for the most important.

The Bible begins with the battle for truth in the Garden of Eden. God said, "Don't eat the fruit or you will die." Satan said, "God is wrong." Adam and Eve decided to elevate themselves above God and God's truth. It was a terrible decision and a tragic sin.

Value God. Value the truth. Live the truth. Tell the truth. Speak it in love.

Questions

For Thought:

1. Would you be willing to be hooked up to a lie detector and have those closest to you ask any questions they choose? Why or why not?
2. Would you lie about your child's age to get a discount? Why or why not?
3. How can you get truth in your "inner parts" as David prayed in Psalm 51?
4. Are you living a life of rules and external regulations without an internal transformation? If so, are you willing to submit to the person and power of Jesus Christ, the only One who can transform you and alter your internal value system?

For Discussion:

1. What influences in American society encourage Americans to take lying lightly? How can we counter these influences in the lives of our children?
2. Why is truth dangerous when it operates apart from love? In what ways can it do harm to us and others?
3. What are some of the pitfalls that Christians, the church, and the world can fall into by failing to distinguish levels of importance regarding truth?
4. Discuss the practical counsel about the relationships of truth, secrets, sins, and confrontation that Jesus describes in Matthew 18:15-17. What might be some consequences of not following this advice?

1 James Patterson and Peter Kim, *The Day America Told the Truth* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1991), 45-49.

2 Ibid., 49.

This transcript is an excerpt from Leith's book *Winning the Values War*. For a copy of the book, available only through Wooddale Church, please call 1-800-MATTERS or mail your request to Faith Matters, 6630 Shady Oak Rd., Eden Prairie, MN 55344. A suggested donation for this book is \$20, and please indicate your request for *Winning the Values War*. The book may also be purchased through the Wooddale Bookstore and you may link to the bookstore through the www.wooddale.org web site.

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