

Truth and its Effect on How We Comprehend the Bible

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Research Paper Outline

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In his book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change*, Stephen Covey states, “We see the world, not as it is, but as we are -- or, as we are conditioned to see it. When we open our mouths to describe what we see, we in effect describe ourselves, our perceptions, our paradigms.”¹ The way we see things, our perception, our truth, shapes how we comprehend and receive information. What is true to one person may not be true to another and this can change everything. The way a person thinks, lives and believes is based on what they perceive to be true. If one does not see the Bible as the absolute true inspired word of God, this will deeply affect the way they live, discuss matters of the Bible and perceive those that do believe it to be the inspired word of God. Our truth concerning the Bible will determine whether we comprehend it to be the absolute inspired word of God or a well written fairy tale recorded by well-meaning men.

What is Truth?

Teresa Okure published a paper entitled, *What is Truth?* She opens her paper with the statement, “Clearly, our cultures influence our reading and shape our understanding of the Bible.”² She goes on to say that:

“Language is the embodiment of culture. It forms and shapes how we perceive and interpret reality. Sometimes our culture conditions even our mouths, our tongues. When our tongues are formed in a particular language, we find it difficult

1 (Covey 2004)

2 (Okure 2011, 405)

to switch to another one. Our tongues are so shaped and conditioned by our native language (mother tongue) that we find it difficult, if not impossible, to pronounce words that are not in our mother tongue.”³

Okure’s study deals with how culture influences the way we read and comprehend the Bible. Truth in the same context shapes how we view the Bible. Let’s begin by taking a look at what truth is not, versus what truth is.

Truth Is Not

According to Norman Geisler, truth is not that which works because a lie can work, but it’s effectiveness does not make it true. It is still false even though it works. Truth is also not that which coheres because consistency and coherence do not determine whether or not something has contextual evidence of its existence. Truth is not that which is intended because intention has very little to do with truth. If truth were based on intention, then every sincere statement made would have to be considered as true. Truth is not that which is comprehensive because the explanation of data does not make something true. Truth is not that which is existentially relevant because not all truths fit into this category. This view is too narrow and fails to give a complete definition to truth. And lastly, truth is not that which feels good. Bad news can make us feel bad but still be true. The nature of truth is not the same as the result of truth.⁴

Truth Is

Truth, simply stated is the way things really are. Truth is personal, not propositional as demonstrated by Jesus when he declares, “I am the truth,” (John 14:6, NIV). Truth can be trusted.

3 (Okure 2011, 407)

4 (Geisler 2010, 82-84)

Truth corresponds to the object it is referring to and truth can be tested.⁵ Truth can stand the test of time. It can hold its own. Truth can be tested and proven over and over, whether scientific, mathematically or theologically. Truth is truth.

What is the Bible?

In Zabriskie's article, *The Bible Challenge and Why It Matters*, he had this to say about the Bible:

“The key to engaging with the scriptures in meaningful ways is to develop a regular practice of prayerful Bible reading. It is clear that Bible study is an important foundation for building strong Christian lives. Faithful church going alone will not sustain spiritual growth, but must be accompanied by daily spiritual practice. Of all the spiritual resources available to Christians—spiritual direction, walking the labyrinth, praying each day, reciting the rosary, reading devotional writers, fasting, and so on—engaging the Bible has been shown to be by far the most effective spiritual tool.”⁶

For believers of God, the Bible is his inerrant, inspired, breathed word and the most effective tool and resource on how to live and how to instruct others. In his book, *The Good Book on Leadership: Case Studies from the Bible*, Borek uses the Bible to paint a picture of effective leadership. He takes different leaders from the Bible such as Moses, Joseph, Jacob and Jesus and uses their lives and actions to instruct others on how to be good leaders. He uses their

5 (Geisler 2010, 84,87-88)

6 (Zabriskie 2015, 249)

stories to bring to light different aspects of leadership such as administration, pragmatism, strategy and mentoring.⁷

For the believer, the Bible is more than just a book. It is a tool, a resource, a manual on the right way to live because it is believed to come from God himself, unlike any other book ever written. Geisler states that the Bible becomes a seed that saves (1 Peter 1:23), milk that nourishes (1 Peter 2:2), food that satisfies (Hebrews 5:14), water that washes (Psalms 119:9; Ephesians 5:25-26), fire that cleanses (Jeremiah 23:29), a hammer that shatters (Jeremiah 23:29), a sword that cuts deep (Hebrews 4:13), medicine that keeps (Psalms (119:11), a mirror that reflects (James 1:23-25), a lamp for the feet (Psalm 119:105), a counselor that comforts (Romans 15:4) and a forecaster that never fails (2 Peter 1:19).⁸ For the believer, the Bible affects every aspect of life because it is God's true inspired word.

The Inspired Word of God

“The Bible claims to be a book from God, a message with divine authority.”⁹ The Bible is a book written by men under the leadership and guidance of God himself. By way of the Holy Spirit, God's Spirit, certain individuals were selected to write and arrange the Holy Bible. Many refute the authenticity of the word of God, but many have chosen to live by it.

For those that have chosen to live by it, there are still different schools of thought on whether to take it literally or figuratively, but must still agree that it is inspired by God. Biblical inspiration is considered to be plenary meaning that it extends beyond the words and delves into every part of what they teach and imply. While the Bible is all God inspired, some things are not as important, but all are true and necessary. For instance, some deaths are mentioned as a way of

7 (Borek 2005)

8 (Geisler 2005, 185-186)

9 (Borek 2005, 169)

establishing historical accuracy, but some deaths such as Lazarus are mentioned as a way of demonstrating the power of God.

Divine and Human

The Bible has a divine origin, but came through human agency. This simply means that God inspired men to write his word. Because the Bible is inspired by God, it is inerrant, without error, and infallible, without any mistakes. Many make the argument that because humans wrote the Bible, the room for error is possible. While this is true, the fact that God inspired it means there are no errors because God does not make mistakes. The only possible issues in the Bible are the results of translation over the years. The original manuscript of the Holy Bible however, is without error, unlike some translations today.

Because the Bible is Divine, it is infallible, immortal, indestructible, indefatigable, indefeasible and inerrant according to Geisler.¹⁰ This means that the divine nature of God in the scriptures makes the Bible a mistake free, ever living organism that cannot be destroyed, stripped of its power, overcome or made void and definitely without error. John Edwards said in his 1746 manuscript, “A love to God for the beauty of his moral attributes, leads to, and necessarily causes a delight in God for all his attributes; for his moral attributes cannot be without his natural attributes: for infinite holiness supposes infinite wisdom, and an infinite capacity and greatness; and all the attributes of God do as it were implying each other.”¹¹ Just as we cannot separate the attributes of God, we cannot make the mistake of trying to separate the importance of humanity in the divine word of God.

While the Bible is divine and inspired by God, it’s important to still recognize the humanity in it. Like all other books, the Bible was written by humans. Approximately 40 people

10 (Geisler 2005, 182-183)

11 (Edwards 1746)

contributed to the writing of the Bible. They offered their own styles and cultural influences and wrote it in the language of their times. The Bible is the inspired, breathed word of God, but it was written by humans in a human language with a human “voice” or style. The Bible also contains human emotion, interests and perspectives.¹² We cannot deny the humanity involved in the writing of the Bible while acknowledging the divine influence of it. Both are important and must be recognized in order to accurately describe and understand it.

In our understanding of the Bible, we must also continue to understand truth and its influence on how we perceive it. Whether we identify as an absolutist or relativist can have much to do with how we read the stories of the Bible and receive the messages that transmit. Our perspective of truth has a great effect on how we comprehend the Bible. It determines whether we receive it as authority for all or a good idea for some.

Perspectives on Truth

In his paper, *Truth or Truths—How Does This Fit in a World of Religious Plurality*, Ucko states that:

“Ambiguity, pluralism, and that which is relative rather than absolute or certain are important factors in our search for truth. Reality is not a solid, self-contained given but a fluid, unfolding process. One cannot regard reality as a removed spectator against a fixed object; one is always engaged in reality, transforming it while being transformed oneself. Our time is characterized also by a sympathetic attitude toward repressed or unorthodox perspectives and a more self-critical view of currently established ones. There is a realization that the world does not exist as a thing-in-itself, independent of interpretation. The world comes into being only

12 (Geisler 2005, 187-190)

through interpretation. The nature of truth and reality, in science, philosophy, and religion, is ambiguous. All human understanding is interpretation, and no interpretation is final.”¹³

Ucko is telling us that interpretation plays a large role in how we view the world around us. It is our interpretation of things such as science, philosophy and religion that give our reality meaning. How we perceive things, such as truth, determines how we will comprehend things in the world we live in, such as the Bible. With that being said, I would like to examine two different perspectives on truth, relative and absolute.

Relativist View

Relativism states that what is true for one may not be true for another. This is a very popular belief system. It is more inclusive and accepting. Relativist believe that some things may be true for some, but not for all. They also believe that some things are true some of the time, but not all of the time. And perhaps some things are true in some places, but not in all places.

This view is much more tolerant and allows the believer to adjust things to their view in order to create their own personal values and meanings as noted by Williams in his paper on absolutism, relativism and anarchy:

“The third challenge for developing a non-anarchic relativism is “loyalty”. Whilst being tolerant of values different from our own, we must also be able to find our own personal and cultural values meaningful. First and foremost, our values are calls to interpretation and action. Any relativism which abandons the feeling that our own values are meaningful and motivating will essentially lead to nihilism

13 (Ucko 2017, 25)

and indifference. This is what Locke believes anarchic relativism, with its “everything goes” approach to value, leads to.”¹⁴

The problem with relativism is that truth is truth, it does not change. If something is true in one place or at one time, it must be true in all places at all times. Geisler notes that people once believed the world was square, but later gave into the belief that the world is round. He asks the question, did the truth change or did beliefs about what is true change?¹⁵ The truth never changed. What was true was still true even though the beliefs had changed. The world was always round even though popular opinion said otherwise. Just because it was the popular idea at the time did not make it any more true that popular culture ideas of this time that are contrary to truth. Popularity does not validate truth. Truth validates truth.

The other obvious problem with relativism is that it is self-defeating. If the relativist believes that relativism is true for everyone, that makes him or her an absolutist because now what is true for one is true for all. This is the very basis of absolutism and the very thing relativist are trying to come against.

Relativism also creates a world full of lies and contradictions because if something is true to one, but not to another this would cause every statement ever made to be true if the one stating it believed it to be true. This means that two people can look at the same object and see something completely different, but both be correct. This means that a believer in God and in the inerrancy of the Bible is correct because he or she believes this to be true, but the one that does not believe in God or in his inspired word is also correct. How can both be correct? How can God both exist and not exist? And how can the Bible be his inspired word and not be his inspired

14 (Williams 2017, 414)

15 (Geisler 2010, 88)

word at the same time? Someone must be wrong, but not according to the relativist because what is true for one may not be true for all.

Absolutist View

Absolute truth or absolutism makes the statement that what is true for me, is true for everyone. There is no gray area when dealing with absolutism. It is finite. Truth is truth. The absolutist would say the Bible is the inerrant, infallible, inspired word of God and there is no room for any other belief. Because of this, Williams states in his study that “absolutism leads to dogmatism, struggle, and the very conflict which it aims to avoid”.¹⁶

Absolutism declares that Christianity is the sole religion that should be followed. Because of this, many conflicts arise in a pluralistic society where free thought and freedom of religion is encouraged. It may seem a bit strict, but in order to be clear it is important to take a stand as a Christian and declare that there is only one God and the Bible is his inspired word to his creations. If we do not take this stand, we leave room for others to insinuate their beliefs and downplay the divinity of God’s word, the Bible.

Some may make the argument that truth is always changing, and we cannot be certain of things because we do not have all the facts. Relativists try to use scientific progress as a way of defending this claim. This is however an erred statement because truth does not change, but our understanding of it may.¹⁷ We may grow in knowledge of truth, but the truth was always just that, the truth. It never changed. It remains an absolute, even when our view of it changes. Truth is what it is at all times.

16 (Williams 2017, 410)

17 (Geisler 2010, 91)

Truth is not something that changes. We as humans are always changing, growing and evolving, but truth always remains the same. How we see truth may change. The way we view things as children, will not remain the same as we mature and grow into adults.

Conclusion

Truth has a great effect on the way we comprehend the Bible. If we view the Bible through the eyes of a relativist, the Bible can be reduced to that of a well written story or fairy tale containing wise words to be applied to life loosely as seen fit, but if we view the Bible as the absolute true word of God without error and applies to all, we receive it as more than inspiration and wise words. We will receive it as a manual by which all should live because we accept it to be the inspired word of the one and only Creator of Heaven and Earth. Truth determines how we comprehend the Bible because it determines whether we see it as the absolute inspired word of God or a simple fairy tale that is well written and well arranged with wise words to be applied to some issues, some people and some facets of life, instead of God breathed words to be applied to all issues, all people and all facets of life.

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