

THE BIBLICAL VIEW OF TRUTH*

JOHN W. ROBBINS

President

The Trinity Foundation

Unicoi, Tennessee

I. INTRODUCTION

Let me say at the outset that I do not intend to break any new ground with this paper, but merely to restate a position taught in Scripture and long held by Christians (and by some non-Christians) for a new age and a new church that have largely repudiated it. The irrationalism and anti-intellectualism that have prevailed among the learned since at least the time of Immanuel Kant also began to dominate popular thought in the 19th century, and they show no sign of relinquishing their dominion in the 21st century.

Let me also say that I do not intend to discuss what are usually regarded as the primary theories of truth: the older coherence and correspondence theories, and the modern pragmatic and performative theories. Nevertheless, I must point out that all four theories agree that truth is propositional. According to the coherence theory of truth, true propositions must be logically consistent and imply or presuppose one another; according to the correspondence theory of truth, true propositions must agree with so-called “facts”; according to the pragmatic theory of truth, propositions become true when put into practice if they “work,” that is, lead to some successful or predicted result; and according to the performative theory of truth, saying a proposition is true is merely affirming one’s assent to the proposition. In all this, whatever problems these theories have, they do not have the problem of denying that truth is propositional.

* This article was presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, San Antonio, Texas, Wednesday, November 17, 2004 and formerly printed in *The Trinity Review* (The Trinity Foundation, P.O. Box 68, Unicoi, TN 37692, www.trinityfoundation.org). It is used by permission.

The matter I wish to address is even more fundamental in the discussion of truth than these theories, for in the past century or so, the propositional nature of truth itself has been widely denied, especially in religious matters. There has always been an influential strain in theology that teaches and emphasizes the unknowability of God, going back at least to Dionysius the Areopagite, whose 5th century works, *Mystic Theology* and *Divine Names*, in parts a plagiarism of the heathen Proclus, were widely accepted and ushered in the Dark Ages. According to Dionysius, God does not even know himself: “God does not know what he himself is because he is not a what.” As Gordon Clark explains:

The highest cause cannot be truly designated by any name; all our expressions are only symbolic. Metaphorically, God can be called Truth, Good, Essence, Light, Sun, Star, Breath, Water, and an infinite number of other things. But God is actually above all these predicates, for each of these has a contradictory—truth and falsehood, good and evil, light and darkness—but God has no contradictory. He is super-essential, super-good, and so on, as Dionysius said.¹

Here are samples of Dionysius’ theology:

Triad supernal, both super-God and super-good, Guardian of the theosophy of Christian men, direct us aright to the super-unknown and super-brilliant and highest summit of the mystic oracles, where the simple and absolute and changeless mysteries of theology lie hidden within the superluminous gloom of the silence, revealing hidden things, which in its deepest darkness shines above the most super-brilliant, and in the altogether impalpable and invisible fills to overflowing the eyeless minds with glories of surpassing beauty.²

Deity of our Lord Jesus, the cause and completing of all, which preserves the parts concordant with the whole, and is neither part nor whole, and whole and part, as embracing in itself everything both whole and part and being above and before, perfect indeed in the imperfect as source of perfection, but imperfect in the perfect as super-perfect and pre-perfect,

¹ Gordon H. Clark, *Thales to Dewey: A History of Philosophy* (Unicoi, TN: The Trinity Foundation, 2000), 198.

² *Mystic Theology*, 1:1.

form producing form in things without form as source of form, formless in the forms as above form, essence penetrating without stain the essences throughout, and super-essential, exalted above every essence, setting bounds to all principalities and orders and established in every principality and order.³

This sort of sanctimonious gibberish has been echoed by theologians of all stripes, not just those who are classified as mystics, down through the centuries, including, as we shall see in a few moments, the Dutch Calvinist, Herman Bavinck, whose four-volume work on *Reformed Dogmatics* is appearing in English for the first time.

II. TRUTH IS PROPOSITIONAL

The view of truth that I wish to restate is this: Truth is propositional, and only propositional. To put it even more plainly, truth is a property, characteristic, or attribute only of propositions. This view is in stark contrast to views, both academic and popular, of truth as encounter, truth as event, truth as pictorial, truth as experiential, truth as emotive, truth as personal, truth as mystic absorption into or union with the divine.

This last view, that truth is personal, not propositional, has led theologians to substitute the nebulous concepts of “commitment,” “personal relationship,” and “union” for the clear and Biblical concept of belief, thus undermining the Gospel itself. The NT uses *believe* and its cognates hundreds of times, specifically with regard to *believing the Gospel*, *believing Scripture*, *believing Christ*, and *believing God*. (Incidentally, when Scripture uses the word *believe* followed by the name of a person or a pronoun, it always means believing the words spoken by or about that person. Using a noun or a pronoun is simply a shorthand way of referencing a proposition or collection of propositions.)⁴ On the other hand, *commit* and its cognates are used much less frequently, and almost always with regard to committing sins. Donald MacKinnon commented on this shift from belief to commitment, saying that the analysis of faith “in terms of self-commitment to a person leaves unanswered (or even deliberately seeks to evade) the distinction between such commitment

³ *Divine Names*, 2:10.

⁴ See Gordon H. Clark, *What Is Saving Faith?* (Unicoi, TN: The Trinity Foundation, 2004).

and that involved in a Fuehrerprinzip (Fuehrer or Leader Principle).⁵ To speak plainly, if commitment to a person is substituted for belief of propositional truth, then there can be no reason not to commit passionately to a demon. The very learned German society of the 1930s, with more Ph.D.'s *per capita* than any other nation on earth, and the billion-member Roman Church-State, both governed by a Fuehrerprinzip, have done so.

Part of this anti-intellectualism that pervades all religions—Eastern, Western, Christian, non-Christian, Roman, Orthodox, and Protestant—at the start of the 21st century is the head/heart dichotomy. This notion that the head, representing the mind and intellect, is inferior to the heart, representing the “soul” and emotions, is completely foreign to Scripture. Nevertheless, one constantly hears and reads theologians, professedly Christian, who prattle on about “heart religion” versus “head religion,” praising the former and condemning the latter.⁶

Let me define a couple terms, and then I will turn to the body of my paper, an examination of Scripture. First, I am not using the word *proposition* in any novel fashion, but in its standard sense: A proposition is the meaning of a declarative sentence. Interrogative, imperative, and exclamatory sentences do not express propositions. Single words, without context, do not express propositions. Rhetorical questions, ostensibly interrogative sentences, are functionally declarative sentences. Voices of verbs do not matter. Two declarative sentences, one in the passive and one in the active voice, can express the same proposition: *Jim hit the ball* and *the ball was hit by Jim* express the same proposition. Language does not matter: *Il pleut*, *Es regnet*, and *It is raining* all express the same proposition. This principle, by the way, is a *sine qua non* for the translation of Scripture. If this principle were not true, the translation of Scripture, indeed the translation of any document from one language to another, would not be possible.

III. THE ECSTATIC HERESY

I mentioned previously the fact that contemporary churches have repudiated the Biblical view of truth. A recent issue of *Christianity Today*

⁵ Quoted in Carl Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority* (Carlisle, Cumbria, U.K.: Paternoster, 1999), 3:486-87.

⁶ For a refutation of the head-heart dichotomy from Scripture, see Clark, *What Is Saving Faith?*, 55ff.

carried an essay on “The Ecstatic Heresy.” Robert Sanders, the author, begins by citing three quotations, which I reproduce here. The first statement was issued by the Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church on March 24, 2004:

The Dammann case [the trial of a lesbian Methodist minister] does reveal continuing differences in the United Methodist Church concerning the issue of homosexuality. The Council of Bishops is painfully aware of this disagreement. In such moments as this, we remember that our unity in Christ does not depend on unanimity of opinion. Rather, in Jesus Christ we are bound together by love that transcends our differences and calls us to stay at the table with one another.

Please note that the propositional view of truth is here characterized as “opinion.” What transcends this is something called “love” and “staying at the table.” Unity is not unity of speech and mind, as Paul commands in 1 Cor 1:10: “Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment”—but unity of emotion, feeling, or experience.⁷ Paul commands propositional unity—“speak the same thing,” “the same mind,” “the same judgment”; yet it is precisely this unanimity of opinion that the Methodists repudiate.

The second statement was made by Douglas Oldenburg, moderator of the 1998 Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) General Assembly. His remarks described two men, a homosexual Presbyterian pastor and a pastor who opposed homosexuality, who had both addressed the Assembly passionately. When they finished their speeches, they embraced. Oldenburg says,

When they finished, all of us stood up and applauded, with a lump in our throats and a tear in our eyes, as we watched them embrace one another. Convictions were not reconciled that day, but two people who held different convictions were reconciled in Christ.

⁷ Oprah Winfrey said in “What I Know for Sure,” in the January 2002 issue of her magazine *O*: “The truth is that which feels right and good and loving. (Love doesn’t hurt. It feels really good.)” So bad news cannot be true, unless, of course, we are ourselves bad and rejoice in hearing bad news. Then it is true for us.

Here the propositional view of truth is called “conviction,” and it is subordinated to something called “reconciliation in Christ,” which apparently consists of a homosexual hug. Once again, the unity Oldenburg praised, and which he found so moving, was not Christian unity, but something else. Christian unity, as the Apostle Peter wrote in 1 Pet 3:8, is unity of mind: “Finally, all of you be of one mind...” The phrase “in Christ,” which is a favorite of mystics and anti-intellectuals, is meaningless unless it means to think Christ’s thoughts as expressed in Scripture. People are reconciled only by thinking the same thoughts, for only then are they in fellowship.

The third quotation comes from Frank Griswold, presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church:

How we all fit together, how our singularities are made sense of, how our divergent views and different understandings of God’s intent are reconciled, passes all understanding. All that we can do is to travel on in faith and trust, knowing that all contradictions and paradoxes and seemingly irreconcilable truths—which seem both consistent and inconsistent with Scripture—are brought together in the larger and all-embracing truth of Christ, which, by Christ’s own words, has yet to be fully drawn forth and known.

Here, something called the “larger and all-embracing truth of Christ,” which encompasses and unifies all paradoxes, contradictions, and “seemingly irreconcilable truths,” and which passes all understanding, is opposed to literal propositional truth. In the dark, all cows are black.

These opinions are common in churches today: Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Lutheran, Baptist, Charismatic, Arminian, Protestant, Reformed, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox. No communion is free of these sentiments. American culture, both civil and ecclesiastical, is saturated with this view of truth. This view of truth is not new, as Sanders points out; it has been around for centuries, though the twentieth century saw some of its most emphatic expressions.

In his *Christianity Today* essay, Sanders lists ten ecstatic principles, not all of them relevant to my purposes here today, but I will mention three. The author contrasts these ecstatic principles with orthodox principles, but he does not always succeed in stating the Biblical position accurately.

Ecstatic Principle # 1: God in Himself or in His revelation as Word and words, is never really verbal. He always transcends language.

This, of course, is a common assertion of mystics, who generally describe union with God as an ineffable experience. It is also an assertion of Neo-orthodox theology, which says that God's revelation is not in propositions but in events, especially the event of an encounter of persons. It is also the position of Reformed thinkers such as Herman Bavinck, who in his book *The Doctrine of God* spends the first 25 pages or so asserting that

adequate knowledge of God does not exist. There is no name that makes known unto us his being. No concept fully embraces him. No description does justice to him....The words *Father, God, Lord* are not real names, but "appellations derived from his good deeds and functions."...He is exalted above all being and above human thought....Accordingly, whenever we wish to designate God, we use metaphorical language....We cannot form a conception of that unitary, unknown being, transcendent above all being, above goodness, above every name and word and thought...The statements "God cannot be defined; he has no name; the finite cannot grasp the infinite" are found in the works of all the theologians. They unanimously affirm that God is highly exalted above our comprehension, our imagination, and our language....Whatever is said of God is not God, for God is ineffable.⁸

These words, of course, are incompatible with the Biblical view of truth, with the doctrine of propositional revelation, and with the Biblical idea that God communicates truth about himself, man, and the world to men in words and propositions.

Bavinck's words are, however, compatible with Eastern religions, including Eastern Christianity. Hindu theology, for example, speaks of God negatively, apophatically. The well-known Hindu phrase used when speaking of ultimate reality is "*neti, neti*"—not this, not this. God is mysterious, beyond human language and thought, beyond literal propositional statements.

⁸ Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 13-37.

IV. CHRISTIAN COLLEGES

This irrationalism, perhaps *anti-rationality* would be a better term, is inculcated in our so-called Christian colleges. The Grove City College newspaper, *The Collegian*, in its April 4, 2003 edition, published a sophomoric dialogue by one Matthew Litwa. Here is the relevant portion of that dialogue:

At this point [after I had said that I had the absolute truth] my friend inquired whether it was not more appropriate to say that Jesus Himself was—and is—the Truth (John 14:6). That is, that Jesus Christ embodied the faithfulness and wisdom of God—and that He became our redemption (1 Corinthians 1:30).

That seemed more accurate. “But,” I prodded, “did not our Savior say many true things about salvation?”

“Surely,” David replied. “Yet what form were they in?”

“Mostly aphorism, parable, metaphor, illustration—at times Christ basing what he said on miracles He had previously done.”

“And the whole point of these sayings,” my friend explained, “including the ‘I Am’ sayings, was to point to a reality that transcended speech itself.”

I paused to reflect. Then David said, “Did, ultimately, our Savior reveal formulaic and propositional truth to His disciples, or did He reveal Himself?”

That sparked a thought in me. Systematic theology, communicating propositions in tight logical form, was not how our Lord communicated. Propositional creeds, too, seemed to come later—this along with theological treatises on, say, justification by faith. I voiced these thoughts to my friend.

“Sometimes I think we Protestants,” David smiled, “speak more about justification by faith than we do about the One we have faith in.”

I agreed, and then my friend summarized our discussion to that point: “As far as I know,” he said, “the only absolute truth we have is in Jesus telling us how to be saved. And how are we saved?”

Automatically, my reply came: “By trusting in the Person of Christ.”

“Not through believing propositions?”

“Well, partly, I guess. But as I suggested before, the propositions are only designed to get us to the Person—and the Person is the Truth.”

“Do we possess this Person?”

“Sort of. He is in our hearts and minds. Nonetheless, we surely do not own and control Jesus! Nor can we break Jesus up into little absolute-truth formulas and inscribe them on a page.”

“Certainly.” David said. “In fact, propositionalizing salvation in Jesus, in my opinion, would be attempting to make salvation like math. And, don’t get me wrong, I love math! Math says, ‘Use this formula, and get this product.’ But mathematical salvation? What an awful concept!”

“In my mind,” my friend proceeded, “scientific salvation cancels real salvation. For real salvation is in a Person—Jesus—‘bleeding and dying on a cross.’ As so many of my Evangelical friends have maintained: Christianity is not a religion, but a relationship. A relationship! A messy, complex, indefinable, muddy thing. Yet, oh, how rich it is, and how wonderful and joyful it can be.”

“So,” I asked my friend, “we do not own and control the Truth?”

“Not if you mean Jesus,” he answered. “We don’t tell Jesus what to do. He saves anyone He would like—relates to anyone He would like.”⁹

In this dialogue we see the disparagement of propositional truth, the notion that truth is personal, not propositional, the notion that Christ

⁹ This dialogue, which might have appeared in any American “Christian” college or church newspaper, expresses common religious opinions and explains why President Bush gave the answers he did to Charles Gibson’s questions on the ABC News program *Good Morning America* on October 26, 2004: “Do we worship the same God, Christian and Muslim?” Bush: “I think we do.” Gibson asked, “Do Christians and non-Christians and Muslims go to heaven, in your mind?” Bush replied: “Yes, they do. We have different routes of getting there...The almighty God decides who goes to heaven.”

spoke almost exclusively in metaphors and parables, the notion that “reality transcends speech”—all of which is consonant with Hindu theology but antithetical to Christian theology. We also see the assertion that “Jesus is in our hearts and minds,” but no explanation of what this statement means, but it does not mean that we think and believe Jesus’ propositions.

This ecstatic principle, that “God transcends language,” contradicts the first chapter of the Gospel of John: “In the beginning was the *logos*, and the *logos* was with God, and the *logos* was God.” The *King James Version* translates *logos* as *Word*. It is an intellectual term. It means speech, wisdom, theology, doctrine, proposition, logic. Scripture says that the Word is God; it never says that God transcends language. Rather the opposite: It asserts that the *logos* is God.

The important point to realize here is that this view of God, logic, and language is not restricted either to the East or to the mystic fringe of Western Christendom, but is widely accepted by Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant theologians.

Ecstatic Principle # 2: Theological statements use language, but literal language refers only to objective [Sanders means empirical] realities. Language applied to God is always symbolic since God is ineffable.

Douglas Wilson, a popular and prolific author who claims to be Reformed but is not, has proposed what he calls “poetic epistemology.” His poetic epistemology is based on this principle that language applied to God is always metaphorical. In fact, Wilson asserts, in agreement with several non-Christian language philosophers,¹⁰ that all language is metaphorical; that there is no such thing as literal language. Of course, such a view is self-refuting, for its proponents mean us to understand their words literally. The Dutch theologian Bavinck as well falsely asserts that all language about God is metaphorical.

Ecstatic Principle # 3: Scripture is the history of ecstatic experiences given verbal content [Sanders apparently means verbal expression] according to the social context of the biblical peoples....Consequently, one must first hear the word

¹⁰ See Gordon H. Clark, *Language and Theology* (Unicoi, TN: The Trinity Foundation, 1980, 1993).

within the biblical words in order to sense the divine that transcends all historical contexts.

This, of course, is a fairly clear statement of a principle of Neo-orthodox theology. But it is also echoed by the leading figure of the Christian and Missionary Alliance in the mid-twentieth century, A. W. Tozer, in a sermon reprinted in *The Presbyterian Journal* on February 11, 1970. *The Presbyterian Journal*, now defunct, professed to be a conservative Calvinist publication representing the more Biblical wing of the Southern Presbyterian Church. In that sermon Tozer, hardly a Calvinist, asserted that there were two kinds of truth. The first kind is the kind unbelieving Jews had. It is, in his words,

intellectual merely...I gather this not only from verse 17 [*John* 7:17, "If a man chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own"] but from the whole *Gospel of John*. To these people truth was an intellectual thing, just as we know two times two is four.

Two times two is four: That is truth, but it is an intellectual truth only....They [the Jews] believed that if you had the words of truth, if you could repeat the code of truth, you had the Truth. That if you lived by the word of truth, you lived in the Truth.

The battle line, the warfare today, is not necessarily between the fundamentalist and the liberal. There is a difference between them, of course. The fundamentalist says God made the heaven and the earth. The liberal says, Well, that's a poetic way of stating it; actually it came up by evolution. The fundamentalist says Jesus Christ was the very Son of God. The liberal says, Well he certainly was a wonderful man and he is the Master, but I don't quite know about his deity. So there is a division, but I don't think the warfare is over these matters any more. The battle has shifted to another more important field. The warfare and dividing line today is between evangelical rationalists and evangelical mystics....

Your evangelical rationalist...says what the Pharisees, the worst enemies Jesus had while on earth, said: Well, truth is truth, and if you believe the truth you've got it.

There is something behind the text that you've got to get through to...Is the body of Christian truth enough? Or does

truth have a soul as well as a body? The evangelical rationalist says that all talk about the soul of truth is poetic nonsense. The body of truth is all you need; if you believe the body of truth you are on your way to heaven and you can't backslide and everything will be all right and you will get a crown in the last day....Just as *Colossians* argues against Manichaeism and *Galatians* argues against Jewish legalism, so the book of *John* is a long, inspired, passionately outpoured book trying to save us from evangelical rationalism, the doctrine that says the text is enough. Textualism is as deadly as liberalism.¹¹

Unfortunately, Tozer does not tell us what the "soul of truth" is, as opposed to the body of truth, that is, the text, the propositional revelation itself, which he disparages. Since the "soul of truth" cannot be explained in literal language, it is indeed poetic nonsense. Further, since Tozer thinks the whole Gospel of John is a passionate argument against what he calls evangelical rationalism, let us begin our study of a Biblical view of truth by looking at John's Gospel.

V. THE PROPOSITIONS OF SCRIPTURE

It is best to begin our study of Scripture, not by examining passages that are pregnant with theological meaning, but rather by examining passages that are quite mundane. The reason for this is that we may be misled or distracted by the theological meaning of the passage, and so miss the meaning of the words *true* or *truth*. After we have seen how the words *true* and *truth* are used by the Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture in ordinary, mundane sentences, then we can examine those freighted with theological import.

Take, for example, this verse: John 4:37: "For in this the saying is true, 'One sows and another reaps.'" Here it is a saying, a proverb, that Scripture describes as "true": "One sows and another reaps." There is nothing mystical, nothing behind the text, no "soul of truth" as distinguished from the truth itself, which is the proposition: One sows and another reaps. The truth here is literal, verbal, and propositional. There is no hint that the truth is ineffable or inexpressible, or that human words are somehow inadequate to express this divine truth. The words used,

¹¹ For a thorough discussion of Tozer's errors, see Gordon H. Clark, *What Is Saving Faith?* (Unicoi, TN: The Trinity Foundation, 2004), 133-40.

whether Aramaic, English, French, or Greek, are entirely adequate to express the truth.

John 5:31: "If I bear witness of Myself, My witness is not true." Here Christ says that His spoken words about Himself are "not true," that is, they are false, if He alone bears witness. Clearly He has in mind the legal rule, stated clearly in the OT, that there must be at least two witnesses for statements to be accepted as true in court. One witness alone is not sufficient for credibility in court. His statements about Himself, if corroborated, are true. It is His spoken statements that Scripture describes as true or false.

John 5:32: "There is another who bears witness of Me, and I know that the witness which He witnesses of Me is true." In this verse Jesus says that He knows that John's spoken statements about Jesus are true. Once again, the word "true" describes propositions; in this case, the statements that John had made about Jesus, such as "It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose"; and "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." There is nothing mystical or mysterious about this. The words that John used to describe the Son of God were true. Obviously, the phrase "Lamb of God" is figurative, rather than literal, but its meaning can be and must be expressed in literal terms, if one is to understand the meaning of the figure. That is, in fact, the import of the NT, in which Christ literally explains the figures of the OT sacrificial system. John the Baptist's human words accurately and adequately described the Son of God incarnate. There is no defect in language, no deeper meaning inexpressible in words that we must somehow "get through to" or "sense." The words, the propositions themselves, are the truth we must understand and believe.

John 10:41: "Then many came to Him and said, 'John performed no sign, but all the things that John spoke about this Man were true.'" Here it is John's spoken words that are described as true, the words that John spoke about Jesus. Truth is verbal; it may be spoken or written; and it is always propositional. Truth is never described in Scripture as anything other than verbal, or propositional. Scripture never teaches that truth is encounter, event, picture, emotion, or experience. Truth is always verbal, propositional, intellectual, and received by the understanding alone. Scripture knows no "personal truth" as distinguished from propositional truth. There are, of course, truths about persons, but those truths are always propositional. If someone wishes to describe those propositions as

“personal truth,” we can only point out that he is using the phrase in a way not intended by Martin Buber and his ilk.

John 19:35: “And he who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you may believe.” John, speaking of himself as an eyewitness of the crucifixion, describes his testimony, his written statements, as true. Furthermore, John knows that he is telling the truth. Notice that the truth is something that can be told. In the previous verse, truth is something that can be spoken. It is verbal; it can be understood and communicated from mind to mind. It can be possessed by many minds simultaneously. Because he knows the truth, John is not guessing, for he has been given knowledge by the Holy Spirit, who causes him to write these propositions. John tells the truth for a purpose: “so that you may believe” the truth. This statement contributes to the whole purpose of John’s Gospel, which is not, as Tozer asserted, to warn us against an imaginary error called evangelical rationalism, but, as John himself explained, “these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name” (John 20:31). John wants his readers to understand and believe the propositions he expresses. Here the apostle says that truths about Jesus are what we must believe in order to be saved, and he mentions three truths, three propositions, explicitly: Jesus is the Christ; Jesus is the Son of God; you have life in His name.

It is important to understand the relationship between propositions and belief, which is the sole instrument of our salvation. The object of belief is always a proposition. One cannot believe something that is not propositional, even if it is verbal. If I say “tree” without context, that is not an object of either understanding or belief. A picture or image is still less than an object of understanding or belief. The Bible is God’s Word, not His picture. It is the Word who was in the beginning, not the emotion or the icon. Scripture says “In the beginning was the *logos*.” It does not say, “In the beginning was the *pathos*.”

VI. THE LESSONS OF DANIEL

The fact that pictures and images *per se*, and even single words without context, express no truth may be seen very clearly in the first six chapters of the Book of Daniel. In chap. 2 Nebuchadnezzar’s dream is described:

And the King said to them, "I have had a dream, and my spirit is anxious to know the dream."

Then the Chaldeans spoke to the king in Aramaic, "O king, live forever. Tell your servants the dream, and we will give the interpretation."

Nebuchadnezzar replied, "My decision is firm. If you do not make known the dream to me, and its interpretation, you shall be cut in pieces, and your houses shall be made an ash heap. However, if you tell the dream and its interpretation, you shall receive from me gifts, rewards, and great honor. Therefore, tell me the dream and its interpretation."

To make a long story short, Daniel intervened with the captain of the guard in order to avoid being slaughtered with the rest of the wise men of Babylon, and prayed that God would reveal to him the dream and its meaning. God did so, and Daniel thanked Him:

Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, for wisdom and might are His....He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding. He reveals deep and secret things....You have given me wisdom and might, and have made known to me what we asked of You, for You have made known to us the king's demand.

Daniel proceeds to describe the image the king saw in his dream. The king did not understand the meaning of the image of gold, silver, bronze, iron, and clay. He assumed, because the dream recurred, but he did not know, that there was a meaning. Apparently a picture is not worth a thousand words. An image, a picture, is not true and not a truth. It is opaque to the understanding and requires an explanation in words and propositions. Only propositions can be true.

But there is more. In the king's first dream, there is not only a dumb image, but an event or series of events: A stone strikes the feet of the image, and the image crumbles. But the events are as opaque to the understanding as the image. Both image and event are non-verbal and non-propositional, and the king has no inkling as to what they mean, or even if they mean anything. Both the events and the images require explanation in words and propositions. Meaning and truth can be communicated

only in words, in propositions, which God revealed to Daniel to give to the king.¹² Only propositions can be true or false.

In chap. 5, another king, Belshazzar, sees the handwriting on the wall, and he does not understand it. The account of this vision advances our understanding of truth, for the vision now is not of a mere image or event, but of actual writing. And still the king does not understand: “Whoever reads this writing, and tells me its interpretation, shall be clothed with purple and have a chain of gold around his neck; and he shall be the third ruler of the kingdom.”

Once again Daniel is summoned, and he reads the writing: “*Mene, mene, tekel, upharsin.*” The single words are as opaque to Belshazzar and the others present at his feast as the dream image and events were to Nebuchadnezzar, and for the same reason: They are not propositional. As I said earlier, single words without context or explanation are neither true nor false. They are literally meaningless. But God tells Daniel the requisite propositions, and Daniel speaks those propositions to king Belshazzar:

This is the interpretation of each word. *Mene*: God has numbered your kingdom and finished it. *Tekel*: You have been weighed in the balances and found wanting. *Peres*: Your kingdom has been divided and given to the Medes and the Persians.

Daniel tells the king three truths, that is, three propositions. Now for the first time the king understands and knows. Earlier he had been very

¹² Some might object that gestures and “body language” can also convey meaning. But they cannot do so unless that meaning is first explained and understood in propositions. Then they might function as a sort of shorthand for understood propositions, just as single words do in context. Jesus’ captors knew what Judas’ kiss meant only because Judas had told them in propositions beforehand what it signified. The gesture of a kiss was a signal to indicate which man to arrest. In many cultures, it is understood beforehand that a kiss signifies love or affection. Like single words, gestures *per se* convey no truth. As for other gestures, besides a kiss, and “body-language,” they vary from culture to culture, and they receive meaning only by being explained in propositions. Americans traveling abroad are wise to inform themselves, in propositions, of the significance of certain gestures and postures in other cultures. In church, the actions of eating bread and drinking wine, *per se*, convey no meaning or truth. They are signs used to signify truths that can be expressed only in propositions. That is why the Lord’s Supper must never be observed without a sermon explaining it.

emotional; his knees were knocking together; and he was yelling and crying. None of this vivid experience, none of this emotion, gave him truth; the single words alone did not give him truth; the visible miracle of the hand writing on the wall did not give him truth; only the revealed propositions spoken by Daniel were intelligible and true. The first six chapters of Daniel give us invaluable lessons in epistemology and the doctrine of propositional revelation, but no commentator that I have read seems to grasp that point.

VII. MORE BIBLICAL PROPOSITIONS

Let us now return to verses that mention *true* and *truth* explicitly, beginning with the OT:

Genesis 42:16: “Send one of your number to get your brother; the rest of you will be kept in prison, so that your words may be tested to see if you are telling the truth” (NIV). The speaker, of course, is Joseph, king of Egypt, addressing his brothers. First, notice that truth is something that can be told; it can be expressed in words. Second, it is not single words spoken by his brothers that Joseph is testing, but statements, propositions, such as “Your servants are twelve brothers, the sons of one man in the land of Canaan; and in fact the youngest is with our father today, and one is no more.” The *New King James* reads: “Send one of you, and let him bring your brother; and you shall be kept in prison, that your words may be tested to see whether there is any truth in you....” Here the truth is in them, that is, in their minds, and testing those words is testing them. Their minds understand and express these propositions.

Deuteronomy 13:13-14: “Corrupt men have gone out from among you and enticed the inhabitants of their city, saying, ‘Let us go and serve other gods’—which you have not known—then you shall inquire, search out, and ask diligently. And if it is indeed true and certain that such an abomination was committed among you....” In this passage what is “true and certain” is the proposition: “an abomination was committed among you.” The same or a similar usage appears in Deut 14:4 and 22:2.

Ruth 3:12: “Now it is true that I am a close relative....” What is true is the proposition, here stated explicitly, “I am a close relative.”

Second Samuel 7:28: “And now, O Lord God, You are God, and Your words are true....” Here the Scripture explicitly says that “true” is a characteristic, attribute, or property of words, not single words, but the propositions that God reveals.

First Kings 10:6: “Then she [the Queen of Sheba] said to the king: ‘It was a true report which I heard in my own land about your words and your wisdom.’” Here the Queen describes as true a report about Solomon that she had received. Second Chronicles 9:5 echoes this statement. The report, of course, consists of propositions.

First Kings 17:24: “Then the woman said to Elijah, ‘Now by this I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is the truth.’” It is the spoken word of Elijah that is the truth. Elijah’s word is the Word of the Lord, and this doctrine that God speaks His truth through men to men in human words overthrows all theologies of revelation that say or imply that human language cannot express divine truth; that the finite cannot grasp the infinite; that God’s Word transcends human thought, conception, and language.

Psalm 19:9: “The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.” Here the *King James* uses the standard word that philosophers use for propositions: judgments. The Lord’s judgments are completely true.

Daniel 3:14: “Nebuchadnezzar spoke, saying to them, ‘Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the gold image which I have set up?’” Here the king asks the three Israelites if a certain proposition is true. That proposition is stated explicitly: “you do not serve my god or worship the gold image which I have set up.” Daniel 3:24 and 6:12 also refer to explicitly stated propositions which are described as true. Daniel 10:1 refers to an entire message, that is, many propositions, that is true.

Rather than further belaboring the point that Scripture uniformly teaches that truth is propositional, let us examine verses that seem to say truth is something else.

Deuteronomy 21:16: “Then it shall be, on the day he bequeaths his possessions to his sons, that he must not bestow firstborn status on the son of the loved wife in preference to the son of the unloved, the true firstborn.”

Luke 16:11: “Therefore, if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?”

John 1:9: “That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world.”

John 4:23: “But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth....”

John 6:32: “Then Jesus said to them, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, Moses did not give you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven.’”

In these verses, and there are many more, something other than words, statements, or propositions is described as true: true firstborn, true riches, true light, true worshipers, true bread. Don’t these verses prove that truth can be non-propositional? Not quite.

Up to this point we have been examining verses in which the words *true* and *truth* are used literally. Literally the words *true* and *truth* describe propositions, and propositions alone. But like many words, the words *true* and *truth* can also be used figuratively. In the verses quoted immediately above, and many others like them, the words *true* and *truth* are used figuratively. Augustine explained the figure in a rather quaint fashion: “True bread” means that the bread is addressing the eater and saying, “I am bread, and my claim to be bread is true.” “True riches” means that the riches are saying, “We are riches, and our claim to be riches is true.” And so with “true worshipers” and “true light.” These are all figurative uses of the word *true*, and they fail to show that the word *true* and the property *truth* properly and literally apply to anything except propositions.

There is, however, one more use of the word *truth* that is sure to come to everyone’s mind: It is Christ’s statement, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” Does not this statement contradict the claim that only propositions can be true, for Christ is surely not a proposition, and yet He says, “I am the truth”?

First, let me point out that there are many more verses than this one which describe God as truth:

Deuteronomy 32:4: “He is the Rock; His work is perfect, for all His ways are justice, a God of truth and without injustice; righteous and upright is He.”

Psalm 31:5: “Into your hands I commit my spirit; redeem me, O Lord, the God of truth.”

Isaiah 65:16: “So that he who blesses himself in the earth shall bless himself in the God of truth; and he who swears in the earth shall swear by the God of truth, because the former troubles are forgotten, and because they are hidden from my eyes.”

John 14:17: “...the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you.”

John 15:26: “But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me.”

John 16:13: “However, when He, the Spirit of Truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come.”

First John 5:6: “This is He who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not only by water, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who bears witness, because the Spirit is truth.”

In these verses not only is God the Father described as truth, but the Spirit is described as truth. In the verse we read first, Christ said He was the truth.

Now the reader must decide whether these expressions are literal or figurative. Further, if these statements are figurative, what do they mean literally? And if they are literal, do we not have many assertions in Scripture that truth is a property of persons, not just propositions, and that truth is personal, not propositional?

Commentators frequently, perhaps usually, take the view that in these verses the words *true* and *truth* are used figuratively, not literally. So when Christ says that He is the truth, He literally means that He is the source of all truth. And that is certainly true: Christ, the Holy Spirit, God is the source of all truth. But is that all Christ meant? If Christ were saying simply that He is the source of all truth, but not the truth itself, then the inescapable implication is that He is something other, something behind, the truth. And that returns us to the dark unknowable of the mystics, not merely unknowable to us, as Dionysius pointed out, but unknowable to Himself. If God is beyond predication, then He Himself cannot predicate anything about Himself, and cannot know what He is.

Therefore, we must say that when the Scripture describes God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit as truth, it is speaking literally. In his book, *The Johannine Logos*, Gordon Clark uses this insight to explain why the Apostle John uses the same Greek word, *logos*, to refer to both Christ and Scripture, specifically to the doctrines, the propositions, that Christ taught. There is no gap between the *logos* and His words, for His words are the Word. “My words are Spirit, and they are life.” It also explains why the Apostle Paul says, “We have the mind of Christ.” In the propositions of Scripture we have the very thoughts of God. Believing Jesus is believing His words. Believing in Jesus is believing His words. Christ

made this very clear in John 5:46-47: “For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me, for he wrote about Me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?” Believing Moses is believing his written propositions. Believing Jesus is believing His (at that time) spoken propositions. There is no non-propositional something behind the text that we must “get through to” or “sense.”

According to Scripture, truth is always and only propositional. There is nothing in Scripture that states or implies that truth is encounter, event, picture, image, or emotion. Passages that seem to imply that something other than propositions is truth turn out to be figurative uses of the word *truth*. If the Gospel is to be preserved and propagated, it can be preserved only within the framework of literal, propositional truth, for salvation is, in the words of the Apostle Paul, “to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:4).