

Looking for Truth in All the Wrong Places

Leann Williams May 4, 2025

Bruce and I have regular discussions these days about how to know what is true. As I listen to my clients, there is a vast difference in how individuals interpret current events. I have been thinking about the nature of truth. My heart directed me to Jesus' words, "I am the way, the truth, and the life."

Let's step back into the scene where Jesus makes these statements. Jesus is nearing the time when he will be arrested and eventually killed. Jesus is trying to prepare his disciples during their last meal together for what is coming. He tries to tell them he is going to die, he will be betrayed, he is leaving. They don't understand. John 14 records Jesus saying,

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me so that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going."

Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him."

Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us."

Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"

Here, in this text, the disciples, mostly good Jewish people, have been living with, learning from, and following Jesus for about three years. They have seen him perform miracles, have listened to his parables and preaching, and have seen him move among all sorts of people showing a different way to live. He has shown them how to love all kinds of people they would have considered not worth their time.

When Jesus said, "I am the way" a Jewish person of the time likely would have heard the concept of the Jewish word HALAKHA. The root word meant to go or to walk. It came to represent the way a faithful Jew would walk out their faith including the laws, traditions, and customs of the Jews. Rabbi Art Green explains Halakha is the way we walk out our faith. It's not an obligation, it's a relationship. The rabbi says, "As I act in faith, I feel the voice of God." Early followers of Jesus were called "The Way" signifying that following Jesus is a process, a journey of faith, a path of faithfulness. Quakers would call this "Gospel Order." Jesus is the true

embodiment of God's law in daily life even when, perhaps especially when, he did 'not follow the rules.'

Jesus shows us the way, prepares the way, provides a way to a meaningful life, to finding our purpose, to live out the values of God's kingdom. Jesus accompanies us on our way.

Then Jesus continues, "I am the truth." But what is truth and does it even matter?

The Bible is clear that the truth matters. In Psalm 15 David asks God, "Who may dwell in your sacred tent? Who may live on your holy mountain?" In other words, who gets to hang out with God? The message version states simply, "Walk straight, act right, tell the truth. Don't hurt your friend, don't blame your neighbor. Despise the despicable. Keep your word even when it hurts you. Make an honest living. Never take a bribe."

Psalm 52 describes a person who is a disgrace in the eyes of God. In the NIV it reads, "Why do you boast, you mighty hero? Why do you boast all day long? You practice deceit, your tongue plots destruction, it is like a sharpened razor. You love evil rather than good, falsehood rather than speaking the truth. You love every harmful word, you deceitful tongue." After pronouncing judgement, the psalmist concludes, "He trusted in his great wealth and grew strong by destroying others." This psalm was likely written about 1,000 years before Jesus walked the earth. Authoritarian leadership is an ancient problem.

So, telling the truth is important, but what is truth itself? Philosophers have debated that question since ancient times. There are three major streams of thought about truth.

The Correspondence theory states truth is what corresponds with reality. A statement is true if it accurately reflects the way things are in the world. Truth is a property of a statement. Here are some problems with the correspondence theory. Something can be factual without my knowledge or awareness of it. Two people can experience or witness the same thing and give two very different reports of what they saw or understood. Take current events as an example. What is reported as truth is vastly different depending on who is reporting. What we once knew as fact such as "the earth is the center of the universe" becomes untrue when new knowledge emerges. So, the Correspondence theory is a problem if you are trying to get to the truth.

The Coherence theory of truth states that truth is a proposition or belief within a system that logically fits together. If your statement fits with the accepted beliefs of the system, does not contradict other beliefs, and makes sense, it is true. The problem here is that two totally different systems of belief can exist that are in complete disagreement as to what is true. Some would argue that there is only one system of absolute truth. I can believe in absolute truth. I just don't believe humans are able or trustworthy to know it.

The Pragmatic theory of truth says whatever is useful to you, or beneficial for you, is true. Truth is a quality the value of which is confirmed by its effectiveness. The problem here is that what works for one person may not be for another.

If the philosophers don't seem to be able to help us understand what truth is, maybe we are looking for truth in the wrong places. Jesus did not say I have the truth, but I AM the truth.

If we look at definitions of the word "TRUE" we come to a different stream of ideas. "True" can mean accurate or exact. It can also mean correctly positioned or aligned, balanced, upright or level. Or "true" can mean loyal or faithful as in a true friend. These definitions move into a way of being.

In his book *To Know as We Are Known*, Parker Palmer encourages us to think of truth NOT as an object to own, statements and systems of belief, but as a way of being. He explains that our English word "truth" came from the word TROTH. It was a word that meant a promise or pledge of loyalty. It was used in wedding ceremonies. The bride and groom would say, "I pledge thee my troth." They were betrothed. The word troth became our word truth.

In the book *The Courage to Teach* Palmer defines truth with these words:

"Truth is an eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline. Truth is the process of inquiry and dialogue itself, that keeps testing old conclusions and coming up with new ones. It is a commitment to the conversation."

This definition fits exactly as I see Jesus by his words and action calling into question the beliefs and practices of his times.

Quakers have understood that we come closer to the truth (what we should do, how we should respond, what we should value) when we discern together. We each have a piece of truth, an understanding that is unique to our experience, that when fit together with others creates an understanding that can be measured against our core values, our testimonies to determine the right course of action. Those values are simplicity, peace, integrity, community, equality, and stewardship.

In 1 John 4:8 John tells us that God is love. In John chapter 1 Jesus is described as "full of grace and truth". I don't think "full of truth" to John meant Jesus was full of words accurately reporting verified realities, nor do I think Jesus was full of statements and propositions that fit within a system of belief. I think Jesus is full of truth that exemplifies ways to align ourselves to God and one another in faithfulness and a commitment to God who is love.

Jesus is the way showing us what a journey of faithfulness to God's values looks like. Jesus is the truth, a true way to align ourselves to God's love and grace. Finally, Jesus states he is the life. Most interpreters of this passage emphasize the exclusivity of Jesus being the only way to access God, the one and only true God, and the only way to achieve eternal life. I am not opposing that interpretation of this passage. But, as I put myself in the text, imagine myself there, I see another way to view Jesus' statement, "I am the life."

In the upper room Jesus is acutely aware that his betrayal, arrest, trial and death will all be taking place very soon. He has been trying to prepare his followers for the upcoming events. He says, “Don’t let your hearts be troubled.” The book of Matthew records that shortly after their time together in the upper room, Jesus and his followers went to a garden where he prayed as he was overwhelmed with sorrow. This is a time of deep confusion, apprehension, and fear.

Life under the Roman occupation had been hard for all the Jews. The system of domination where the Romans demanded taxes and unquestioned obedience to their cruel requirements of service to the empire was dehumanizing. Jesus offered an alternative way to live within an oppressive regime that was not violent returning evil for evil nor passive cooperation. Jesus taught his followers to respond to the laws in ways that exposed their lack of justice and abuse of power.

Ultimately, Jesus’ betrayal, trial, execution, and death expose the oppressive systems of Roman government and the failures of the Jewish religious system. The most advanced political system of the time, the Roman Empire, and the most developed religious system of the time, the Jewish sacrificial system ultimately led to Jesus’ death. I believe that one of the reasons Jesus died was to give us an example that human systems that rely on domination and fail to acknowledge the sacredness of every life will eventually lead to death.

Perhaps Jesus declaring, “I am the life” is a foreshadowing of his giving his life to liberate us from the oppression of sin, and the foolishness of trying to live a life independently of God.

Our times are troubling. It’s often hard to discern the correct responses to life events. Jesus gives us an example of how to live in a world where power and wealth are valued above the dignity and the inherent value of every person. As we live in faithfulness to the way of Jesus, we continue to question and challenge the false perceptions of truth as Jesus did, and trust that the life Jesus gave for us can provide liberation from our sins and those of the world around us.

May the way, the truth, the life and grace of Jesus guide each of us on our path today.