

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine God's communicable attributes. Dr. Spencer, we finished with God's wisdom last time, so are we moving on to the next attribute examined by Wayne Grudem in his *Systematic Theology*?

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we are. The next attribute he examines is God's truthfulness.¹ Which immediately brings to mind Jesus' statement in John 14:6 that "I am the way, and the truth, and the life."²

Marc Roby: It also brings to mind Pilate's famous question, "What is truth?" (John 18:38)

Dr. Spencer: You had to bring that up, didn't you?

Marc Roby: Well, it is a question that is extremely relevant in this day and age.

Dr. Spencer: I have to admit that. In a 2001 poll, Barna found that only 22% of Americans believed in absolute truth.³ Then, in a 2016 poll, he found that only 59% of professing Christians believed that moral truth is absolute and that only 15% of people listing no religion thought so.⁴ These results seem inconsistent to me, and there are others out there that vary widely too, but all of them show a very disturbing pattern that many, if not most, people in the United States reject the idea of absolute truth, at least with respect to morality. So, it is certainly well worth taking some time to discuss what truth is.

Marc Roby: I agree. So, how would you define truth?

Dr. Spencer: As with many questions there is a short answer and there is a very long answer. Let me begin with brief summary of the very long answer. But first, let me preface my comments with a disclaimer. I'm not going to try and give a detailed, exhaustive or precise presentation, I'm just going to give the general flavor of the arguments because it will lead us to an important conclusion.

Marc Roby: OK, your disclaimer is duly noted.

Dr. Spencer: The question of how we define truth is, not surprisingly, one that philosophers have spent a considerable amount of time on. There are three major theories I'd like to look at. The correspondence theory of truth, the coherence theory of truth and the pragmatic theory of truth. There is significant overlap among them as we will see, but virtually all other theories boil down to some version or combination of these three. Now, when I say that I have to add that I am simply ignoring so-called theories of truth that deny the existence of absolute truth.

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 195

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³ See http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr_poll5.htm

⁴ See <https://www.barna.com/research/the-end-of-absolutes-americas-new-moral-code/>

Marc Roby: You mean like the idea that all truth is relative?

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. All the postmodern ideas that deny the existence of absolute truth are complete failures of human reasoning. Let me quote from *The Great Ideas*, which is a summary analysis of the great books of the western world. It summarizes the arguments against any view that is skeptical about the existence of real truth claims. It says that “Across the centuries the arguments against the skeptic seem to be the same. If the skeptic does not mind contradicting himself when he tries to defend the truth of the proposition that all propositions are equally true or false, he can perhaps be challenged by the fact that he does not act according to his view. If all opinions are equally true or false, then why, Aristotle asks, does not the denier of truth walk ‘into a well or over a precipice’ instead of avoiding such things.”⁵

Marc Roby: That’s a great quote. I think it is extremely important to point out that the idea that there is no such thing as absolute truth is self-contradictory and, frankly, silly.

Dr. Spencer: It certainly is. If there is no such thing as absolute truth, then that statement itself is also not an absolute truth, which means that absolute truth *can* exist. Or, as the Great Ideas put it, if someone says that all propositions are equally true or false, then that proposition itself is also equally true or false, which negates it.

That is why I’m not going to spend any time dealing with these postmodern ideas. And it is also why I find the poll results I noted at the beginning so disturbing; our educational system has failed in a massive way if a majority, or even a large percentage, of people in this country do not believe in absolute truth. As I noted before, that is a complete failure of human reasoning, it is irrationality.

Marc Roby: Very well, let’s get back then to the correspondence, coherence and pragmatic theories that you mentioned. Can you give a brief synopsis of these three?

Dr. Spencer: Certainly. The pragmatic theory of truth simply says that whatever works is true. But that obviously begs the question of what you mean by saying that something works.

Marc Roby: It seems to me that it would be incredibly difficult, if not impossible, to give a completely general description of what you mean by saying that something works.

Dr. Spencer: I agree. And, in fact, that idea can lead you far astray. For example, if I were to define what works by saying that a given statement is true if it gets me out of some difficult situation, then I’m in serious trouble in terms of defining truth, because a lie will often work to get me out of some difficult situation. Therefore, I would be saying that a lie is true.

Marc Roby: That is, unfortunately, true.

Dr. Spencer: Nice pun. In one sense the pragmatic theory is the least important of the three precisely because it is difficult to define what you mean by saying that something works. On the

⁵ *The Great Ideas*, A Syntopicon of Great Books of the Western World, Vol. II, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1952, pg. 915

other hand, both the coherence and correspondence theories could be thought of as versions of the pragmatic theory with specific definitions for what it means for something to work. So, if I look at it that way, I could say that the pragmatic theory is the *only* theory of truth.

Marc Roby: OK, so what are these other two theories then?

Dr. Spencer: According the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, the coherence theory says the truth of a given proposition “consists in its coherence with some specified set of propositions.”⁶ Of course, that leaves us with the problem of defining this set of propositions, or statements. But, at the very least, we can certainly say that whatever set of propositions we consider to be true the statements should all be consistent, or coherent, with one other.

Now I must say that I don’t see how this theory can stand by itself. You need to say what the “specified set of propositions” is, and there is no guidance provided by this theory as to how you guarantee those propositions are true. You can imagine concocting a set of propositions that are entirely self-consistent, that is, coherent, and yet are false.

Marc Roby: In other words, that theory is missing any notion that our ideas have to, at least in some way, correspond to the physical world.

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. And that leads us to the correspondence theory of truth; which says that whatever corresponds to reality is true. Personally, I think that at the end of the day a good definition of truth has to have a combination of correspondence and coherence. Certainly, any statement we make that can be tested must correspond to reality to be called true, but it also seems that all of the statements you believe to be true must be consistent, in other words, they must cohere.

To give a couple of examples, if I tell you that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, you can easily test to see whether or not what I have said is true. But, if I tell you that murder is wrong, how do you check to see if that corresponds to reality?

Marc Roby: I don’t think there is any observation or test I could make to answer that question.

Dr. Spencer: I don’t think there is. But I am quite confident that it is true that murder is wrong. And, as a Christian, I would defend that statement by saying that God tells us it is wrong.

Marc Roby: But that statement obviously begs the question of how you can know that God exists and that he tells the truth.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it does. In previous sessions we have discussed the fact that the Bible claims to be the infallible word of God. And we have given a large amount of extra-biblical evidence to corroborate that claim. We have also shown in other ways that the biblical worldview is coherent and corresponds to reality. In fact, I would say that the biblical worldview is the *only* worldview that is completely consistent and in accord with reality. But let’s put off that discussion for another time.

⁶ See <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/truth-coherence/>

Marc Roby: That sounds reasonable, we could obviously spend far more time than we want to right now discussing that.

Dr. Spencer: We certainly could. The study of how we know what we know and how we can determine if our beliefs are rationally justified is called epistemology. It is a very important field and we will get into it in more detail in a later session. But the question Pilate asked, “What is truth?” is often used to avoid a meaningful discussion. In fact, in one sense the question is a waste of time.

Marc Roby: Now hold on a minute, you just offended the philosophers in our audience. How can you make such a statement?

Dr. Spencer: I first said that such inquiries are very important, so hopefully the philosophers will forgive me. But when I said that the question is, in one sense, a waste of time, what I meant is very easily illustrated.

Suppose someone throws a rock through my living-room window and I run outside and find a five-year-old boy in the front yard playing with rocks. If I ask him, “Did you throw the rock that just came through my window?” Do you think he knows the difference between telling me the truth or a lie?

Marc Roby: Well, any normal five-year-old certainly would.

Dr. Spencer: And that is precisely my point. On a very practical day-to-day level we all understand what truth is. It is that which corresponds to reality. If he had, in fact, thrown the rock that went through my window he and I both understand it would be a lie for him to say he had not done so. And we also both know that he would be telling the truth if he admitted that he had done so. Now, we must grant that it can be far more difficult to deal with the meaning of truth when we get to some other topics, but most of the time it is obvious.

Marc Roby: I see your point. And so I assume this is also the short answer to the question that you noted at the start; that the truth is that which corresponds to reality.

Dr. Spencer: That is the short answer, yes.

Marc Roby: Have you said all that you want to for now in response to the question, “What is truth?”

Dr. Spencer: Not quite. There is an incredibly important related point to discuss here, and that is the subject of worldview. I used that word a minute ago without definition because most people have a reasonable idea of what it means, but I think Phil Johnson, who is a retired law professor from UC Berkeley, gives a wonderful definition. In his forward to Nancy Pearcey’s book *Total Truth* he wrote that “Understanding worldview is a bit like trying to see the lens of one’s own eye. We do not ordinarily see our own worldview, but we see everything else by looking through

it. Put simply, our worldview is the window by which we view the world, and decide, often subconsciously, what is real and important, or unreal and unimportant.”⁷

Marc Roby: That is a great definition, and it explains why our worldview is so important, it affects everything we think.

Dr. Spencer: And because our worldview has such a pervasive influence on what we believe to be true, it is an important thing to examine. We should ask ourselves whether or not our worldview itself is true! Phil Johnson said it is a bit like the lens of our eye, and we know that if the lens is bad, our vision will be bad. We will not see things correctly.

Marc Roby: It seems as though our worldview is something which is formed mostly unconsciously though, so how could we examine it?

Dr. Spencer: We can test whether or not some of the fundamental tenets of our worldview are true or not.

Marc Roby: And so, we get back to the definition of truth.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we do.

Marc Roby: Can you give me an example of how we can test our worldview?

Dr. Spencer: I'd love to. Suppose, for example, that I am convinced that there is no God. In other words, my worldview is an atheistic worldview, matter and energy and the laws of physics are all that exist. If that worldview is true, then there are certain conclusions that simply *must* be true.

Marc Roby: Such as?

Dr. Spencer: Such as the conclusion that there cannot be any such thing as a moral absolute.

Marc Roby: Why do you say that?

Dr. Spencer: Because the laws of physics certainly do not contain any moral commands, they simply specify how matter and energy can interact. Moral laws require authority. If you tell me that I'm not allowed to take my neighbor's car for example, I can ask, "Who says I can't take my neighbor's car?"

Marc Roby: I assume that your neighbor, for one, wouldn't like it very much.

Dr. Spencer: I'm sure that's true, but suppose I'm much stronger than my neighbor and I take it anyway. Who is to say that is wrong? Obviously, our society has laws that say it is wrong, but why should I obey those laws?

Marc Roby: Well, because you'll end up in jail if you don't.

⁷ Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth; Liberating Christianity from its Cultural Captivity*, Crossway Books, 2004, pg. 11

Dr. Spencer: And that makes my point nicely. The ultimate test of a moral law is whether or not someone has authority to enforce it. So, ultimately, without authority, there is no moral law. But, without God, the only authority that exists is raw human power. Either the power of an individual, or the power of some group.

Crudely speaking, our government is founded on the principle that the majority should decide the laws. So, the authority of the government is actually the authority of the majority, which is based, ultimately, on the power of the majority. But there is no moral law that says majority rule is right and a dictatorship is wrong for example. So, if I am an atheist, I cannot say that a dictatorship is immoral. I can say that I don't like it, but I cannot be logically consistent and say that it is morally wrong. And now, let me take this argument to the final step. If I am an atheist, I am being logically inconsistent, in other words irrational, if I claim that what Hitler did in the holocaust was morally wrong.

Marc Roby: I'm sure that statement will raise a few hackles.

Dr. Spencer: I hope it does, because my point is to try and shock people into thinking carefully. If you don't believe in God, you cannot rationally believe in moral absolutes. The conclusion is that morality is defined by whoever has the power to enforce the rules.

Marc Roby: In other words, might does make right.

Dr. Spencer: If you're going to be a logically consistent atheist, yes, you have to say that. You can certainly say that *you* don't like what Hitler did, and *you* think it was wrong and, by the way, I would certainly agree with you. But, if there were no God, Hitler, if he were still around to answer for himself, could simply say, "Who are you to tell me what is right or wrong?"

Marc Roby: Of course, World War II sort of answered that question. The ones who were telling Hitler what he was doing was wrong were the ones who defeated his armies and removed him from power.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. In other words, it is another example of might makes right in a human sense. But Hitler died and then he faced the only perfect judge of all men and received his final, eternal judgment.

Marc Roby: That is a sobering thought. You said at the beginning that discussing the meaning of truth would lead us to an important conclusion. Can you state that conclusion now?

Dr. Spencer: Yes, I can. The important conclusion is that at the end of the day truth really *does* depend on power because it depends on authority. The word authority comes, of course, from the word author, which means the person who creates something. We give the word authority a broader meaning based on power. For example, one dictionary I looked in says that authority is the power to give orders or make decisions. But, the greatest authority comes from being the one who creates something. If I author a book, I can make it say whatever I want it to say. And God is the author of the universe. He created it to be exactly the way he wanted it to be. And he sustains it and governs it to continue to be exactly the way he wants it to be. So, he has ultimate

authority and, in a very real sense, he *is* truth. Whatever God thinks is true, *is* true because he has the power to make it be true.

Marc Roby: And so we get right back to John 14:6, which you quoted at the beginning, Jesus saying, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.”

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. Truth, in the ultimate sense, is not a property of a statement, it is a person. It is God.

Marc Roby: That seems like a great place to end, so let me remind our listeners that they can email their questions or comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We look forward to hearing from you.