

On Truth

Dr. Stan Fleming

Introduction:

I remember sitting outside as a little boy on the steps of our front porch. It was a warm day and I was in the shade. A tiny flying creature buzzed around and landed on my thumb. I was fascinated by this beautiful yellow and black furry insect. I brought my thumb closer to my face to examine this marvel. “Why not pet this small creature,” I thought! Yet, as I put my finger lightly on its back to pet it, it pushed a thin black needle-like object into my thumb. I cried in pain and ran to my mother as the honey bee flew away, leaving its poisonous stinger in me. I felt betrayed. My first “why-did-that-happen-to-me?” experience was mild compared to the experience of others, who through no fault of their own suffer grave injustices and pain. Yet, I was not mature enough to contrast my tiny misfortune to the grief of others. I learned one aspect of truth that day – don’t pet small, beautiful, insects. Yet, deep inside, the experience forced other questions as well. Consider the question: what is truth?

Abraham Lincoln once asked, “How many legs does a dog have if you call the tail a leg?” His answer: “Four; calling a tail a leg doesn’t make it a leg.” Lincoln was a pragmatic politician and not a philosopher, but his witty statement reveals one of the definitions of truth: Truth means the real state of things, agreement with fact, or conformity to actuality. The word *truth* is a noun, a thing, as compared to the word *truthful*, an adjective, which would deal more with ideas of honesty and sincerity. At some level, truth is important to everyone. Yet, if it were easy to grasp, we wouldn’t be discussing it.

Philosophy, religion, science, art, government, social justice, education, media, and other great institutions of people have formed their ideas about truth upon which they build their institutions. Exploring the depth, width, breadth, and height of truth is a course not easily charted, and the task is beyond the limitations of a paper this size. Yet, for my part I want to add a few thoughts regarding the gradual awareness that occurs in the lives of individuals about the idea of truth. This comes through the stages or modes of experience, wonder, and purpose. I contend that it is in one’s approach to the acquisition of truth that spiritual illumination is attained or not. This impacts worldview and, thus, the world, because ideas have consequences. Let’s begin by briefly considering the stages or modes.

Three Stages or Modes:

First: Experience - Experience is the state of being affected from without. It precedes wonder and purpose. Some truth is learned on an experiential level. Have you ever been burned by fire? The pain of that experience taught you a certain amount of truth: Be careful with fire!

People are born into life and are immediately pre-occupied with the challenges of their existence. The day-to-day pressures of physical survival and the changes of growth, not only physically but mentally and emotionally, in a competitive and sometimes harsh environment delay them in their pondering of the great philosophical questions of life. They exist; they are aware; that is what is of initial importance. Truth during this season of life is simply the discovery by the individual of the conditions of existence – the real state of things. Learning comes through experience. The testing of abilities and limitations of self and that of others (i.e. parents) increases knowledge. This is the truth of the child.

Second: Wonder - Wonder is curiosity, amazement aroused by something extraordinary. It is the question mark of life. It exposes a different layer of truth than mere experience does because wonder looks beyond experience to the question– why? Do you remember thinking, “That is amazing; how did it happen” or “what is life all about?” That is wonder.

Wondering about existence and the universe happens to all people. It emerges in childhood and reoccurs throughout our lives. How we learn to associate with wonder, how we inquire, and the conclusions we draw from these inquiries will either enhance or limit our illumination! Socrates said: “Wisdom begins in wonder.” Thus, if we want to be wise, we must ask questions and continue on that path until wisdom is achieved. It is in the stage of wonder that the great philosophical questions about life emerge, questions like (1) where did I come from, (2) why am I here, and (3) where am I going?

Third: Purpose - Purpose is function, intention, and something to be aimed for. It answers “why - why do we exist?” The proper acquisition of truth derived from our wonder can illuminate us to the nobler, spiritual reasons about purpose for life. This wisdom shapes our character, moral fiber, view of God and responsibility towards people.

Purpose or lack of it is perceived at different levels. For instance, some may say they only find purpose in their work or their family. This is what makes them feel significant or gives them value. Though this may be valid, it only partially answers “why they are here?” and does not answer “where did they come from?” or “where are they going?” It is incomplete, and if work or family is removed, no perceived purpose or value remains. Some think life has no ultimate purpose and become apathetic, even committing suicide or wasting their lives, thinking that nothing really matters. It should also be noted that wrong conclusions about one’s purpose can be detrimental to society. For example, a suicide bomber’s delusion gives him or her untrue perspective of God and purpose; this ultimately harms others.

The Acquisition of Truth:

Once as a little boy, I lay on the grass looking up at the sky for a long time. Clouds rolled across the blue depth above and my dog, Victor, kept licking my face and blocking my view. I would pet him and then push him away to look again. “The universe goes on forever,” someone had said. Wonder was in my heart. “Can it be true?” I thought. “Is there no wall, no barrier, or no end?” “If there were a wall, what would be beyond it?” Infinity was beyond the grasp of my small mind. I could feel the grass I lay on and my dog, but the universe was a mystery. Though I did not answer the question about the size of the universe on that day, I did recognize one thing; there were large questions in my life that needed to be answered. Many people have had similar thoughts.

As I see it, truth is acquired through the steps of recognition, commitment, openness, and acceptance. The day that I looked up at the sky I first recognized the large question – does it go on forever? Eventually, I sought out answers and finally accepted the one that made the most sense.

Here are my steps of the acquisition of truth: (1) Recognition that there are questions to be answered; (2) Commitment to finding the answers to the best of one’s ability, (3) Openness to any and all ideas that may answer the questions; and (4) Acceptance of the right answers. All of this can be summed up in the idea of going on a quest for the truth and finding it.

Please note that I fully acknowledge that some of the large questions of life seem to end with the conclusion: “It is a mystery”. Yet, the revelation that something is a mystery can be an answer in itself. Our brains only weigh about 3.5 lbs. That is not a lot of reasoning power in relationship to the entire universe. The idea that we can reason well enough to learn everything is not practical. At some level faith enters into the picture. Scientific or philosophical empirical data based on observation can only bring one so far in investigation and inquiry. At whatever moment fact ends and assumption begins, that is a point of faith. Faith has been defined as a combination of belief and trust in someone or something. Those things that we call mysteries often lead people to consider ideas about faith and thus ideas about God.

Here is a question to explore: Are we only mind and body? Some think so; they think that there is no spirit that exists. Today, there is a line of reasoning that believes there is no Eternal Creator God, the universe and earth were formed by chance, life also came by chance, and when we die we cease to exist. However, there are many objections to this belief such as intelligent design theories, the existence of morals, premonition, shared dreams, and fulfilled prophecies. Also, clinically documented experiences of dead patients being revived, reporting about an afterlife, support the notion that we are not just mind and body; there is spirit and life after death. Consider three of these.

First, intelligent design theories say that the universe and life are too complex to have happened by chance. The nineteenth century Anglican clergyman, William Paley, argued that if a man found a stone in the field he may say that it had always existed. Yet, if the man found a watch, he would know by its intricate components that it had an intelligent designer. “So it is”, Paley argued, “with Creation itself.”

Second, the idea that some people are cruel while others express kindness impacted me when I was young. When I was about eight-years old, a teen-age bully hit me in the head with a baseball bat, not because of anything wrong I had done, but simply because he wanted to see how hard he could hit me.

Fortunately, I have a hard head. This evil done to me could be contrasted to the goodness of a school mate's kind mother. At the boy's birthday party, each child was supposed to win a prize at one of the games, but somehow I got overlooked and did not win a prize. I felt terrible as I walked home alone without a prize. However, later in the day, the boy's mother came to our house with a present for me – a brand new squirt gun! Suddenly, life was good! Deep in my heart I was grateful for a prize that I had not really won. My point in sharing these experiences is this. There is an idea in us about universal moralistic standards of right and wrong; these suggest that there is a judgment of everyone's life by which we live.

Third, unexplainable experiences lead people to believe in the existence of spirit and afterlife. For instance, I had a shared-dream experience when I was a teenager that made me wonder. In those days, I fancied myself somewhat as an agnostic. Only a few times did my family attend church when I was a boy, and I had been indoctrinated in atheistic / evolutionary teachings in the public school. The incident of the dream was unexpected. My best friend Phil and I had the same dream. In the dream we were conversing about whether any type of birds could have four legs. I pointed to one on a perch and said, "See, they can have four legs." When I awoke I did not remember the dream, but a couple of weeks later, I was walking with my friend when I recalled our conversation about the birds. For some reason at that moment, I did not remember that it had occurred in a dream; I thought of it as real conversation. So I said to Phil in a rather sarcastic manner, "I told you that birds can have four legs." At that moment, he stopped walking and stared at me with shock in his eyes; he remembered having the dream. As I looked in his eyes, I suddenly recognized that it happened in a dream. He yelled, "Were you there in my dream?" We were both quite shocked and talked about the experience for days. Wonder and question emerged. Though I cannot prove it, I believe now that our spirits somehow met together as we both slept.

In my life, various experiences and a deep desire to know truth led me to research ancient and modern philosophy, science, the occult, and world religions. I questioned reality and existence to the borders of my reason and even the borders of insanity. Fortunately, I survived. Experiences produced wonder. Inquiry took me through all the steps of acquisition which ultimately gave me foundational purpose in life. I finally accepted that there is a God who created the universe and people; He is the Lord Jesus Christ! Though much of this is still a mystery, I now have a greater understanding of God's purposes with regard to people, and this ultimately has given me perspective on where we came from, why we are here, and where we are going.

The State of Truth:

If truth, according to the definition, is the real state of things, then something can be completely true, partially true, or not true. In the example of a formula we might assign complete truth to "A". If "A" and only "A" is completely true, then "A+B" is partially true, and "B+C" is not true at all. This is an oversimplification. Yet, my point is that what people believe and build their lives upon may be true, partially true, or not true at all. Ideas have consequences; hence, generations can possibly be influenced by "A+B" and "B+C" (partial or no truth). Now, let us consider this in light of spiritual illumination.

Spiritual Illumination:

There is no "A+B" (partially true) when it comes to the existence of an Eternal Creator God; He either exists or He does not. The atheist says there is no God. If the atheist is correct then experience, wonder, and purpose are superfluous, even as Jean Paul Sartre thought. In some sense, it might be argued that if there is no Eternal Creator God then life becomes a lie, every breath of hope, every movement of faith, or every thought of love. It is true that individual atheists can have ethical standards, but the passion to support morality, justice, high ideals, or plan for future generations becomes tentative at best. Why care if there is no real lasting purpose?

Christians would certainly have a dilemma if there were no God and no afterlife. We believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and a future resurrection for all. The apostle Paul argued that if the resurrection were not true then our "faith is futile" (1st Cr. 15:16-17).

However, since there is no one who can disprove the existence of an Eternal Creator God, and since there are reasons to believe that He does exist, and furthermore, since it could be argued that there

are benefits to the individual and society in believing this, it becomes quite practical to accept that He does exist and that He is interested in how we live our lives. This is part of spiritual illumination! The process of spiritual illumination opens up the spirit to believe that there is a high moral purpose for life and that each one has responsibility towards God and other people.

As people live their lives, there are moments of wonder that beg them to acquire truth. These moments of wonder can be at times almost ordinary but at other times extraordinary. For me the wonder of looking up into infinity or having the shared dream with my friend was extraordinary. So was falling in love with my wife, watching our children being born, etc. Even watching someone die can bring wonder. These significant moments are not easily ignored, but if the recipient of these wonderful moments does not seek to go deeper, to acquire the truth behind this sense of wonder, then the opportunity to examine these things from a perspective of wonder passes. Behavior patterns are formed. People who consistently refuse to consider the larger questions of life hinder the opportunity for spiritual illumination. This would even include those who are influenced by religion and ritual but who never seek to acquire truth on their own. Thus, their approach or lack of it to acquire the truth by exploring the larger questions, spurred on by moments of wonder, shape whether they will attain spiritual illumination or not.

Jesus Christ actually said that He came into the world “to bear witness to the truth” (John 18:37), and referred to Himself as “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). Of course, there are many religions in the world that claim paths to spiritual illumination, and possibly all of them have some truth and morality. Certainly, all religions have problems as well, including Christianity. Yet, for Christians it is not so much about religion as it is about a personal, loving relationship with Jesus Christ who claims to be the truth. Consider some of the significant historical religious leaders: Buddha tried to seek an answer to why people suffer; Confucius tried to restore moral standards to China, and Muhammad promoted himself as a prophet above all others. Yet, none but Jesus Christ claimed to be the Son of God, gave His life for others, and then proved what He said by rising from the dead. This is the great truth which spawns hope. The celebration of His resurrection is at the heart of Christianity because it gives hope to millions of people that there is a future life after this one, and that God is concerned about how we live and what we believe. Indeed, the bible says that God desires “truth in the inward parts” (Psalm 51:6).

The authentic Christian believes that God is interested in having a personal spiritual relationship, like a father to a son or a daughter. This deep conviction impacts the Christian’s thinking and life choices, and when enough people have this common worldview it transforms societies. For example, the earliest Christians did not conquer the Greco-Roman Empire by physical swords and spears; they changed society through a deep, passionate love for the Lord Jesus Christ and their fellow man. One aspect of their love for Jesus was the high moral conduct of Christians; this contrasted starkly against the debauchery of the Greco-Roman religious system of temple prostitutes, money-making schemes, and idolatry. Early Christianity’s idea of truth changed the lives of individuals and even the Greco-Roman Empire! The truth of it can still change lives today!

Conclusion

The subject of truth is simple yet complex. In this paper, I have considered the stages or modes of experience, wonder, and purpose, and how one’s approach to acquire truth impacts spiritual illumination. At some level, truth is important to all people. In closing, here is an amazing thought: If all people in all places began speaking nothing but the truth and seeking nothing but the truth, the world would change instantly and forever.

Dr. Stan Fleming