

The Church: Guardian of the Truth (Part 1)

How important is truth? It seemed that after the tragedy of September 11th, America had rediscovered the existence of absolute right and wrong and thus absolute truth. But it now seems that as the remains of the World Trade Center have been gathered up and trucked out of Manhattan, so has this newfound understanding been removed from the mind of many Americans. The mantra that “Truth is relative” or “That is truth for you, but not for me” echoes in our ears. Truth is again declared to be a human construct, based upon personal or corporate opinion rather than as an absolute that exists apart from the mind of man. This type of thinking will ultimately lead to the utter devaluation of all truth and would answer our initial question that truth is only important as long as I find it useful. It is a tool to be used and discarded as the occasion demands. But is this the correct answer? Fortunately for us there is another answer not grounded in the shifting opinions of man, but in the ultimate source of truth himself, namely the Lord God Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. He has graciously provided a depository of objective truth in His revealed word, the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament. We must turn to Him and this revelation to find the correct answer to our question.

Scripture records that our understanding of truth must begin with God himself. He is not only the author of truth, “*Thy word is truth*,” (John 17:17) but He is truth personified (John 14:6). The late Professor Louis Berkhof wrote the following as he was considering the Scriptural terms for truth and their application to God:

“When God is called the truth, this is to be understood in its most comprehensive sense. He is the truth first of all in a metaphysical sense, that is, in Him the idea of the Godhead is perfectly realized; He is all that He as God should be, and as such is distinguished from all so-called gods, which are called vanity and lies, Ps. 96:5; 97:7; 115:4-8; Isa. 44:9,10. He is also the truth in an *ethical* sense, and as such reveals Himself as He really is, so that His revelation is absolutely reliable. Num. 23:19; Rom. 3:4; Heb. 6:18. Finally, He is also the truth in a *logical* sense, and in virtue of this He knows things as they really are, and has so constituted the mind of man that the latter can know, not merely the appearance, but also the reality, of things. Thus the truth of God is the foundation of all knowledge.”¹

Because this is so:

“He is the source of all truth, not only in the sphere of morals and religion, but also in every field of scientific endeavor.”²

Truth is not only important to God, but it is important and indeed essential to us. Our salvation is founded upon the veracity of the Gospel proclaimed to us. Not in vain does the Heidelberg Catechism answer the question “What is true faith?” with “It is not only a certain knowledge, whereby I hold for truth all that God has revealed to us in his word, but also a hearty trust...”³ Furthermore, not only our eternal destiny, but even our daily lives here on earth are dependent upon truth. Consider for a moment the importance of truth in the areas of applied science (technology); social interactions (family, church and state); business (especially in light of the recent corporate scandals and the cry for truthfulness in reporting); etc. Even if many deny truth’s importance, much of life is based upon the firm foundation of truth.

¹ Berkhof’s *Systematic Theology*, pg. 69

² Berkhof, 69

³ Heidelberg Catechism, question #21

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Who had God called to be Guardians of Truth?

Since God's revelation is truth and man's very existence and life are contingent upon truth, another question must be raised at this point. Since truth is critically important, into whose hands has God entrusted the protection and promotion of truth? But before we attempt to answer this question, it is necessary to understand what is entailed in this responsibility. The guarding of the truth can be viewed from two different angles or aspects. The first is positive, the proclamation or promotion of the truth. The second is negative, the confronting and overturning of error. But that is not all. As the title of Richard Weaver's book Ideas Have Consequences suggests, what we hold as truth not only affects our thinking but our very lives. So each of the above mentioned aspects must include both a knowledge or cognitive sense but also a practical, applicatory sense. We must not only know and proclaim the truth, but we must also apply the truth to our own and our listener's lives. We must not only confront erroneous thinking, but we must also confront the evil fruit that such thinking produces. Our preaching, teaching, exhortation, counseling, apologetics; whatever the Lord calls us to do in regards to the truth must include the focus on both word and deed, doctrine and praxis.

With this in mind, let us attempt to answer our second question, namely to whom has God entrusted the protection and promotion of truth? It is our contention based upon Scripture that the primary agent to whom God has entrusted the vital task of guarding the truth is the covenant people of God, or the visible, corporate church. To support this thesis our overall approach will be to: First, survey the Scriptures of both the Old and New Testament to establish its biblical basis. Next, we will briefly survey church history, paying particular attention to how the church understood and carried out this task, specifically in her formulation of creeds and confessions. Finally, we will apply what we have learned to a present day situation, in particular the claims of Mr. Harold Camping, president of Family Radio. His recent teaching includes the assertion that God has declared that the visible church is dead, that its officers have no spiritual authority and should repudiate their offices, and that the Holy Spirit has left what remains of the church in the hands of Satan.

The Old Testament People of God as Guardians of Truth

Turning now to the early chapters of Genesis, we discover that God entrusted His Holy Word to Adam from the very start (Gen. 1:28-30). He also called him to guard the garden, the meeting place of God and man (Gen. 2:15). Unfortunately, Adam failed in both of these responsibilities. He neither upheld God's word as true nor confronted the error that Satan had introduced into the garden. In addition, Adam did not practice the truth but believed and followed the lie (Gen. 3:1-6). Needless to say, the result were disastrous. Notice, however, that God did not forsake Adam; instead He further declared and entrusted His word of promise to him and expected him to rely upon it (Gen. 3:8f). We learn from this incident that God's revelation of truth brought with it the responsibility to guard and promote it.⁴ As we continue on our journey through the book of Genesis, we encounter the patriarch Noah. He not only received and guarded God's word, but obeyed it to the saving of his household (Heb. 11:7). He was declared by the Apostle Peter as "*a preacher of righteousness*" (2 Pet. 3:20).⁵ Still later, we encounter another man of God, the patriarch Abraham. God greatly honored him by not only giving him great and precious promises and the grace of faith to believe in them (Gen. 15:6), but also by designating him as a prophet

⁴ Note that Heidelberg Catechism Question 54 states that the church exists "from the beginning to the end of the world" and Question 19 declares that the Holy Gospel was "first revealed in Paradise" by God Himself. Thus we understand that the church or covenant people of God existed in the Garden of Eden.

⁵ Noah functioned as the covenant head or representative of his household which according to the Apostle Peter was "*saved by water*" (1 Pet. 20-21). Thus Noah's household symbolized the existing church of that era.

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(Gen. 20:7) and one who obeyed God's voice and "*kept his charge, commandments, statutes and laws*" (Gen. 26:5).⁶

God's calling not only included covenant heads such as Adam, Noah, and Abraham; but also the covenant people of God as a whole. Moses was not only called by God to lead the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt (Exodus 3:10), but also to deliver His word to Israel for safekeeping (Exodus 24:4; Num. 33:2; Deut. 31:9). As we noted earlier, this task of safekeeping (guarding) included knowing God's word as well as putting it into practice. Israelite parents were commanded to know and teach it to their children throughout the day (Deut. 6:4-9). The Levites and priests were to teach it to the people (Lev. 10:11; Deut. 33:10). The elders of the people were to render just judgment according to it (Exodus 18:20-22; Deut. 1:13-18). The king that would arise at a latter time was commanded to personally copy it and meditate upon it (Deut. 17:18-20). In other words, all aspects of the lives of the covenant people of God were to be informed by it. It was their glory and crown in the sight of all the nations (Deut. 4:5-8). The Apostle Paul summarized this duty in his epistles to the Romans when he declared that "*unto them were committed the oracles of God*" (Rom. 3:2).

Furthermore, not only were the Old Testament people of God responsible to know and do God's word of truth, but they were also called to confront error in doctrine and life both within the covenant community and without. For example, the people were required to evaluate any prophet that came upon the scene based upon the clear instruction found in the Law of God (Deut. 13:1-5, 18:22). They were also not to learn the religious beliefs of those who dwelt in the land of Canaan, nor follow their practices (Deut. 18:9-14). They were called to be a holy people, set apart for God's purposes, directed by His law, for His glory and praise. In summary, the Old Testament people of God were called to positively and negatively guard His word by knowledge and by life.

The New Testament People of God as Guardians of Truth

As we now turn our attention to the New Testament, we again encounter a variety of individuals who were called to guard God's truth. The premier example is that of our Lord Jesus Christ. He not only knew the word of God, He was the Word made flesh (John 1:1-14). His earthly ministry included the proclamation of the truth and the fulfillment of all the just demands of the Law as well as the confrontation of the erroneous teaching and practices of many of His contemporaries. We could profitably spend much time considering this aspect of His life and ministry, but for the purposes of this article, we must focus our attention on those for whom Christ came to redeem and call to discipleship, namely the church. Throughout his public ministry our Lord Jesus ministered unto the multitudes, but the main focal point of His attention and effort was the preparation of a small band of hand picked followers who would carry on the mission. These followers, who are called apostles,⁷ were set apart as His representatives and heralds of the truth of the Gospel. They were commissioned to go and "*make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age*" (Matt. 28:19-20). He promised to send to them the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, who would cause them to remember His words and who would guide them into all truth (John 14:16-17, 26).

⁶ Notice that the Lord declared that the reason that He knew Abraham was "that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep (guard) the way of the Lord. To do justice and judgment;" (Gen. 18:19)

⁷ as well as others given by Christ to the church such as prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers (Eph. 4:11)

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The Book of Acts provides an abundance of examples of the Holy Spirit's guiding of the church into all truth and away from error, especially through Christ's commissioned representative. For example, on the day of Pentecost, we observe the apostle Peter standing up with the eleven (Acts 2:14), answering the questions of the crowd that had gathered, proclaiming the truth of the Gospel and calling them to repent and be baptized (Acts 2:38); in other words, to become Christ's disciples, members of the church. Later, when arrested by the leaders of the Jews and forbidden to preach the Gospel, the apostles responded "*Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard*" (Acts 4:19-20). After they were released, the apostles prayed "*Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word*" (Acts 4:29). The Lord Jesus answered their prayer and granted them great boldness to preach and to confront the errors of their time. This included confronting lies and deception within the church as well. It should not come as a surprise that the next incident recorded by Luke is that of judgment upon Ananias and Sapphira for lying to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:1-10).⁸

Though the apostle Peter functions as the main spokesman or chief representative of the church in these accounts, Scripture records that there were many others who fulfilled Christ's discipleship mandate. For example, during the General Council or Synod at Jerusalem recorded in the fifteen chapter of Acts, an elder of the Jerusalem church, whose name was James, gave the final word and drafted the doctrinal and practical response to the churches concerning the issue of Gentile believers that had been brought to the council. Later, in his epistle (the book of James), he both instructed believers in the truth as well as confronted various errors in doctrine and life. Consider further the apostle John. He was known in the early church as "the beloved disciple or the disciple whom Jesus love" and later designated "the apostle of love." But he could just as easily been called "the apostle of truth." It is through the Gospel that bears his name that we previously learned that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth, that Christ himself claims to be the truth (John 14:6), and promised the church that "*If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free*" (John 8:31-32). Moreover, a major concern in all three of John's epistles is that of truth, especially Second and Third John.⁹ Finally, who could ignore Jude, the Lord's brother, who in his epistle exhorted the church "*to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints*" (Jude 3). His exhortation seems to have been necessitated due to the many errors that were plaguing the church (see verses 4-19). Last, but not least, in our survey of Christ's heralds and foundations of the church (Eph. 2:20) is the apostle Paul. Since the example of his life and his specific teachings concerning God's calling upon the church as guardian of the truth play such a crucial role in the life of the first century church and beyond, we will continue our study of his contribution in next month's issue.

To summarize, what we have learned thus far is that God is greatly concerned about truth and has ordained the visible, corporate church in general, and His commissioned and gifted representatives specifically, to proclaim and live the truth and to confront and reprove error in its many forms. The church, through her officers, must continue to carry out this divine task of guarding the truth and will continue to do so until Christ himself returns from heaven to judge the living and the dead. Amen!

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⁸ Notice that this judgment was accomplished through Christ's representative.

⁹ A quick scan reveals 20 occurrences of the word truth alone.