

## WHAT IS TRUTH?

*Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" "Is that your own idea," Jesus asked, "or did others talk to you about me?" "Am I a Jew?" Pilate replied. "It was your people and your chief priests who handed you over to me. What is it you have done?" Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place." "You are a king then!" said Pilate. Jesus answered, "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth." "What is truth?" Pilate asked.*

Ever since sin entered the world there has been a war raging between truth and falsehood. The truth comes to us from God through His Word and His Spirit. Jesus said, *"If you continue in my word, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."* (John 8:31-32) He prayed to His father for his disciples, *"Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth."* (John 17:17) He called the Holy Spirit the *"Spirit of truth"* Who *"leads us into all truth."* (John 16:13) Conversely, Jesus calls Satan *"...a liar and the father of lies"* and says of him that, *"When he lies, he speaks his native language..."*

Throughout history, lies have been Satan's primary means of attacking God's church and truth has been its only effective defense. Satan loves to spread lies about God. He lies about what the Scriptures say, he lies about what the church believes and teaches and he lies about Who and what Jesus was. A lot of these lies start outside the church and are circulated around by people who just don't know any better. They would be funny if they weren't so damaging. Lies like, *"the Bible teaches that sex is evil, that Christianity is a joyless, grim religion, that Christians think they're better than other people and that you get to heaven by being good."* All lies but people believe them.

The most damaging lies of all, however, find their origin within the church itself. The devil loves to set up shop in the church and spread lies. There's an old saying to the effect that, where ever God builds a church, the devil builds a chapel. The early church was literally swamped with Satan's lies. Some of these lies attracted large numbers of followers and came to be known as heresies; they produced great strife and even schism—a tearing asunder of the church. Through a group that came to be known as the Gnostics, Satan taught that the Old Testament was not to be believed, that all physical creation was irredeemably evil, and that Christ was only a Spirit without human flesh and blood. On the other hand, through a Christian bishop by the name of Arius he taught the exact reverse—that Christ was not the Son of God, but only a created human being upon whom God's Spirit temporarily rested. He taught a lot of other lies as well. Some of them deviated only slightly from the truth; others were wholesale distortions. But they all had one thing in common: they all denied that Jesus Christ was God in human flesh and had come to save mankind from his sins. In other words, they denied the Gospel, that *"God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."* Satan raged against the Gospel and did everything in his

power to distort and suppress it because he knew that the truth of the Gospel—and only that truth—can set us free from his power. The Gospel is the only light that keeps us from stumbling in the darkness, and Satan is perfectly happy to have you believe anything you like, as long as it's not the Gospel.

To respond to these heresies the church assembled its greatest theologians and Biblical scholars and formulated what came to be called the great ecumenical creeds: the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the one you all look forward to saying each year on Trinity Sunday: the Athanasian Creed. These creeds are all concise descriptions of what the Bible teaches about the Triune God: about the Father who created everything; about the Son who redeemed creation from sin; and about the Holy Spirit who guides the church and sanctifies believers.

And that set everything straight so that from that time on there were no more lies or heresies to worry about. Right? Wrong! You see, heresies are like politicians: they never die—they just smell that way. Like the seven deadly sins, heresies still abound, and the church is their seedbed. All you have to do is turn to the religion section of your newspaper on any Saturday or Sunday and you won't have to look far to find them. One popular heresy going around nowadays is the old saw that faith in Jesus Christ is not necessary for salvation—that there are many roads to God. You will find this opinion not only among people who dabble in religion, but in the official teaching of the largest Christian church in the world, which now professes that even pagans CAN be saved and ARE BEING saved apart from any knowledge whatsoever of Jesus Christ. Moreover, they are beginning to teach that it is wrong to attempt to convert Jews and Moslems to faith in Jesus Christ because to do so is disrespectful to their religions.

Many such heresies have found their way into the teachings of the contemporary church. And that is a tragedy because people you and I know and care about hear these lies and believe them since they issue from the church. And *what people believe determines their eternal destiny!* That is why Missouri Synod pastors are very, very persnickety to the point of being downright obnoxious about insisting that only the pure Word of God be preached and taught in the church. Everything else in this mutant world will change and one day pass away. But the Word of God will never change. As Jesus said, *"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away."* We are saved through faith; faith comes from hearing, and hearing from the Word of God. Need anything more be added?

Well, actually, yes, something does need to be added. Truth is important. Truth is essential. But truth must be spoken in love. God IS love, and the reason He sent His Son into the world to testify to the truth was not merely to enlighten us, *but to save us.* To have saving power, truth must be spoken in love. Spoken unlovingly, the truth can merely be dead information with as much power to harm as to help. Conversely, when we try to love people without being truthful with them we merely flatter them and confirm them in their weaknesses. That is why John admonishes us to love one another, *"...not in word or tongue, but in truth and action."* Truth and love are two sides of the same coin; neither is effective without the other.

But we try to separate them, don't we? The devil whispers into our ears that it's kinder to spare people the truth; the truth will just hurt them and they'll be better off if you don't tell it to them. And, of course, it's easy for us to believe. Who wouldn't rather be flattered and

coddled in their sins than be told the truth—even when spoken in love? How many times have you and I convinced ourselves that we can love people with lies? We start with “white lies” just to avoid offending them over trivial matters, and pretty soon we find ourselves telling them whatever it takes to make them happy (and keep the peace). Our friends respond in kind and we end up in relationships which are superficial and mutually enabling. We do each other no good; we fail to love each other.

Of course we can think of a thousand good reasons to lie. We can console ourselves that it is, after all, the way of the world—that everybody does it and therefore it can't be all that bad of a thing. But a lie is a lie, and the truth is the truth. One is of God; the other is of Satan. One brings health; the other, sickness unto death.

Pontius Pilate famously asked, “*What is truth?*” That he could even ask that question as he stood in the presence of the King of the Universe who had just testified to the truth speaks volumes about how little Pilate valued the truth. To pretend that the truth cannot be known—or that there is no such thing as truth—is perhaps the greatest lie of all. And it is a lie that pervades the “zeitgeist”—the spirit of our age—the notion that outside of science, there is no such thing as objective truth, but that all so-called truths are relative and determined by cultural context. This view dominates what is called “postmodernism.”

But despite what the postmodernists say, there is such a thing as objective truth—Biblical truth—and we all desperately need to hear and believe it because it is the only thing that will cleanse us from our sins and give us eternal life. Without it all we can do is stumble around in the darkness. That is precisely why God sent His Word and His Spirit into this world: to guide us into the light of truth. The Holy Spirit, Who came to dwell in us at our baptism, is constantly at work within us to lead us to accomplish this. “*When [the Spirit] comes, He will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin,*” Jesus said to his disciples. (*John 16:8*) The Holy Spirit will show you the truth about yourself, and you won't like it. But then He will show you the truth about your Savior, and you will love it. He will bring you to repentance and then He will bring you to faith in the One who can save you from sin, death and the lies of the devil.

What is truth? Truth is the life that God lovingly gives us through His Word and His Spirit. Truth is what sets us free. Amen.

### **Zechariah 8:14-17**

This is what the LORD Almighty says: “Just as I had determined to bring disaster on you and showed no pity when your ancestors angered me,” says the LORD Almighty, “so now I have determined to do good again to Jerusalem and Judah. Do not be afraid. These are the things you are to do: Speak the truth to each other, and render true and sound judgment in your courts; do not plot evil against each other, and do not love to swear falsely. I hate all this,” declares the LORD.

### **Romans 1:18-21**

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the

creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.

**John 8:31-33; 39b-47**

To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?"... "If you were Abraham's children," said Jesus, "then you would do what Abraham did. As it is, you are looking for a way to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things. You are doing the works of your own father." "We are not illegitimate children," they protested. "The only Father we have is God himself." Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I have come here from God. I have not come on my own; God sent me. Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me! Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don't you believe me?"

Whoever belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God."