

**Philosophy, Truth, and the Wisdom of Love**

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**Trustees, Senators, Colleagues, Junior Members, Distinguished Guests, and Friends:**

**The love of wisdom needs the wisdom of love. Let me say what this means and why it matters. I begin with a poem by Miriam Pederson titled “Hold Your Horses.”**

**Lasso truth  
like a run-away steer  
and you will find its veins  
running cold.**

**Approach it like a lover  
with a ribbon for her hair  
and truth, in time,  
will lean in your direction.**

**Or, as I have put it more prosaically, the love of wisdom needs the wisdom of love.**

**Since ancient times, philosophy in the West has described itself as pursuing the truth out of love for wisdom. In its origins, Western philosophy is not simply an academic discipline or professional occupation. It is, in the words of Pierre Hadot, a way of life or a spiritual exercise, and it offers a path to truth**

that challenges other ways in which people love wisdom and pursue truth. This puts philosophy in tension with robust wisdom traditions attached to the world's religions.

Christianity, too, includes a wisdom tradition, one that flows from Judaism and does not easily combine with Greco-Roman philosophy.<sup>4</sup> Hence the strong contrast in I Corinthians between Greek wisdom and Christ as “the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:18-25). In the early days of Christianity, it was not readily apparent how the wisdom of the Greeks and the wisdom of Christ should relate, no more than it is obvious today how one can honor the Christian wisdom tradition while philosophically pursuing the truth. The very words in which Western philosophy has described its vocation— truth, love, wisdom—are spiritually loaded terms; in the Jewish and Christian scriptures, these terms do not mean what many philosophers have taken them to mean. So, as reformational thinkers have insisted, Christian philosophers must reconceive the meaning of these terms in line with our religious wisdom tradition and with the scriptures that provide its decisive touchstone.

Today I want to explore what this might require in our understanding of truth. After commenting on some scriptural passages, I shall suggest that a philosophy in line with the Jewish and Christian scriptures should understand truth as a way of life rather than simply a set of assertions, as something enacted rather than merely claimed.<sup>6</sup> Then I shall talk about three endeavors through which we can live (the) truth: by seeking the good, by resisting evil, and by living in hope. I shall conclude by connecting all three endeavors with the call to love.

## 1. Wisdom, Truth, and Love

In a remarkable confluence of central biblical concepts, Psalm 85 links truth with love, justice, and peace. Translations often hide these links, for it is hard to render ancient Hebrew in contemporary English. Yet Psalm 85 prominently employs the term “emeth,” the central concept of truth in the Jewish scriptures, and it portrays truth as meeting up with steadfast love (chesed) in the messianic condition. When God promises peace to God's people (v. 8), and when God's glory (kabod) comes to dwell on Earth (v. 9), then, says Psalm 85,

love and truth will meet; justice and peace will kiss (v. 10). The Hebrew word for peace is shalom. Shalom is a condition of complete fulfillment where all creatures flourish—a condition I call “interconnected flourishing.” Psalm 85 envisions a glorious day when justice and shalom embrace, when steadfast love and truth converse. In that day “truth will spring up from the earth, and justice will [shine] from the sky” (v. 11).

Now, if you have a standard Western philosophical concept of truth, you might well wonder what truth could possibly have to do with love, justice, and shalom. The standard Western concept ties truth to factual accuracy and to the correctness of assertions. On one common construal, a statement is said to be true when it corresponds to the facts. But if that’s all truth comes to, then it would seem bizarre to envision a day when love meets truth.

In the Jewish scriptures, however, the primary meaning of truth (emeth) is not accuracy or correctness. Instead, emeth means faithfulness, and it pertains both to God and to human beings. To be true, in the first instance, is not simply to be correct but to be faithful in relationship to others. God is true in faithfully carrying out God’s Word of promise for creation, and human beings are true when their dealings are faithful to the conditions of God’s promise. That is why Calvin Seerveld says truth in the scriptures means “God’s blessing presence is in evidence” in human life.

When Psalm 85 imagines truth and love sitting down together, for a coffee kletz, so to speak, it points to a society where people, in their everyday dealings, are so faithful to God’s Word of promise that God’s lovingkindness completely envelops them, like gentle mist on the very soil from which their faithfulness springs.<sup>8</sup> In principle, there is no tension between love and truth, nor, as Nicholas Wolterstorff has shown, between love and justice. Without traces of such truth and love, such faithfulness and lovingkindness, there would be neither justice nor shalom; with truth and love present in their fullness, justice and peace do embrace. In other words, when people are true in response to God’s lovingkindness, they live in justice with one another, and the world they inhabit flourishes. Then, as Psalm 85 says, God “will indeed give what is good,” and Earth “will yield its harvest” (v. 12).

To live in this way is to listen to the voice of wisdom, “she who danced when earth was new,” in the words of Ruth Duck’s hymn text “Come and Seek the Ways of Wisdom.” To live in the truth is to “follow closely what [Wisdom] teaches, for her words are right and true. Wisdom clears the path to justice, showing us what love must do.”<sup>10</sup> Her first stanza resonates with Proverbs 3, where, as in Psalm 85, love and truth meet. In Proverbs 3, Lady Wisdom urges her child to keep lasting love (*chesed*) and truth (*emeth*) close, to bind them around its neck and inscribe them on its heart (v. 3). And the promise that accompanies such wise instruction points again to justice and shalom: “you will find favor” with God and others (v. 4), follow the right paths (v. 6), and receive bodily refreshment (v. 8).

The brilliant second stanza to Duck’s hymn rightly connects all of this with the prologue to the Gospel of John (John 1:1-18). There Jesus, as God’s Word of promise “made flesh among us,” embodies a Wisdom “full of glory, truth, and grace.”<sup>11</sup> The word “glory” (*doxa*) in John’s gospel recalls the glory (*kabod*) of God come to dwell on Earth in Psalm 85. Moreover, as Henk Hart observes, John’s description of Jesus as “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14) is “almost certainly a direct ‘quote’ of the Old Testament pair ‘chesed and emeth’”—Psalm 85’s “love and truth”—which together “proclaim God as full of love, compassion, mercy, forgiveness, faithfulness.” Jesus, then, is the very incarnation of God’s blessing in whom love and truth meet, even as Jesus embodies the wisdom that teaches us how to find God’s blessing.

John’s prologue illuminates Jesus’ response to Thomas in John 14. After Jesus tells his disciples he’s going to prepare a place for them in his Father’s house, and they know the way there, Thomas exclaims: “We do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” (v. 5) According to John, Jesus replies: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (v. 6). Heard in the echo chamber of the Jewish scriptures and the prologue to John, this reply proclaims Jesus himself as the very incarnation both of God’s blessing and of the wisdom that shows how to find this blessing. To find their way to God’s house of blessing, to God’s glory on earth, to the promised messianic condition, the disciples will need to walk in Jesus’ way. They must follow his teachings. They are to live as he lived. What this way comes to is the life of love: the life of loving God above all and

our neighbors as ourselves, in response to a God who creates everything out of love—*creatio ex amore*, to quote Jim Olthuis.

In Jesus, then, the decisive themes of Western philosophy—truth, love, and wisdom—intersect. In intersecting there, however, they fundamentally redirect philosophy. For in Jesus, as in the Jewish scriptures, truth is not primarily propositional, and the love of wisdom is not simply an intellectual pursuit. Instead, truth is a way of life to which wisdom points everyone. Our challenge now is to decipher what such redirection means for how philosophers understand the idea of truth.

## 2. Seeking the Good

Parmenides, a pre-Socratic poet-philosopher, carved out the channels where the mainstreams of Western truth theory have flowed. Parmenides aligns truth with being that does not change. For Parmenides, to be wise is to know what does not change. Philosophy, as the love of wisdom, is a godlike search for what is “uncreated and indestructible,” what is “complete, immovable, and without end.” Most people, however, do not seek unchanging truth. They do not love wisdom but folly; they have opinions without knowledge; they embrace falsehood and the lie. Between these two paths—between a godlike search for immutable being and truth, and all-too-human ignorance amid changing appearances—Parmenides sees no bridge or middle way. Moreover, only the philosopher can follow the esoteric way of unchanging truth.

The Jewish and Christian wisdom traditions turn such an esoteric conception of truth upside down. Affirming that God created everything good, and recognizing temporal change and interconnections as intrinsic to created goodness, they do not align truth with unchanging and self-sufficient being. Nor do they connect wisdom with knowing immutable truth. Instead, Judeo-Christian “truth” has to do with blessed faithfulness within relationships and amid change, and “wisdom” pertains to instruction for faithful living, for lives of loving God and neighbor. All human beings, including philosophers, are called to live in and live out the truth.

This implies in turn that truth and goodness intersect. To live the truth is to try to do what truth requires—to do what contributes to blessed faithfulness.

**And to do what truth requires is to embrace and promote that which is good. To live the truth, then, we must seek the good.**

**To resist the truth, by contrast, is to ignore or refuse what truth requires—to block blessed faithfulness. Such ignorance or refusal goes hand in hand with an embrace of that which is evil. Indeed, persistent and deep-seated falsehood feeds into what Seerveld calls “the Lie.” The Lie is much more than a simple fib. The Lie completely and deliberately twists all that is good in order to promote evil.**

**Last November the Oxford Dictionaries chose the term “post-truth” as the International Word of the Year, noting that in 2016 “use of the word post-truth ... increased by approximately 2,000% over its usage in 2015.” The adjective “post-truth” refers to “circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” It suggests the concept of truth “has become unimportant or irrelevant.”**

**The Oxford Dictionaries announced their choice just one week after the surprise election of Donald Trump to be president of the United States. Politically, it does seem we are in a time when factual “truth” has become insignificant: a time when Kellyanne Conway, Trump’s senior advisor, can characterize obvious falsehoods as “alternative facts”; when Scott Pruitt, a climate change denier, can be appointed head of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency; and when the President himself regularly tweets blatant lies, seemingly without serious repercussions. Truth in the standard Western sense of factual accuracy and correct assertions seems to have become politically passé. Anyone who knows what authoritarian and totalitarian regimes are like will find this trend worrisome.**

**Even more worrisome, however, would be tendencies toward a world that is beyond truth in the scriptural sense of blessed faithfulness. In such a scripturally “post-truth” world, it would not matter whether we seek to live the truth and to embrace what is good. It would not matter whether we promote justice or pursue oppression, whether we show solidarity toward others or practice hatred, whether we respect or rape the Earth. In fact, the very distinction between good and evil would fade away. This is the larger worry of an allegedly**

post-truth world, namely, that in dismissing the importance of correctness and accuracy, people will simultaneously lose their desire to seek the good, thereby tolerating societal evil and embracing the Lie. The term “post-truth” signals more than a political quandary. It points to a deeply spiritual crisis in society.

### **3. Resisting Evil**

Within this crisis, those who want to live the truth by seeking the good must also challenge falsehood by resisting evil. In the first instance, this means not only refusing to give up a distinction between factual truth and factual untruth but also holding everyone accountable to standards of accuracy and correctness. We certainly should not allow politicians, business leaders, or academic administrators get away with regularly dishing out what American philosopher Harry Frankfurt calls bullshit. Rather, we should dispute their duplicity, even as we call out those who ignore the evidence, distort the facts, and deliberately lie; these are egregious offenses, and they unravel the fabric of a democratic society.

In addition to challenging factual untruth, however, to live the truth requires us to resist evil in all of its other manifestations. I am especially concerned about collective evil that has become so entrenched in our cultural practices and social institutions that we find it hard both to take responsibility for it and to resist it. I call such entrenched collective malevolence “societal evil.” A society’s ongoing destruction of the Earth, oppression of the poor, and hostility toward so-called aliens are prime examples of societal evil.

The call to live the truth as blessed faithfulness requires us to resist societal evil. But it also requires us to recognize the limits to our own resistance, limits in a double sense: first, individual and organized efforts to resist societal evil can do only so much and, second, viable resistance must embody the spirit of truth, the spirit of blessed faithfulness. This second limitation is crucial. Deeply entrenched societal evil has a pervasive spiritual direction: the direction of the Lie, the direction of what completely and deliberately twists the good. Only in the spirit of blessed faithfulness can the spirit of societal evil be truly resisted, for only as we cling to the good can we stand up to the Lie.

**I'm not suggesting we should be naïve about the violence we face. Yet, as Bruce Cockburn recognizes, to be true, our resistance must not embody the spirit of what we resist, such that we become “grim travellers”:**

**Bitter little girls and boys from the Red Army Underground  
They'd blow away Karl Marx if he had the nerve to come around  
They're just grim travellers in dawn skies  
See the beauty—makes them cry inside  
Makes them angry and they don't know why  
They're grim travellers in dawn skies**

**If we put on the opaque mask of grimness, we will not see the dawn sky. We will not see the good that calls us to resist. We do not need grimness. Instead we need an articulate sense of the good we seek, as well as a spirited critique of the evil we resist.**

**That is where true philosophy, as a hopeful love of comprehensive wisdom, can help. On the one hand, philosophy can help us sort out the diverse goods in our lives and spell out those that matter most for society as a whole. Here I have in mind shared societal principles such as justice, resourcefulness, and solidarity. In a contemporary setting, such principles are what call for human faithfulness; when honored, they carry a Word of promise.**

**On the other hand, philosophy can also help us take the measure of societal evil by providing a critique of society as a whole, what, following Abraham Kuyper, I call an architectonic critique. Such a critique is essential for wise resistance. We need to understand how the current organization of society both blocks and permits blessed faithfulness. We also need to detect the sore spots where suffering gathers and where social transformation can begin. Philosophy that pursues “comprehensive wisdom about the contemporary world” can help in both respects.**

#### **4. Living in Hope**

Earlier I said Psalm 85 portrays truth and love as meeting up “in the messianic condition.” I also suggested that, according to the Gospel of John, Jesus’s disciples will need to walk in his way in order to find a path to “God’s house of blessing.” Such phrases introduce a theme of hope for the future quite foreign to the mainstreams of Western truth theory. Scriptural truth talk contains an ongoing interplay between the current call to blessed faithfulness and the eschatological promise of a faith-fulfilling blessedness still to come—the promise of a new heaven and a new Earth (Rev. 21:1-4) where God, in love and truth, is “all in all” (Eph. 1:23). This promise means that God, first and foremost, is a God of love, and Jesus is the very embodiment of God’s love. For those who would follow Jesus, to live the truth is to walk along the pathways of love, love for God and neighbor, in hope for God’s future, despite our own fragility and failure, and amid the societal evil that surrounds us. To live in such hope, we must remain ever open to the Spirit of truth, which can take us in surprising new directions.

Hope for a future where love and truth meet has ripple effects in the present. Living in such hope, we can neither regard our current dealings and practices and institutions as fully “in the truth” nor despair over the depth and power of societal evil. This implies, in turn, that contemporary philosophy needs to be more than a love of comprehensive wisdom that helps us sort out societal principles and articulates an architectonic critique. For philosophy’s love must be a hopeful love: it must remain open to a promised future whose surprises surpass philosophical comprehension.

That is why, in my own attempts to offer a reformational conception of truth, I have insisted on the eschatological openness of both societal principles and what I call the “life-giving disclosure of society,” in which “human beings and other creatures come to flourish in their interconnections.” Hence we need to relativize our efforts, recognizing how the society we hope for lies beyond our striving, and how our fidelity to societal principles does not suffice to bring it about.

**So I describe truth as a dynamic correlation between human fidelity to societal principles and a life-giving disclosure of society. In light of the Jewish and Christian wisdom traditions, I also insist that there is more to truth—more to blessed faithfulness—than our current fidelity and disclosure can achieve. And this “more” challenges the prevailing Western concept of truth as a static correspondence between assertions and facts. For there is always more to truth, more even to factual truth, than a static correspondence can capture.**

## **5. The Call to Love**

**I have not tried to provide a theory of factual truth today. Instead I have explored biblical underpinnings for the broader and reformational conception of truth within which I intend to offer a theory of factual truth.<sup>39</sup> On this broader conception, truth is to be lived rather than merely asserted, and our assertions of truth need to belong to our living (the) truth. To live the truth is to be faithful in relation to God and others. Such faithfulness is summarized in the call to love God above all and our neighbors as ourselves.**

**In contemporary society, the contours of this call to love show up in historically embedded and eschatologically open societal principles such as justice and solidarity. When we are faithful to such principles, we experience the blessing of a loving God. This blessing occurs via a life-giving disclosure of society. In contemporary society, then, truth amounts to a dynamic correlation between human fidelity to societal principles and a life-giving disclosure of society, with both the fidelity and the disclosure sustained by hope for God’s future. In the end, there is no such truth without love, for love and truth must meet.**

**To live (the) truth is to seek the good: solidarity, justice, interconnected flourishing; to resist evil, especially what alienates and oppresses and kills the Earth’s creatures; and to live in hope for a future where justice and peace embrace. There’s no place for the Lie in God’s future. But there is a place for everyone who walks along the pathways of love, following God’s Word of promise “made flesh among us,” the way and the truth and the life.**

**God’s future calls to everyone, in the voice of Wisdom incarnate, inviting them to a feast of love and joy. And truthful responses to Wisdom’s call will sing back their own invitation:**

**Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life:**

**Such a Way, as gives us breath:**

**Such a Truth, as ends all strife:**

**Such a Life, as killeth death.**

**Come, my Light, my Feast, my Strength:**

**Such a Light, as shows a feast:**

**Such a Feast, as mends in length:**

**Such a Strength, as makes his guest.**

**Come, my Joy, my Love, my Heart:**

**Such a Joy, as none can move:**

**Such a Love, as none can part:**

**Such a Heart, as joys in love.**

**“Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life: Come, my Joy, my Love, my Heart.” I have been blessed to hear and to sing this invitation at ICS, first as a graduate student, then as a Senator and Chancellor, and most recently as a Professor of Philosophy. There I have learned how the love of wisdom can listen to the wisdom of love. Thank you for lending your own voices to this heartfelt invitation. May all of us take joy in truth and in love. Blessings!**