

What is Truth?

“What is truth?” is a question, a statement, or both. We cannot be sure out of what motive or motives Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Palestine, posed this question to Jesus of Nazareth, as recorded in the book of John. Was Pilate seeking to know, sincerely, the truth, or was he making an arrogant or cynical statement to the effect that there is no truth? For the Romans and Greeks the truth was found in philosophy and in the art and science of logic; for the Jews the truth was found in the Torah, in the Law and the cultic practices associated with the temple in Jerusalem. Pilate’s question was posed by many others before him, and it has been posed countless times and in numerous places all over the world since the First Century A.D.

Men and women throughout history have attempted to find and know the truth that will explain the how, and the why of human existence, and the purpose for which each of us are here. In fact, many would say that this drive to seek out and know the truth is the primary motivation in human existence. Various schools of philosophy have sought to know and establish the truth through an objective system of propositions and proofs. The diversity of philosophical and theological systems and views that address this question are evidence of how people have sought to know and express their beliefs about truth. Even persons who claim that there is no objective truth in human existence per se have developed systematic philosophies to substantiate their beliefs.

Since the beginning of the modern age, and particularly in the post-modern age, the quest to know an objective answer to the question of “What is truth?” is often seen as a quaint or even irrelevant endeavor. The dominant or popular view of truth in post-modern philosophy and society is that there is no objective truth, rather, truth is entirely subjective, and therefore there are many truths all of which are equally valid and truthful. To a certain extent this is an understandable reaction to the imposition of “truth” upon people by individuals, institutions, systems, and structures of a given society and culture. Often these same individuals and institutions fail to uphold and even violate the truth they impose, and this leads many to disillusionment, cynicism, and despair, and to distrust or doubt any claims about truth as it pertains to human existence.

The predecessors to early Friends, collectively known as Seekers, were also disillusioned with the people and institutions of their time that claimed to know the truth and were willing and able to impose it upon those who differed with them. The Seekers, though, held the conviction that there was an objective truth that could be known and experienced, but that one of its major characteristics was that those who believed and lived in it were not led to impose it upon others, especially through oppression and violence. The key point here is that these people firmly believed in the reality and existence of an objective truth, valid for all people, at all times, and in all places. For those who became known as Friends, or Quakers, this truth is given to all irrespective of

differences in culture, time, or geographyⁱ. Furthermore, this truth is not restricted to those with knowledge of a book or even the name of Jesus.

My own experience of searching for the Truth, of being a seeker, was characterized by finding theologies, philosophies, and systems that appealed to me and made sense to me. I would read and study and often seek out a person or community from the given tradition or school of theology, or sociopolitical system, and I would attempt to put into practice the outward forms, if any, and rest assured that my intellectual understanding was sufficient and of primary importance. Even my initial encounter with and practice of Quakerism, and what I thought to be my “convincement,” in the late 1990’s was primarily of this order. At times I despaired of ever finding the truth that would speak to my condition and that of the world around me. An accurate description of my state of being during this long period, from my early twenties until my convincement in the 12th Month of 2005, is summed up as followsⁱⁱ: “Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In a pamphlet published by The Tract Association of Friends entitled *A Quaker View of the Christian Revelation*, John H. Curtis says:

...it is often said that Quakerism is a religion of experience. This is true in that Quakerism is not based on an intellectual tradition, a sacred book, an approved liturgy, or an authoritarian church. However, it is not based on experience as such, nor even on religious experience in general. It is based on the particular experience of the continuing presence of Christ.

The first time that I experienced His presence it was earth shattering. I recalled the story of Mary Magdalene and her encounter with the risen Lord at his tomb; she mistook him for the gardener until he called her by name^{iv}. How many times I had read this and yet it had only been as an historical record without power. George Fox and the early Friends had this experience of the risen Lord who has come to teach his people himself, and others in every generation since have had this experience of the Truth—for the Truth is not words but the Word to which the lives and words and writings of the Apostles, the early Friends, we and countless others, and the words of Scripture bear witness.

ⁱ See John 1:9

ⁱⁱ Convincement is not an intellectual confirmation or understanding. My convincement took place when God chose to reveal his Son in me (see Galatians 1:15-16) that I might see myself clearly. In seeing myself clearly I was convicted of the wrong I had done, the sin. I felt God's judgment within and His loving redemption; I began to come into obedience to God's Word and to know His power to overcome sin and death and to walk in righteousness according to His will. What I had read and studied certainly had some value, but without this experience I would have remained dead in the letter: "for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life" (2 Corinthians 3:6). See "Friends and the Truth" in *The Truth is Christ* by Lewis Benson (New Foundation Publications No. 5, Summer 1981) and "The Greatest Deceivers" pp. 25-26, and "The Form of Godliness" pp. 26-27, in the *Early Prophetic Openings of George Fox* (The Tract Association of Friends, 1986).

ⁱⁱⁱ 2 Timothy 3:7

^{iv} John 20:11-16