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“What is Truth?”*

PAUL TILlich

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; . . . For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ [John 1:14, 17].

Why do you not understand what I say? . . . you are of your father the devil. . . . He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies [John 8:43, 44].

Pilate said to him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king, For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice.” Pilate said to him, “What is truth?” [John 18:37, 38].

Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” [John 14:6].

He who does what is true, comes to the light. [John 3:21].

And I will pray the Father, and he will give you . . . the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you [John 14:16, 17].

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth. [John 16:13].

Let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God; for God is love [I John 4:7, 8].

Jesus then said to the Jews who had believed in Him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” [John 8:31, 32].

IN the above passages there are words in which Jesus speaks about truth. Another of these words shall be the center of our meditation, the word in which He combines truth and freedom: “The truth will make you free.”

The question of truth is universally human; but like everything human it was first manifest on a special place in a special group. It was the Greek mind in which the passionate search for truth was most conspicuous; and it was the Greek world in which, and to which, the Gospel of John was written. The words, here said by Jesus, are, according to ancient custom, put into His mouth by the evangelist who wanted to show the answer of Christianity to the central question of the Hellenic mind: the question of truth. The answer is given also to us, for we, too, ask the question of truth. And some of us ask it as passionately, and sometimes as desperately, as the Greeks did.

It is often at an early age that we are moved by the desire for truth.

*In advance of the publication of Paul Tillich's new volume of sermons, *The New Being*, we received permission to print this sermon in the *Journal*. We are grateful to Dr. Tillich & Messrs. Scribners, the publishers, and are glad to call our readers' attention to the book which has now appeared.

When I, myself, as a fifteen-year-old boy received the words of our text as the motto for my future life from the confirming minister, who happened to be my father, I felt that this was just what I was looking for; and I remember that I was not alone in my group with this longing for truth. But I also observed, in myself and in others, that the early passion for truth is due to be lost in the adolescent and adult years of our lives. How does this happen?

The truth the child first receives is imposed upon him by adults, predominantly by his parents. This cannot be otherwise; and he cannot help accepting it. The passion for truth is silenced by answers which have the weight of undisputed authority, be it that of the mother or the father, or an older friend, or a gang, or the representatives of a social pattern. But sooner or later the child revolts against the truth given to him. He denies the authorities either all together, or one in the name of the other. He uses the teachers against the parents, the gang against the teachers, a friend against the gang, society against the friend.

This revolt is as unavoidable as was his early dependence on authority. The authorities gave him something to live on, the revolt makes him responsible for the truth he accepts or rejects.

But whether in obedience or in revolt, the time comes when a new way to truth is opened to us, especially to those in academic surroundings: The way of scholarly work. Eagerly we take it. It seems so safe, so successful, so independent of both authority and willfulness. It liberates from prejudices and superstitions; it makes us humble and honest. Where else, besides in scholarly work, should we look for truth? There are many in our period, young and old, primitive and sophisticated, practical and scientific, who accept this answer without hesitation. For them scholarly truth is truth altogether. Poetry may give beauty, but it certainly does not give truth. Ethics may help us to a good life, but it cannot help us to truth. Religion may produce deep emotions, but it should not claim to have truth. Only science gives us truth. It gives us new insights into the way nature works, into the texture of human history, into the hidden things of the human mind. It gives a feeling of joy, inferior to no other joy. He who has experienced this transition from darkness, or dimness, to the sharp light of knowledge will always praise scientific truth and understanding and say with some great medieval theologians, that the principles through which we know our world are the eternal divine light in our souls. And yet, when we ask those who have finished their studies in our colleges and universities whether they have found there a truth which is relevant to their lives they will answer with hesitation. Some will say that they have lost what they had of relevant truth; others will say that they don't care for such a truth because life goes on from day to day without it. Others will tell you of a person, a book, an event outside their studies which gave them the feeling of a truth that matters. But they all will agree that it is not the scholarly work which can give truth relevant for our life.

Where else, then, can we get it? “Nowhere,” Pilate answers in his talk with Jesus. “What is truth?” he asks, expressing in these three words his own and his contemporaries’ despair of truth, expressing also the despair of truth in millions of our contemporaries in schools and studios, in business and professions. In all of us, open or hidden, admitted or repressed, the despair of truth is a permanent threat. We are children of our period as Pilate was. Both are periods of disintegration, of a world-wide loss of values and meanings. Nobody can separate himself completely from this reality, and nobody should even try. Let me do something unusual from a Christian standpoint, namely, to express praise of Pilate—not the unjust judge, but the cynic and sceptic; and of all those amongst us in whom Pilate’s question is alive. For in the depth of every serious doubt and every despair of truth, the passion for truth is still at work. Don’t give in too quickly to those who want to alleviate your anxiety about truth. Don’t be seduced into a truth which is not really your truth, even if the seducer is your church, or your party, or your parental tradition. Go with Pilate, if you cannot go with Jesus, but go in seriousness with him!

Twofold are the temptations to evade the burden of asking for the truth that matters. The one is the way of those who claim to have the truth and the other is the way of those who do not care for the truth. The first ones are called “the Jews” in our gospel. They point to their tradition which goes back to Abraham. Abraham is their father; so they have all truth, and do not need to be worried by the question which they encounter in Jesus. Many among us, Christians and secularists, are “Jews” in the sense of the Fourth Gospel. They point to *their* tradition which goes back to the Church Fathers, or to the popes, or to the Reformers, or to the makers of the American Constitution. Their church or their nation is their mother, so they have all truth and do not need to worry about the question of truth. Would Jesus tell them, perhaps, what He told the Jews—that even if the church or the nation is their mother, they carry with them the heritage of the father of untruth; that the truth they have is not the truth which makes free? Certainly there is no freedom where there is self-complacency about the truth of one’s own beliefs. There is no freedom where there is ignorant and fanatical rejection of foreign ideas and ways of life. There is not freedom but demonic bondage where one’s own truth is called the ultimate truth. For this is an attempt to be like God, an attempt which is made in the name of God.

There is the second way of avoiding the question of truth—the way of not caring for it, of indifference. It is the way of the majority of the people today, as well as at the time of Jesus. Life, they say to themselves, is a mixture of truth, half-truth and falsehood. It is quite possible to live with this mixture, to muddle through most of the difficulties of life without asking the question of a truth that matters ultimately. There may be boundary situations, a tragic event, a deep spiritual fall, death. But as long as they are far removed, the question of truth can also stay far away. Hence, the

common attitude—a little bit of Pilate's scepticism, especially in things which it is not dangerous today to doubt, as, for instance, God and the Christ; and a little bit of the Jew's dogmatism, especially in things which one is requested to accept today, as, for instance, an economic or political way of life. In other words, some scepticism and some dogmatism, and a shrewd method of balancing them liberate one from the burden of asking the question of ultimate truth.

But those of us who dare to face the question of truth may listen to what the Fourth Gospel says about it. The first thing which strikes us is that the truth of which Jesus speaks is not a doctrine but a reality, namely, He Himself: "I *am* the truth." This is a profound transformation of the ordinary meaning of truth. For us, statements are true or false; people may *have* truth or not; but how can they *be* truth, even *the* truth? The truth of which the Fourth Gospel speaks is a true reality—that reality which does not deceive us if we accept it and live with it. If Jesus says, "I am the truth," He indicates that in Him the true, the genuine, the ultimate reality is present; or, in other words, that God is present, unveiled, undistorted, in His infinite depth, in His unapproachable mystery. Jesus is not the truth because His teachings are true. But His teachings are true because they express the truth which He Himself is. He is more than His words. And He is more than any word said about Him. The truth which makes us free is neither the teaching of Jesus nor the teaching about Jesus. Those who have called the teaching of Jesus "the truth" have subjected the people to a servitude under the law. And most people like to live under a law. They want to be told what to think and what not to think. And they accept Jesus as the infallible teacher and giver of a new law. But even the words of Jesus, if taken as a law, are not the truth which makes us free. And they should not be used as such by our scholars and preachers and religious teachers. They should not be used as a collection of infallible prescriptions for life and thought. They *point* to the truth, but they are not a law of truth. Nor are the doctrines about Him the truth that liberates. I say this to you as somebody who all his life has worked for a true expression of the truth which is the Christ. But the more one works, the more one realizes that our expressions, including everything we have learned from our teachers and from the teaching of the Church in all generations, is not the truth that makes us free. The Church very early forgot the word of our Gospel that He *is* the truth; and claimed that her doctrines about Him are the truth. But these doctrines, however necessary and good they were, proved to be not the truth that liberates. Soon they became tools of suppression, of servitude under authorities; they became means to prevent the honest search for truth—weapons to split the souls of people between loyalty to the Church and sincerity to truth. And in this way they gave deadly weapons to those who attacked the Church and its doctrines in the name of truth. Not everybody feels this conflict. There are masses of people who feel safe under doctrinal laws. They are safe, but it is the safety

of him who has not yet found his spiritual freedom, who has not yet found his true self. It is the dignity and the danger of Protestantism that it exposes its adherents to the insecurity of asking the question of truth for themselves and that it throws them into the freedom and responsibility of personal decisions, of the right to choose between the ways of the sceptics, and those who are orthodox, of the indifferent masses, and Him who *is* the truth that liberates. For this is the greatness of Protestantism: that it points beyond the teachings of Jesus and beyond the doctrines of the Church to the being of Him whose being is the truth.

How do we reach this truth? "By doing it," is the answer of the Fourth Gospel. This does not mean being obedient to the commandments, accepting them and fulfilling them. Doing the truth means living out of the reality which is *He* who is the truth, making His being the being of ourselves and of our world. And again, we ask, "How can this happen?" "By remaining in Him" is the answer of the Fourth Gospel, i.e., by participating in His being. "Abide in me and I in you," He says. The truth which liberates is the truth in which we participate, which is a part of us and we a part of it. True discipleship is participation. If the real, the ultimate, the divine reality which is His being becomes our being we are in the truth that matters.

And a third time we ask, "How can this happen?" There is an answer to this question in our Gospel which may deeply shock us: "Every one who is of the truth hears my voice." Being "of the truth" means, coming from the true, the ultimate reality, being determined in one's being by the divine ground of all being, by that reality which is present in the Christ. If we have part in it, we recognize it wherever it appears; we recognize it as it appears in its fullness in the Christ. But, some may ask in despair: "If we have *no* part in it, if we are *not* of the truth, are we then forever excluded from it? Must we accept a life without truth, a life in error and meaninglessness? Who tells me that *I* am of the truth, that *I* have a chance to reach it?" Nobody can tell you; but there is one criterion: If you *seriously* ask the question, "Am I of the truth?" you *are* of the truth. If you do not ask it seriously, you do not really want, and you do not deserve, and you cannot get, an answer! He who asks seriously the question of the truth that liberates, is already on his way to liberation. He may still be in the bondage of dogmatic self-assurance but he has begun to be free from it. He may still be in the bondage of cynical despair, but he has already started to emerge from it. He may still be in the bondage of unconcern about the truth that matters, but his unconcern is already shaken. These all are of the truth and on their road to the truth.

On this road you will meet the liberating truth in many forms except in one form: you never will meet it in the form of propositions which you can learn or write down and take home. But you may encounter it in one sentence of a book or of a conversation or of a lecture, or even of a sermon. This sentence is not the truth, but it may open you up for the truth and it

may liberate you from the bondage to opinions and prejudices and conventions. Suddenly, true reality appears like the brightness of lightening in a formerly dark place. Or, slowly true reality appears like a landscape when the fog becomes thinner and thinner and finally disappears. New darkneses, new fogs will fall upon you; but you have experienced, at least once, the truth and the freedom given by the truth. Or you may be grasped by the truth in an encounter with a piece of nature—its beauty and its transitoriness; or in an encounter with a human being in friendship and estrangement, in love, in difference and hate; or in an encounter with yourself in a sudden insight into the hidden strivings of your soul, in disgust and even hatred of yourself, in reconciliation with and acceptance of yourself. In these encounters you may meet the true reality—the truth which liberates from illusions and false authorities, from enslaving anxieties, desires and hostilities, from a wrong self-rejection and a wrong self-affirmation.

And it may even happen that you are grasped by the picture and power of Him who is truth. There is no law that this must happen. Many at all times and in all places have encountered the true reality which is in Him without knowing His name—as He Himself said. They were of the truth and they recognized the truth, although they had never seen Him who is the truth. And those who have seen Him, the Christians in all generations, have no guarantee that they participate in the truth which He is. Maybe they were not of the truth. Those, however, who are of the truth and who have encountered Him who is the truth have one precious thing beyond the others: They have the point from which to judge all truth they encounter anywhere. They look at a life which never lost the communion with the divine ground of all life, and they look at a life which never lost the union of love with all beings.

And this leads to the last word which the man who has written the Gospel and the Letters of John has to say about truth: that the truth which liberates is the power of love, for God is love. The father of the lie binds us to himself by binding us to ourselves—or to that in us which is not our true self. Love liberates from the father of the lie because it liberates us from our false self to our true self—to that self which is grounded in true reality. Therefore, distrust every claim for truth where you do not see truth united with love; and be certain that you are of the truth and that the truth has taken hold of you only when love has taken hold of you and has started to make you free from yourselves.