



TRUTHINESS

Compiled by Mynhardt van Pletzen

 **TKERK** | **TREND**

Around 4 p.m. on Oct. 17, 2005, Stephen Colbert was searching for a word. Not just any word, but one that would fit the blowhard persona that he was presenting that night on the premiere episode of Comedy Central's Colbert Report. He once described his faux-pundit character as a "well-intentioned, poorly informed, high-status idiot", and the word he was looking for had to be sublimely idiotic. The word he chose was 'truthiness'. – Andy Gilmour ¹

"But you will have gathered what I am getting at, namely, that it is still a metaphysical faith on which our faith in science rests – that even we knowers of today, we godless anti-metaphysicians still take our fire too, from the flame lit by the thousand-year old faith, the Christian faith which was also Plato's faith, that God is Truth; that Truth is 'Divine'..." – Friedrich Nietzsche

"That's what fiction is for. It's for getting at the truth when the truth isn't sufficient for the truth." – Tim O'Brien

1. [<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/17/magazine/17FOB-onlanguage-t.html>]

INTRODUCTION

From the earliest times we have been asking the question: What is truth? And, perhaps more to the point: What does truth entail?

In an idealistic world truth is the core of everything. It is how we determine law and justice and how we can ensure a fair society. In an idyllic world, truth is objectively findable and understandable. We tell ourselves that if we have access to the right sources, we will know what the truth is and we will be able to believe and act accordingly. The world of today asks new questions about the nature and existence of truth.

In this trend report we want to explore the newest trends around the concept of 'truth'. We will also look back at how truth was understood throughout history. We also want to look at a healthy, Biblical understanding of truth, which will hopefully lead us to a fresh and relevant philosophy of service for our congregations and ministries.

TRUTH AND POLITICS IN 2017

The current political upheavals probably caused to biggest events in the news and trends of 2016 and 2017. The massive changes in international and local political regimes left virtually no area of society unchanged.

It is therefore a good idea to explore these political changes as foundation for our further discussion of truth. The political events of the past two years have created a whole series of new international terms. Most of these terms involve our understanding and usage of either objective or subjective facts.

It completely changed our understanding and the implications of truth.

Alternative Facts

Perhaps one of the most obvious events concerning this trend happened when a former advisor to President Donald Trump, Kellyanne Conway, first used the term 'alternative facts'. In a media interview shortly after the presidential inauguration, Conway discussed the different opinions on the size of the crowd at the event. Some background information: the official spokesperson for the White House, Sean Spicer, made alleged false claims about the number of people who were present.

*When pressed during the interview with Chuck Todd to explain why Spicer "utter[ed] a provable falsehood", Conway stated that Spicer was giving "alternative facts". Todd responded, "Look, alternative facts are not facts. They're falsehoods."*²

From that moment the concept of 'alternative facts' became a way of explaining and justifying apparently opposing truths. Conway and Spicer's factual gymnastics reminded people so strongly of the dangerous political situation against which George Orwell warns in his classic book *1984*, that sales of this book rose by 9,5% in the days and weeks after Conway's interview.

Indeed, we disagree on so much that it can seem, as one political commentator recently put it, that there are no facts anymore. That's a way of expressing a seductive line of thought: There just is no way of escaping your perspective or biases. Every time you try to get outside of your own perspective, you just get more information filtered

*through your own perspective. As a consequence, objective truth is just irrelevant — either we'll never know it or it doesn't exist in the first place.*³

The idea of 'post-truth' involves a conviction within which a group of people act and take decisions based on variables other than any objective fact or truth. Emotional conviction and individual opinion both play a strong role here. The concept surfaced often during the recent American presidential election when different versions of history and other factual events were presented. This term and trend once again points to Orwell's novel, within which fictional world leaders rewrote history to suit their own version of the present and future. The 'post-truth' concept became so thoroughly entrenched, that the Oxford Dictionary chose it as the Word of the Year for 2016 – a good indication of the prevailing socio-political environment.

'Truthiness'

Although it is still an uncertain and unstable time for staunch supporters of the truth, times like these are a fertile source of inspiration for comedians and satirists. Stephen Colbert is perhaps one of the biggest critics of our new subjective understanding of facts, but his sharp commentary is only comical enough not to land him in hot water with the authorities.

In 2005 he first used the concept 'truthiness' in his TV programme *The Colbert Report* as a way of exposing politicians' lies. As a result, the American Dialect Society chose it as their word of the year and the New Oxford Dictionary included it as an official word in their publication, instead of other words like 'podcast' and 'sudoku'.

Of course, the word enjoyed renewed interest during the recent political season – both in international and local media.

'Speak Truth To Power'

This phrase was used by the Quakers in the 1950s in their protest campaigns, and originated in the book of the same name.

In 2016 and 2017 it became the uniting cry of those who found themselves at the receiving end of the political twisting of facts. 'Speaking truth to power' was a call, not only for a new

2. [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Post-truth_politics]

3. [<http://www.chronicle.com/article/Teaching-Humility-in-an-Age-of/240266> Post-Truth]

understanding of what truth involves, but also to act accordingly and to hold accountable those who manipulate the truth to their own advantage.

"There does seem to be at least one common denominator when it comes to speaking truth in the name of advancing power - and that is courage. The courage to stand upon one's own convictions — or maybe, as we've seen these past few weeks across the country, the courage to throw conviction out the window for personal or political expediency. After all, in more ways than one, a conviction does not always require truth. Indeed, there's a reason the game "Two Truths and a Lie" is so popular. Very often it's hard to tell the difference." ⁴

'Speaking truth to power' also enjoyed much attention in South Africa. Whether in one of a number of social media campaigns or in the streets in the form of protests, young South Africa weren't afraid to declare that they would not be silenced on the burning issues of the day.

South Africans and young people, such as myself, were sold yet another dream. We should be angry, we should call for action and we should rally to get the economy growing. As young people, the 2019 election ballots we cast must be in the name of jobs and skills for fellow young people; in so doing we would be able to speak truth to power and incrementally fulfil the hopes, dreams and vision of the NDP. ⁵

'Fake News'

Since the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, concerns over the circulation of "fake" news and other unverified digital content have intensified. As people have grown to rely on social media as a news source, there has been considerable debate about its role in aiding the spread of misinformation. Much recent attention has centred around putting fact-checking filters in place, as false claims often persist in the public consciousness even after they are corrected.

Fabricated news, or fake news, can be understood in one of two ways. Depending on your position relevant to a specific factual issue, fake news is either created for sensation or self-enrichment, or it is a pathetic attempt at sweeping the real facts under the carpet.

Fake news is written and published with the intent to mislead in order to gain financially or politically, often with sensationalist, exaggerated, or patently false headlines that grab attention. ⁶

Fake news finds its momentum in the speed at which messages are spread on social media. With every person having a virtual megaphone at his disposal with which to reach an unsuspecting audience, is it understandable that not everything on social media should be taken as the truth. This distinction tends to fade when fake news reports take on the same form and tone as their respectable counterparts.

The social media giant Facebook entered into the fray recently with all sorts of new technologies and algorithms to try to fight fake news.

The feature seems to be yet another attempt to combat fake news and "alternative facts," after Facebook's reporting and flagging process failed miserably last month. Some users believed that disputed news articles were actually real, and needed to be shared even more so their voices wouldn't be silenced by the media. Which ultimately led to frustration across the board. – Carissa Lintao | Facebook Tests New tools To Combat Fake News. ⁷

The world of entertainment joins the game

One of the most popular television series the past few years was the series *Fargo*. The series owes most of its success to the clever way in which the producers disguised a fictional tale as a true story.

With just the right techniques, sketches and text, producers didn't only manage to fabricate a whole series of events, they changed viewers' understanding of how true events should be presented as opposed to a fictional

4. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jade-greear/speaking-truth-to-power_2_b_8824094.html]

5. [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.za/yaseen-carelse/south-africa-has-been-sitting-on-itssolutions_a_21903977/]

6. [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fake_news]

7. [<http://flip.it/kYD4SV>]

With just the right techniques, sketches and text, producers didn't only manage to fabricate a whole series of events, they changed viewers' understanding of how true events should be presented as opposed to a fictional narrative. The producer, Ethan Coen, had the following to say about the thin line between truth and fabrication that the TV series painted so well: "[*Fargo*] aims to be both homey and exotic, and pretends to be true. We wanted to make a movie just in the genre of a true story movie. You don't have to have a true story to make a true story movie."

Even after the producers, actors and other role-players made a serious effort to reveal the fictional nature of the series to viewers, the 'true story' myth persisted:

"The television series adaptation has made the same "true story" claim at the beginning of each episode, but series creator Noah Hawley has confirmed that "it's all just made up". Even though the truth is out and viewers logically know that both the film and television series are only "pretending to be true", some people still seem to struggle with which aspects of it are true and which are not." – Karen Strauss⁸

The Truth and South Africa

It's rather ironic that the young democracy that arbitrated its birth pains with the creation of a commission to facilitate truth and reconciliation, has since walked such an inadequate road to truth. Since the promising first years of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's activities until now, there had been few independent governments plagued by twisted truths and covered-up lies quite like ours. Yet, our new dispensation's roots lie deep in the initial work of the Truth Commission and the search for law and justice is part of our DNA as a country and nation.

*"For all these entrenched problems that remain in South Africa, made no better by what many South Africans consider ineffectual and corrupt governance under President Jacob Zuma, most agree that life now is better than it was two decades ago, and that the communal experience of watching and learning from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's work was a big part of what made the improvements possible."*⁹

We could also argue that South Africans' never-ending struggle from the pre- to the post-apartheid

years was against fabricated truths that were more lie than anything else.

The concepts of 'post-truth' and 'alternative facts' are nothing new to South Africans, no matter which side of the race or economic division you find yourself on. *The South African* touched on the same idea in February this year in their article 'Africa has a long history of fake news after years of living with non-truth'.¹⁰

They say that '...post-truth politics is a culture in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.' They confirm this phenomenon in South Africa with the following: 'The post-truth era is therefore anything but new within the African context. This explains the emergence of alternative regimes of communication and sites of "truth".'

As recently as May 2017 *The Daily Maverick* also published an opinion piece on this theme. Everywhere in South Africa the truth is under fire, especially in the context of politicians and their management of the country. Stephen Grootes write the following in his article 'Politics in the age of lies'¹¹:

'In the headlong rush to December's ANC leadership contest, and the 2019 election that hovers increasingly menacingly after it, the list of casualties is mounting. The naked ambition is leading to the destruction of both pawns and reputations. But in the middle of this something else is happening: truth itself is now joining the mounting list of casualties. It is getting harder than ever to determine fact from well-orchestrated fiction...'

This phenomenon reached boiling point in South Africa when the British human relations consultants, Bell Pottinger, launched a campaign to create a false perception of the economic spread among South Africans. The campaign was so successful that the term 'white monopoly capital' spread like wildfire on social media, together with all the accompanying misconceptions.

8. [<https://www.etiket.agency/single-post/2017/08/16/FARGO-A-narrative-of-untruths-clusterfucks-and-unfathomable-pinheadery>]

9. [<https://www.pri.org/stories/2017-04-06/south-africas-imperfect-progress-20-years-after-truth-reconciliation-commission>]

10. [<https://www.thesouthafrican.com/lifestyle/>]

11. [<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2017-05-22-analysis-politics-in-the-age-of-lies/#.WbFyFtGxWfA>]

After the campaign was exposed as a blatant lie by the local media, the once respected British firm suffered serious consequences. Bell Pottinger was banned by their own association of communication experts and some of the top managers resigned after the revelations.¹²



12. [<http://www.fin24.com/Companies/Advertising/ex-bell-pottingers-geoghegan-and-lambert-said-to-seek-legal-help-as-firmcrumbles-20170911>]

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR US?

A new understanding of truth is needed urgently. The black-and-white approach of truth and non-truth is no longer accepted by everyone, and given multiple contexts, experiences and assumptions, we need a new understanding of 'what is true' – one that we can share with everyone, especially those with other beliefs than us.

It is still increasingly difficult for people to discern between truth and lie, and to handle the tension between these two worlds in a meaningful way.

It is interesting that we individually tend to think of ourselves as clear thinkers and see those who disagree with us as misguided. We imagine that the impressions we have about the world come to us unsullied and unfiltered. We think we have the capacity to see things just as they really are, and that it is others who have confused perceptions. As a result, we might think our job is simply to point out where other people have gone wrong in their thinking, rather than to engage in rational dialogue allowing for the possibility that we might actually be wrong. – Peter Ellerton¹³

It is no longer enough to simply ask ourselves if any fact, statement or comment is true or not. We should also reinvent our thoughts by contemplating our way of thinking about truth.

The American philosopher, Harvey Seigel, supports this point when he talks of an epistemological approach where we don't simply place truth under a microscope, but where we also carefully look at how we arrived at those truths.

By what criteria do we evaluate reasons? How are those criteria themselves evaluated? What is it for a belief or action to be justified? What is the relationship between justification and truth? [...] these epistemological considerations are fundamental to an adequate understanding of critical thinking and should be explicitly treated in basic critical thinking courses.¹⁴

13. [<https://theconversation.com/how-do-you-know-that-what-you-know-istrue-thats-epistemology-63884>]

14. [<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/BF00128144?no-access=true>]

THE MEANING OF THE WORD

Part of the limits that we experience in our understanding of truth, involves our interpretation of the word.

Merriam-Webster translates the word as follows:

a (1): the body of real things, events, and facts: actuality (2): the state of being the case: fact (3) often capitalized: a transcendent fundamental or spiritual reality b: a judgment, proposition, or idea that is true or accepted as true truths of thermodynamics c: the body of true statements and propositions

In addition, they also give the following definition: *Sincerity in action, character, and utterance.*¹⁵

'Truth' therefore clearly involves a multidimensional understanding of the word. For the purposes of this trend report, we will focus on the difference between these two definitions, and the implications thereof in the world in which we live.

The two seemingly opposing definitions are therefore:

1. Truth as a scientifically and/or historically provable fact [We refer to 'truth']
2. Truth as a correct representation of a world view, status quo or paradigm [We refer to 'to be true to ...']

Read on as we explore the different views on truth.

A JEWISH UNDERSTANDING OF TRUTH

From our Christian view, we share many beliefs and theological foundations with the Jewish faith. It is therefore interesting and informative to also understand something of the Jewish concept of truth – what it involves, and what it excludes. For the Jews, the opposite of truth isn't falsehood, but misleading.

*Generally speaking, while Judaism obviously attaches great significance to intellectual honesty, as evidenced, for example, in the constant quest for the truth in the debates and among the medieval philosophers, the main thrust in the appeals for Jews to be truthful is in the direction of moral truth and integrity.*¹⁶

In fact, there are many cases in which it will be possible for a Jew to lie, even if he was telling the truth. On the other hand, there are also some cases where it is right to lie in order to stay faithful to a bigger virtue or truth.

The most misleading way to tell a lie in the Jewish culture is therefore not to masquerade a false fact as the truth, but to manipulate the context or meaning of a set of facts in such a way that the final understanding thereof no longer matches the original paradigm or intention.

A good example of this way of thinking is found at the beginning of the story of creation, when the snake first talks to Eve:

"You will not certainly die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (Genesis 3:4-5, NIV). Although everything the snake says is factually true, he misleads Eve by misinterpreting the context and underlying meaning of the words on her behalf. This persuades her to act against God's rules, and to be unfaithful to His truth.

In another example a Jewish rabbi gives an interesting answer to the question of whether he believes that all the Biblical stories are historically, anthropologically and archeologically correct. His answer illustrates the differences in the different concepts of truth in a concrete way:

"I don't know if this is exactly how it happened, but I know the story to be true."

A MODERN PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERSTANDING OF TRUTH

Peter Rollins, in conversation with Rob Bell, talks to us about an understanding of truth from a Christian-philosophical background [*The Robcast feat. Peter Rollins: On God Parts 1-3*]. Rollins builds on Kant's understanding of where truth and beliefs are formed: outside a person, or in his/her inner world.

Kant makes a foundational distinction between the "objects" of subjective experience and the "objects" of "reality." He labels the former phenomena and that latter noumena. The noumena for Kant are things in themselves. These exist outside of and separate from the mind. This is what

15. [<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/truth>]

16. [<http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/truth-and-lies-in-the-jewish-tradition/>]

*we might call "reality" or actual states of affairs like what we saw in the correspondence theory. But for Kant, the noumena are entirely unknowable in and of themselves. However, the noumena give rise to the phenomena or are the occasion by which we come to know the phenomena.*¹⁷

In English we also distinguish between the different concepts of truth as 'factuality' [a factually proven truth] and 'fidelity' [to be true to a specific character or identity].

Let us look at how Peter Rollins applies this to our understanding of what exactly the truth involves.

Truth as An Objective Fact

As mentioned earlier, the first level of truth includes the objective, provable nature of a factual claim. The example that Rollins uses to illustrate this, is the case where a mother calls her baby the most beautiful baby in the world. If this comment had to be judged objectively, there are no factual grounds that the mother can base her claim on.

According to an objective, factual understanding of truth, the mother's comment is clearly false. Yet, we all intuitively understand that the mother isn't purposefully telling a lie. There has to be another way in which her comment about 'the most beautiful baby in the world' can be true.

Truth as An Experience

In light of Rollins' example, we can also understand the mother's comment in the context of 'truth as experience'. When she claims that her baby is the most beautiful baby in the world, she doesn't necessarily refer to an objectively provable fact, but her own subjective experience.

Truth in this context is therefore to equally applicable to everyone, but only to those who had been exposed to a similar experience.

In Rollins' example, the comment is true for the mother in relation to her experience as the mother and caregiver of the child. The baby has 'redefined' her definition of beauty to the point where the child is the complete embodiment of her concept of beauty.

Truth As a Transformational Force

The last way in which truth exists, is not as an objective fact or a subjective experience. In its third application, Rollins states that any fact, experience or comment only carries the power of 'truth' if it inspires the one making the claim to act.

In short, only those facts that determine and lead our actions, can be classified as truth.

In this case, the beauty of the child invites the mother to provide love, generosity, selflessness and care. The awareness of the baby's beauty convinces the mother to change her behaviour and it is therefore a transformational truth in the life and consciousness of the mother.

According to Rollins, truth as a transformational power is the purest form of truth, because it exists apart from the clouded aspects of changing perceptions and contexts.

It also reminds us of the following verses that all link truth to changed behaviour:

"Jesus replied, "Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them." (John 14:23, NIV)

"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." (John 13:35, NIV)

"What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." (James 2:14,17, NIV)

17. [<http://www.philosophynews.com/post/2015/01/29/What-is-Truth.aspx>]

A CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF TRUTH

The Bible as Truth

In the Christian tradition there are also many different ways of defining and understanding truth. The first important concept to discuss is 'the Bible as truth'. In a recent article *Relevant Magazine* reported that *Lifeway Research* found that only 36% of Americans believe that the Bible is 'true'. The Barna Group, in a similar study, found the following about the general public's perception of the Scripture:

According to the Barna study, the percent of engagement people have with the Bible— from being engaged (reading the Bible at least four times a week), friendly (engaged with the Bible less than four times a week), neutral (read the Bible once a month or less and see the Bible as the inspired word of God, but acknowledge it can have some errors) and sceptical (see the Bible as "just another book of teachings written by men")— has started to stabilize and return to its normal rates after the rate of scepticism increased by 4 percent to 14 percent and the rate of friendliness dropped 8 percent to 37 percent in 2011. Now, six years later, the friendliness rate has rested at 38 percent, the neutrality rate is 23 percent, engagement is 20 percent and scepticism is lowest at 19 percent.¹⁸

Of course, a better question would be: 'How do the readers experience that the Bible is true?'. In our discussion above, we see that there are different ways in which truth is applied in our lives and beliefs. Where the study falls short, is to say whether the readers that do see the Bible as the truth, also considers it to be an objective, factual truth, or possible something else.

Jesus as Truth

When we look up Jesus' words about truth, we immediately see that He presents Himself as the true embodiment of truth. He doesn't see Himself as separate from truth, but defines Himself as an incarnated truth.

Again Jesus used the definite article to emphasize Himself as "the only truth." Psalm 119:142 says, "Your law is the truth." In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus reminded His listeners of several points of the Law, then said, "But I say unto you . . ." (Matthew 5:22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44), thereby equating Himself with the Law of God as the authoritative standard of righteousness.

In fact, Jesus said that He came to fulfil the Law and the prophets (Matthew 5:17). Jesus, as the incarnate Word of God (John 1:1) is the source of all truth.¹⁹

According to the New Testament, we understand that truth is not found only as an objective fact, experience or transformational power, but also as a relationship with Jesus.

Truth is revealed to us as our relationship with Jesus grows.

Truth is therefore a Person, and our relationship with Him.

Truth As Faithfulness To God

Ultimately, the purest form of Biblical truth as found in Jesus, isn't based on an objective, historically provable fact. Truth in this sense can be better defined as faithfulness to the character and nature of God.

Here's a simple definition drawn from what the Bible teaches: Truth is that which is consistent with the mind, will, character, glory, and being of God. Even more to the point: Truth is the self-expression of God. That is the biblical meaning of truth. Because the definition of truth flows from God, truth is theological.²⁰

If we therefore think about what truth is, it seems to be more about aligning ourselves with principles that correspond with the identity and character of God, than a collection of propositional statements or terms.

18. [<https://relevantmagazine.com/slice/study-36-of-americans-believe-that-the-bible-istrue/>]

19. [<https://www.gotquestions.org/way-truth-life.html>]

20. [<https://www.gty.org/library/articles/A379/what-is-truth>]

WHAT IS THE CHURCH TO DO?

Recent studies show that when like-minded people move in groups, it becomes exceptionally difficult for them to critically evaluate facts and get rid of myths and lies.

All in all, these findings add to the ongoing conversation about misinformation in increasingly connected online environments. Critics of social media often point to its complicity in creating "echo chambers" that selectively expose us to like-minded people and to content that matches and reinforces our beliefs. But our participants seemed reluctant to question claims even in the presence of strangers, suggesting that this effect may be amplified.²¹

This reality then creates an extra responsibility for leaders in local congregations to ensure that our faith is based on real truths, and not on popular opinions brought to us by virtual echo chambers. In the context of 'fake news', 'truthiness' and 'post-truth' world views, it is very important to critically evaluate everything presented as 'truth', whether cultural, historical or religious truth.

Here are a few practical guidelines for local congregations who want to resist the temptation of false truths:

- 1. Launch an empowerment series** [whether as a course or series of sermons] that focus on the ability of discernment in an era of information overload. Empower believers to, in a respectful way, keep a healthy distance from any seemingly factual claim that doesn't necessarily stand up to the test of real truth.
- 2. Cultivate a culture** of compromise and grace. This is especially necessary where believers from diverse backgrounds, contexts and beliefs must serve together in one local congregation.
- 3. Lead the local congregations to a deeper understanding** of truth that goes further than objective, scientific proofs of a factual truth. Ask the question of what it means to be convinced of the truth in relation to the nature, character and identity of God, rather than dogmatic statements and teachings.
- 4. Facilitate an in-depth Bible study experience** where the concept of 'truth' is placed under the microscope. Focus especially on truth as the Person of Jesus, and truth as our relationship with Him.
- 5. Start open discussions** among local believers about current issues, especially where the truth isn't obvious, or where the media or press misrepresented the facts on purpose. Discuss the factors and role-players that caused any possible false perceptions and beliefs.

21. [<https://hbr.org/2017/08/research-being-in-a-group-makes-us-less-likely-to-fact-check>]

For any enquiries:

info@ekerk.org

www.ekerk.org

 **EKERK**
Jesus - sigbaar, voelbaar, verstaanbaar