**The Bible As Truth**

Gordon H. Clark

*Editor's note: “The Bible As Truth” was first published in Bibliotheca Sacra (April 1957) and reprinted in God's Hammer: The Bible and Its Critics (1995). The Bible and its system of truth are still under attack today, even from so-called conservative theologians. The church needs to be brought back to its only authority—the Bible, for the Bible alone is the Word of God.*

In a game of chess a player can become so engrossed in a complicated situation that, after examining several possibilities and projecting each one as far ahead as he is able, he finally sees a brilliant combination by which he may possibly win a pawn in five moves, only to discover that it would lose his queen. So, too, when theological investigations have been pursued through considerable time and in great detail, it is possible to overlook the obvious. In the present state of the discussions on revelation, it is my opinion that what needs most to be said is something obvious and elementary. This paper, therefore, is a defense of the simple thesis that the Bible is true.

This thesis, however, does not derive its main motivation from any attack on the historicity of the Bible narratives. The destructive criticism of the nineteenth century still has wide influence, but it has received a mortal wound at the hand of twentieth-century archaeology. A new form of unbelief, though it may be forced to accept the Bible as an exceptionally accurate account of ancient events, now denies on philosophical grounds that it is or could be a verbal revelation from God. So persuasive are the new arguments, not only supported by impressive reasoning but even making appeals to Scriptural principles, which every orthodox believer would admit, that professedly conservative theologians have accepted them more or less and have thus betrayed or vitiated the thesis that the Bible is true.

Because the discussion is philosophical rather than archaeological, and hence could be pursued to interminable lengths, some limits and some omissions must be accepted. Theories of truth are notoriously intricate, and yet to avoid considering the nature of truth altogether is impossible if we wish to know our meaning when we say that the Bible is true. For a start, let it be said that the truth of statements in the Bible is the same type of truth as is claimed for ordinary statements, such as: Columbus discovered America, two plus two are four, and a falling body accelerates at thirty-two feet per second per second. So far as the meaning of truth is concerned, the statement “Christ died for our sins” is on the same level as any ordinary, everyday assertion that happens to be true. These are examples, of course, and do not constitute a definition of truth. But embedded in the examples is the assumption that truth is a characteristic of propositions only. Nothing can be called true in the literal sense of the term except the attribution of a predicate to a subject. There are undoubtedly figurative uses, and one may legitimately speak of a man as a true gentleman or a true scholar. There has also been discussion as to which is the true church. But these uses, though legitimate are derivative and figurative. Now, the simple thesis of this paper is that the Bible is true in the literal sense of true.

After a thorough understanding of the literal meaning is acquired, the various figurative meanings may be investigated; but it would be foolish to begin with figures of speech before the literal meaning is known.

This thesis that the Bible is literally true does not imply that the Bible is true literally. Figures of speech occur in the Bible, and they are not true literally. They are true figuratively. But they are literally true. The statements may be in figurative language, but when they are called true the term true is to be understood literally. This simple elementary thesis, however, would be practically meaningless without a companion thesis. If the true statements of the Bible could not be known by human minds, the idea of a verbal revelation would be worthless. If God should speak a truth, but speaks so that no one could possibly hear, that truth would not be a revelation. Hence the double thesis of this paper, double but still...
elementary, is that the Bible—aside from questions and commands—consists of true statements that men can know. In fact, this is so elementary that it might appear incredible that any conservative theologian would deny it. Yet there are some professed conservatives who deny it explicitly and others who, without denying it explicitly, undermine and vitiate it by other assertions. The first thing to be considered, then, will be the reasons, supposedly derived from the Bible, for denying or vitiating human knowledge of its truths.

**The Effect of Sin on Man’s Knowledge**

The doctrine of total depravity teaches that no part of human nature escapes the devastation of sin, and among the passages on which this doctrine is based are some which describe the effects of sin on human knowledge. For example, when Paul in 1 Timothy 4:2 says that certain apostates have their conscience seared with a hot iron, he must mean not only that they commit wicked acts but also that they think wicked thoughts. Their ability to distinguish right from wrong is impaired, and thus they give heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of devils. Therefore, without in the least denying that sin has affected their volition, it must be asserted that sin has also affected their intellect. And though Paul has in mind a particular class of people, no doubt more wicked than others, yet the similarity of human nature and the nature of sin force the conclusion that the minds of all men, though perhaps not to the same degree, are impaired. Again, Romans 1:21, 28 speak of Gentiles who become vain in their imaginations and whose foolish hearts were darkened; when they no longer wanted to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind. In Ephesians 4:17 Paul again refers to the vanity of mind and the darkened understanding of the Gentiles, who are alienated from the life of God through ignorance and blindness. That ignorance and blindness are not Gentile traits only but characterize the Jews also, and therefore the human race as a whole, can be seen in summary condemnation of all men in Romans 3:10-18, where Paul says that there is none who understands. And, of course, there are general statements in the Old Testament: “the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked” (Jeremiah 17:9).

These noetic effects of sin have been used to support the conclusion that an unregenerate man cannot understand the meaning of any sentence in the Bible. From the assertion “there is none who understands,” it might seem to follow that when the Bible says, “David...took out a stone...and struck the Philistine in his forehead,” an unbeliever could not know what the words mean.

The first representative of this type of view, to be discussed here, are centered in the faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Cornelius Van Til and some of his colleagues prepared and signed a document in which they repudiate a particular statement of the unregenerate man’s epistemological ability. A certain professor, they complain, “makes no absolute qualitative distinction between the knowledge of the unregenerate man and the knowledge of the regenerate man” (The Text of a Complaint, page 10, column 2). This statement not only implies that an unbeliever finds it less easy to understand that David smote the Philistine, but in asserting an absolute qualitative distinction between whatever knowledge he derives from that statement and the knowledge a regenerate man derives, the quotation also suggests that the unregenerate man simply cannot understand propositions revealed to man.

In another paper, two of Van Til’s associates declare that it is “erroneous” to hold that “regeneration...is not a change in the understanding of these words” (A. R. Kuschke, Jr., and Bradford, A Reply to Mr. Hamilton, 4). According to them, it is also erroneous to say, “when he is regenerated, his understanding of the proposition may undergo no change at all [but] that an unregenerate man may put exactly the same meaning on the words...as the regenerate man” (6). Since these are the positions they repudiate, their view must be precisely the contradictory; namely, an unregenerate man can never put exactly the same meaning on the words as a regenerate man, that regeneration necessarily and always changes the meaning of the words a man knows, and that the unregenerate and regenerate cannot possibly understand a sentence in the same sense. These gentlemen appeal to 2 Corinthians 4:3-6, where it is said that the Gospel is hidden to them that are lost, and to Matthew 13:3-23, where the multitudes hear the parable but do not understand it. These two passages from Scripture are supposed to prove that a Christian’s “understanding is never the same as that of the unregenerate man.”

As a brief reply, it may be noted that though the Gospel be hidden from the lost, the passage does not state that the lost are completely ignorant and know nothing at all. Similarly, the multitudes understood the literal meaning of the parable, though neither they nor the disciples understood what Christ was illustrating. Let us grant that the Holy Spirit by regeneration enlightens the mind and leads us gradually into more truth, but the Scripture surely does not teach that the Philistines could not understand that David had killed Goliath. Such a view has not been common among Reformed writers; just one, however, will be cited as an example. Abraham Kuyper, in his Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology (110-111), after specifying eight points at which we are subjected to error because of sin adds:

The darkening of the understanding...does not mean that we have lost the capacity of thinking logically, for so far as the impulse of its law of life is concerned, the logica has [sic] not [italics his] been impaired by sin. When this takes place, a condition of insanity ensues...sin has weakened the energy of thought...[but] the universal human consciousness is always able to
overcome this sluggishness and to correct these mistakes in reasoning.

In thus defending the epistemological ability of sinful man, Kuyper may have even underestimated the noetic effects of sin. Perhaps the human consciousness is not always able to overcome the sluggishness and correct mistakes in reasoning. The point I wish to insist on is that this is sometimes possible. An unregenerate man can know some true propositions and can sometimes reason correctly.

To avoid doing an injustice to Van Til and his associates, it must be stated that sometimes they seem to make contradictory assertions. In the course of their papers, one can find a paragraph in which they seem to accept the position they are attacking, and then they proceed with the attack. What can the explanation be except that they are confused and are attempting to combine two incompatible positions? The objectionable one is in substantial harmony with Existentialism or Neo-orthodoxy. But the discussion of the noetic effects of sin in the unregenerate mind need not further be continued because a more serious matter usurps attention. The Neo-orthodox influence seems to produce the result that even the regenerate man cannot know the truth.

Man’s Epistemological Limitations

That the regenerate man as well as the unregenerate is subject to certain epistemological limitations, that these limitations are not altogether the result of sin but are inherent in the fact that man is a creature, and even in glory these limitations will not be removed, is either stated or implied in a number of Scriptural passages. What these limitations are bears directly on any theory of revelation, for they may be so insignificant that man is almost divine, or they may be so extensive that man can understand nothing about God. First, a few but not all of the Scriptural passages used in this debate will be listed: “Can you search out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limits of the Almighty?” (Job 11:7); “Behold, God is great, and we do not know him, nor can the number of his years be discovered” (Job 36:26); “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain it” (Psalm 139:6); “for my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways” (Isaiah 55:8-9); “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and his ways past finding out! For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become his counselor?” (Romans 11:33-34); “Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God” (1 Corinthians 2:11).

These verses are simply samples, and many similar verses are easily remembered. Several of them seem to say that it is impossible for man to know God. We cannot search him out; we know him not; I cannot attain this knowledge; God’s thoughts are not ours; no one knows the mind of the Lord; and no one knows the things of God. It could easily be concluded that man is totally ignorant and that no matter how diligently he searches the Scripture, he will never get the least glimmering of God’s thought. Of course, in the very passage which says that no man knows the things of God, there is the strongest assertion that what the eye of man has not seen and what the heart of man has never grasped has been revealed to us by God’s Spirit “that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God.” It will not be surprising, therefore, if some attempts to expound the Biblical position are as confused actually as the Biblical material seems to be. With many statements of such theologians we all ought to agree; but other statements, misinterpreting the Scripture in the interest of some esoteric view of truth, ought to be rejected.

Man’s Knowledge in Relation to God’s

The professors above referred to assert, “there is a qualitative difference between the contents of the knowledge of God and the contents of the knowledge possible to man” (The Text, 5:1). That there is a most important qualitative difference between the knowledge situation in the case of God and the knowledge situation for man cannot possibly be denied without repudiating all Christian theism. God is omniscient; his knowledge is not acquired, and his knowledge, according to common terminology, is intuitive while man’s is discursive. These are some of the differences and doubtless the list could be extended. But if both God and man know, there must with the difference be at least one point of similarity; for if there were no point of similarity, it would be inappropriate to use the one term knowledge in both cases. Whether this point of similarity is to be found in the contents of knowledge, or whether the contents differ, depends on what is meant by the term contents. Therefore, more specifically worded statements are needed.

The theory under discussion goes on to say: “We dare not maintain that his knowledge and our knowledge coincide at any single point” (The Text, 5:3). The authors repudiate another view on the same grounds that “a proposition would have to have the same meaning for God as for man” (7:3). These statements are by no means vague. The last one identifies content and meaning so that the content of God’s knowledge is not its intuitive character, for example, but the meaning of the propositions, such as David killed Goliath. Twice it is denied that a proposition can mean the same thing for God and man, and to make it unmistakable they say that God’s knowledge and man’s knowledge do not coincide at any single point. Here it will stand repetition to say that if there is not a single point of coincidence, it is meaningless to use the single term knowledge for both God and man. Spinoza in attacking Christianity argued that the term intellect as applied to God and as applied to man was completely equivocal, just as the term dog is applied to a four-legged animal that barks and to the star in the sky. In such a case, therefore—if knowledge be defined—either
God knows and man cannot, or man knows and God cannot. If there is not a single point of coincidence, God and man cannot have the same thing, namely, knowledge.

After these five professors had signed this cooperative pronouncement, some of them published an explanation of it in which they said: “Man may and does know the same truth that is in the divine mind...[yet] when man says that God is eternal he cannot possibly have in mind a conception of eternity that is identical or that coincides with God’s own thought of eternity” (A Committee for the Complainants, The Incomprehensibility of God, 3). In this explanatory statement, it is asserted that the same truth may and does occur in man’s mind and in God’s. This of course means that there is at least one point of coincidence between God’s knowledge and ours. But while they seem to retract their former position in one line, they reassert it in what follows. It seems that when man says God is eternal, he cannot possibly have in mind what God means when God asserts his own eternity. Presumably the concept eternity is an example standing for all concepts, so that the general position would be that no concept can be predicated of a subject by man in the same sense in which it is predicated by God. But if a predicate does not mean the same thing to man as it does to God, then, if God’s meaning is the correct one, it follows that man’s meaning is incorrect and he is therefore ignorant of the truth that is in God’s mind.

This denial of univocal predication is not peculiar to the professors quoted, nor need it be considered particularly Neo-orthodox. Although the approach is different, the same result is found in Thomas Aquinas. This medieval scholar, whose philosophy has received the papal sanction, taught that no predicate can univocally be applied to God and created beings. Even the copula is cannot be used univocally in these two references. When therefore a man thinks that God is good or eternal or almighty, he not only means something different from what God means by good or eternal or almighty, but, worse (if anything can be worse) he means something different by saying that God is. Since as temporal creatures we cannot know the eternal essence of God, we cannot know what God means when he affirms his own existence. Between God’s meaning of existence and man’s meaning there is not a single point of coincidence.

The Scholastics and Neo-scholastics try to disguise the skepticism of this position by arguing that although the predicates are not univocal, neither are they equivocal, but they are analogical. The five professors also assert that man’s “knowledge must be analogical to the knowledge God possesses” (The Text, 5:3). However, an appeal to analogy—though it may disguise—does not remove the skepticism. Ordinary analogies are legitimate and useful, but they are so only because there is a univocal point of coincident meaning in the two parts. A paddle for a canoe may be said to be analogical to the paddles of a paddle-wheel steamer; the canoe paddle may be said to be analogous even to the screw propeller of an ocean liner; but it is so because of a univocal element. These three things—the canoe paddle, the paddle wheel, and the screw propeller—are univocally devices for applying force to move boats through water. With a univocal element, even a primitive savage, when told that a screw propeller is analogous to his canoe paddle, will have learned something. He may not have learned much about screw propellers and, compared with an engineer, he is almost completely ignorant—almost but not quite. He has some idea about propellers, and his idea may be literally true. The engineer and the savage have one small item of knowledge in common. But without even one item in common, they could not both be said to know. For both persons to know, the proposition must have the same meaning for both. And this holds equally between God and man.

If God has the truth and if man has only an analogy, it follows that he does not have the truth. An analogy of the truth is not the truth; even if man’s knowledge is not called an analogy of the truth but an analogical truth, the situation is no better. An analogical truth, except it contain a univocal point of coincident meaning, simply is not the truth at all. In particular (and the most crushing reply of all) if the human mind were limited to analogical truths, it could never know the univocal truth that it was limited to analogies. Even if it were true that such was the case; he could only have the analogy that his knowledge was analogical. This theory, therefore, whether found in Thomas Aquinas, Emil Brunner, or professed conservatives is unrelied skepticism and is incompatible with the acceptance of a divine revelation of truth. This unrelied skepticism is clearly indicated in a statement made in a public gathering and reported in a letter dated March 1, 1948, to the Directors of Covenant House. The statement was made, questioned, and reaffirmed by one of the writers mentioned above that the human mind is incapable of receiving any truth; the mind of man never gets any truth at all. Such skepticism must be completely repudiated if we wish to safeguard a doctrine of verbal revelation.

Truth Is Propositional

Verbal revelation—with the idea that revelation means the communication of truths, information, propositions—brings to light another factor in the discussion. The Bible is composed of words and sentences. Its declarative statements are propositions in the logical sense of the term. Furthermore, the knowledge that the Gentiles possesses of an original revelation can be stated in words: “Those who practice such things are worthy of death.” The work of the law written on the hearts of the Gentiles results in thoughts, accusations, and excuses which can be and are expressed in words. The Bible nowhere suggests that there are any inexpressible truths. To be sure, there are truths which God has not expressed to man, for “the secret things belong to the Lord our God”; but this is not to say that God is ignorant of the subjects, predicates, copulas, and logical concatenations of these secret things.
Once again we face the problem of equivocation. If there could be a truth inexpressible in logical, grammatical form, the word *truth* as applied to it would have no more in common with the usual meaning of truth than the Dog Star has in common with Fido. It would be another case of one word without a single point of coincidence between its two meanings. The five professors, on the contrary, assert, “we may not safely conclude that God’s knowledge is propositional in character.” And a doctoral dissertation of one of their students says: “It appears a tremendous assumption without warrant from Scripture and therefore fraught with dangerous speculation impinging upon the doctrine of God to aver that all truth in the mind of God is capable of being expressed in propositions.” To me, the tremendous assumption without warrant from Scripture is that God is incapable of expressing the truth he knows. And that his knowledge is a logical system seems required by three indisputable evidences: first, the information he has revealed is grammatical, propositional, and logical; second, the Old Testament talks about the wisdom of God and in the New Testament Christ is designated as the Logos in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge; and third, we are made in the image of God, Christ being the light that lights every man.

Certainly, the burden of proof lies on those who deny the propositional construction of truth. Their burden is twofold. Not only must they give evidence for the existence of such truth, but first of all they must make clear what they mean by their words. It may be that the phrase *nonpropositional truth* is a phrase without meaning.

What I apprehend to be this confusion as to the nature of truth has spread beyond the group criticized above. The thought of Edward J. Carnell would presumably not find favor with them, and yet on this point he seems to have adopted much the same position. Consider his argument in *A Philosophy of the Christian Religion* (450-453). He begins by distinguishing two species of truth: first, “the sum total of reality itself;” and second, “the systematic consistency or propositional correspondence to reality.” It is not irrelevant to the argument to consider the correspondence theory of truth, but it might lead to a discussion too extended for the immediate purpose. Suffice it to say that if the mind has something which only corresponds to reality, it does not have reality; and if it knows reality, there is no need for an extra something which corresponds to it. The correspondence theory, in brief, has all the disadvantages of analogy. Carnell illustrates the first species of truth by saying, “The trees in the yard are truly trees.” No doubt they are, but this does not convince one that a tree is a truth. To say that the trees are truly trees is merely to put literary emphasis on the proposition, the trees are trees. If one said the trees are not truly trees, or, the trees are falsely trees, the meaning would simply be, the trees are not trees. In such illustrations no truth is found that is not propositional, and no evidence for two species of truth is provided. Carnell then describes a student taking an examination in ethics. The student may know the answers, even though he himself is not moral. But the student’s mother wants him not so much to know the truth as to be the truth. Carnell insists that the student can be truth. Now, obviously the mother wants her son to be moral, but what meaning can be attached to the phrase that the mother wants the son to be the truth? Let it be that thinking is only preparatory to being moral, as Carnell says, not what can be meant by being the truth; that is, what more can be meant than being moral? The student could not be a tree. It seems therefore that Carnell is using figurative language rather than speaking literally. He then refers to Christ’s words, “I am...the truth.” Now, it would be ungenerous to conclude that when Christ says “I am...the truth,” and then the student may be said to be the truth, that Christ and the student are identified. But to avoid this identification, it is necessary to see what Christ means by his statement. As was said before, the Bible is literally true, but not every sentence in it is true literally. Christ said, “I am the door”; but he did not mean that he was made of wood. Christ also said, “This is my body.” Romanists think he spoke literally; Presbyterians take the sentence figuratively. Similarly the statement, “I am...the truth,” must be taken to mean, I am the source of truth; I am the wisdom and Logos of God; truths are established by my authority. But this could not be said of the student, so that to call a student the truth is either extremely figurative or altogether devoid of meaning.

Carnell also says: “Since their systems [the systems of thought of finite minds] are never complete, however, propositional truth can never pass beyond probability.” But if this is true, it itself is not true but only probable. And if this is true, the propositions in the Bible, such as David killed Goliath and Christ died for our sins, are only probable—they may be false. And to hold that the Bible may be false is obviously inconsistent with verbal revelation. Conversely, therefore, it must be maintained that whatever great ignorance may characterize the systems of human thought, such ignorance of many truths does not alter the few truths the mind possesses. There are many truths of mathematics, astronomy, Greek grammar, and Biblical theology that I do not know; but if I know anything at all, and especially if God has given me just one item of information, my extensive ignorance will have no effect on that one truth. Otherwise, we are all engulfed in a skepticism that makes argumentation a waste of time.

In the twentieth century it is not Thomas Aquinas but Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, the Neo-orthodox, and Existentialists who are the source of this skepticism to the detriment of revelation. Brunner writes:

> Here it becomes unmistakably clear that what God wills to give us cannot be truly *eigentlich* given in words, but only by way of a hint *hinweisend*.... Therefore because he [Jesus] is the Word of God, all words have a merely instrumental significance. Not only the linguistic vessel of words, but also the conceptual content
is not the thing itself, but only its form, vessel, and means.

The utter skepticism of this position—in which not only verbal symbols but the conceptual content itself is not what God really wills to give us—is disguised in pious phrases about a personal truth, or Du-Wahrheit, distinct from the subject-predicate relation called Es-Wahrheit. God cannot be an object of thought; he cannot be a Gegenstand for the human mind. Truth, instead of being a matter of propositions, is a personal encounter. Whatever words God might speak, Brunner not only reduces to hints or pointers, but he also holds that God’s words may be false. “God can, if he wishes, speak his Word to man even through false doctrine.” This is the culmination, and the comment should be superfluous.

In conclusion, I wish to affirm that a satisfactory theory of revelation must involve a realistic epistemology. By realism in this connection, I mean a theory that the human mind possesses some truth—not an analogy of the truth, not a representation of or correspondence to the truth, not a mere hint of the truth, not a meaningless verbalism about a new species of truth, but the truth itself. God has spoken his Word in words, and these words are adequate symbols of the conceptual content. The conceptual content is literally true, and it is the univocal, identical point of coincidence in the knowledge of God and man.

Christian Worldview Essay Contest
The winner of the 2008 Christian Worldview Essay Contest is Jeremy Mills of Tullahoma, Tennessee for his essay titled “Under God?” Jeremy, who is a student at Motlow State Community College, was awarded First Prize and $3000. The Second Prize and $2000 were awarded to Devra Dato-On of Richardson, Texas for her essay titled “Unless the Lord Build the House.” Devra is a student at Collin County Community College. The Third Prize and $1000 were awarded to Jesse Smith of Colorado Springs, Colorado for his essay titled “Foundations for a Free Capitalistic Republic.” Jesse is a high school special education paraprofessional. Congratulations to the winners! All contestants had to read Freedom and Capitalism: Essays on Christian Politics and Economics by Dr. John W. Robbins and write an essay about the book. Please visit our website, www.trinityfoundation.org, to view biographies of the winners and excerpts from their winning essays. The topic for the 2009 Christian Worldview Essay Contest will be announced after the first of the year.

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