

True' and Truth' in the Johannine Writings

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Geerhardus Vos may rightly be called “the father of Reformed biblical theology.” After accepting the professorship to the newly created chair of biblical theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, he served that institution for 39 years until his retirement in 1932 at the age of 70. During that time Dr. Vos achieved the reputation of a theologian whose biblical insight is without equal. The full impact of his exegetical labor is only now being realized, well beyond his own time.

Emphasizing the historical character of biblical revelation, Vos was able to clarify the pervasive meaning of Scripture by bringing into view its basic structure. Far from an array of isolated proof-texts, the Bible was, for Vos, an organism — its rich diversity was seen to give unanimous expression of its redemptive message.

We are accustomed to say that there is but one truth, and that what is not true is *ipso facto* false. And yet the New Testament knows of two kinds of “truth.” It may be well to add immediately that this does not mean applying the predicate “true” in an identical sense to statements that are logically contradictory and hence mutually exclusive of each other. Nor do we wish to have the doubleness understood according to the somewhat loose popular habit of affirming that the truth has various sides, so that what appears true from one point of view may seem different from another. In such a case it is not, of course, the identical thing that receives at one and the same time the opposite predicates, but only the various ingredients or aspects of the thing are described *per contraria*.

Nor, once again, do we mean to refer to the Ritschlian attempt of assigning certain complexes of things to diverse spheres, so that, for instance, in the realm of science or metaphysics a conclusion could be called false to which nevertheless the religious consciousness in the sphere of faith could feel bound to attach the opposite predicate of true, or vice versa.

What we mean is this: The words for true, truth, possess inherently two distinct connotations. One linguistic term serves to describe two different qualities, each carrying within itself two differently meant opposites. If there is a defect or a cause for misleading here, it is an inadequacy in the precision of the language, not in the idea or the reality of things. In excuse of the language it may be properly urged that the two meanings expressed by the same terms have a close

innate connection, so as to render the lack of distinction well nigh unavoidable to the average popular mind. Besides, the language has made some effort, as we shall see, to mark the distinction. Nevertheless, a real difference exists, and to miss it means the missing of a valuable and important item of biblical thought.

The two meanings can with sufficient approach to correctness be expressed by the two adjectives, veracious and veritable. True, as exchangeable with veracious, belongs to the conceptual or cognitive sphere. It denotes the agreement of a concept or its expression with the reality reflected in it. Its opposite is misrepresentation (intentional or non-intentional; in the former case falsehood). From the conception or expression it is extended to the person who conceives or conveys the thought or utterance. So soon as what he believes and what he speaks differ he can no longer be strictly called true, may this be due to an inadequacy of expression, in which case no moral blame will attach, or to a designed divergence, in which case the language stigmatizes him as untruthful or hypocritical.

It is not necessary to give many examples of this ordinary cognitive meaning of the term. Two instances may suffice: To receive Jesus' testimony is to set one's seal to the veracity of God (John 3:33); and, "herein is that saying true, one soweth and another reapeth" (4:37). Especially the Old Testament in a certain usage calls attention to the moral blame attaching to an untrue state of life. In the one word *emeth* it expresses the correctness of perception in religious things, and the loyalty to Jehovah going with or flowing from it. Thus true can become synonymous with good. This synonymity is worth noticing, because it reflects the scriptural judgment concerning the close nexus between right religious conviction and religious rightness in general (cf. John 3:30-21; 7: 18).

Cognitive truth so far touched upon is something intramental, subjective, predicable not of things in themselves, but conceptions or expressions about things. Without a thinking, thought-uttering subject, there could be no truth of this kind in the world. Even as to God this holds true; when what He declares is truth, it is because of the absolute correspondence between His declaration and the reality of some external object or of the thought or purpose in His mind.

The second meaning, designated above by veritable, is by no means so obvious or perspicuous as the one just commented upon. In fact it is apt to startle somewhat when first brought to the attention of the Bible student. When Jesus is called "the true light" (John 1:9), or "the true bread" (6:32), this has nothing to do with His telling the truth, but may be approximately rendered "the veritable light," "the veritable bread." Veritable is that which answers to the highest conception or ideal of something. In the same way Jesus calls Himself the "true vine" and His Father the "husbandman" (15:1). Somewhat less obvious, but none the less surely intended, is the description of the ideal worshipers as "true worshipers" (4:23), although here what follows about the duty of worshiping "in spirit and in truth" has mistakenly led to interpreting "truth" by sincerity, of which more anon.

In I John 2:8 the “true light” is not different from that of verse 9 in the Prologue of the Gospel, and there is no reason to depart from this meaning, when in I John 5:20 God is twice called the *alethinós* (veritable) God.

These are all the indubitable instances from the Gospel and the first epistle, so far as the adjective comes under consideration, but the same phenomenon can be observed in regard to the noun. When Jesus is called “the truth,” it would be a rash judgment to assert that this can mean nothing else than that His words are the supreme, incarnate veracity. The noun can just as well mean, and undoubtedly, in view of the usage of the adjective, sometimes does mean, that the supreme reality of the things that compose His character is incarnate in Him. The fulness of “truth,” which, side by side with “grace,” resides in the Only Begotten, must mean far more than the reliability pertaining to His words; similarly the “grace and truth” which, in contrast to the law of Moses, “came [or became] through Jesus Christ,” must have a wider and deeper reference, if justice is to be done to the context.

When Jesus, in 14:6, makes the triple identification between the “way,” the “truth,” and the “life,” and Himself, the very point of the statement is missed when, as is so frequently done, the three concepts are simply coordinated, and the content of each unfolded separately. The context shows that what was in question was the “way” to the place whither Jesus was going. This place consisted in the house of the Father with the many mansions; He is the way to this because He Himself is bound for this. The identification with Him furnishes absolute certainty of the disciples’ arriving there. This is then further made clear by the two following explicative concepts: He is specifically the truth, the veritable essence of that region to which He is going; and within that essence again He is the life characteristically belonging to it. Somewhat more doubtful, but on the whole pointing in the same direction, is the description of believers as being “out of the truth” (John 18:37; cf. I John 3:19), and of being made “free by the truth” (John 8:32; cf. vs. 36: “If the Son therefore shall make you free”).

It will be observed that most of the instances in which this notion of veritableness occurs are from the Gospel and the first epistle. In the two smaller epistles it is not in evidence, which, considering the small size and the more particular purpose of these two documents, can hardly cause surprise. But neither do we meet with it in the Apocalypse, a book of no such small extent. Possibly this is to be explained from the prophetic, strongly asseverative style here prevailing, since this naturally attracts the use of the adjective to the emphatic affirmation of the veracity of God and of Christ (cf. Rev.3:7,14; 15:3; 16:7; 19:2,9,11; 21:5; 22:6). This shows itself in the fact, also, that *pistos*, “faithful,” repeatedly appears as its synonym.

The idea, “veritable,” is so general as to render necessary the question, wherein the veritableness consists, or what is its cause. On this we obtain light by observing that the veritable things appear in a more or less clear association with

heaven. The proximate definition is a local one. A rapid survey of the passages will bear this out. Not confining ourselves now to the Johannine writings, in which, to be sure, the bulk of the evidence appears, we note, first, Luke 16:11, toward the close of the parable of the dishonest steward. Here Jesus puts the question: "If therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true?" The adjective *alethinous* needs to have repeated with it from the former half of the sentence "mammon," meaning riches. There can be little doubt as to what these "veritable riches" are. They are the riches laid up in heaven (cf. Matt. 6:19-21). In this particular case what corresponds to them is the asset of assurance of a glad welcome in "the everlasting habitations" from those befriended on earth. "The veritable light" of John 1:9 is represented as a light "coming into the world," that is, from heaven. This appears to be by far the preferable construction. The conclusion would not follow, of course, in case "coming into the world" were joined to "every man."

In John 4:23 the ideal worshipers are those who seek and adore God in His heavenly reality and habitation. At first sight the injection of the celestial element here might seem to be uncalled for, and the idea of "spirit" fully sufficient as a qualitative definition of the worship foretold, but verse 21 proves that a detachment from earthly localities and limitations is essential to the completion of the thought of worship "in truth." Nor is the mention of "spirit" in this connection by any means unmotivated, for at bottom spirit expresses the element, the atmosphere, wherein the heavenly reality consists. It is not improbable that here (as "grace and truth" in John 1:14, 17) "spirit and truth" must be understood on the principle of a hendiadys, equivalent to "spirit which is truth," spirit in its heavenly manifestation.

The association between the "veritable" character of Jesus' flesh as meat indeed and His blood as drink indeed (John 6:55) must have something to do with the emphasis placed throughout the context on the provenience of Jesus from heaven. The failure to understand this correctly is in part due to the loose translation, "bread indeed," "drink indeed," instead of "true bread," "true drink," as the Greek has. In fact, verse 32 and, following in this same chapter, 35 come near to a formal definition of what "veritableness" predicated of bread, signifies: "Moses gave you not that bread from heaven; but my Father giveth you the true bread from heaven." Decisive is, with personal reference to Jesus, "The bread of God is he which cometh down from heaven and giveth life to the world." That this is meant in the literal sense appears from the murmuring of the Jews against it, in verse 42, where it is by them opposed to Jesus' being the son of Joseph. No less emphatic and unequivocal is the statement of verses 50 and 51: "This is the bread which cometh down from heaven that a man may eat thereof and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live forever, and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world." The statement seems to verge on the idea that there is a close connection between the descent from heaven and the life-giving power of the bread suggests the somewhat analogous representation of Paul in I Corinthians

15:45, 47 to the effect that Christ is the Lord from heaven, and as such a quickening Spirit.

The two passages in the epistle to the Hebrews which use “veritable” in the same specific sense, 8:2 and 9:24, even more pointedly identify it with “in heaven.” It here is a technical term belonging to the typological system of the epistle, according to which the ritual things on earth are reflections, down-shadowings, of the ritual in heaven. The “holy places made with hands” are the figures of “the true,” that is, the heavenly, places. Nor is this parallelism in Hebrews confined to the ritual comparison. It rests on the broader theological background of the coexistence of two strata of creation (cf. Heb. 9:11, “not of this creation”; 12:22, “the heavenly Jerusalem”). Still in Hebrews the terminology of “veritableness” remains confined to the ceremonial contrast.

In John, on the other hand, the general theological background on which the distinction between true and its opposite rests is drawn in broader lines. “Veritableness” in its full, wide-ranging import cannot be comprehended here until it is placed in the light of the thorough bisection of the universe that dominates this teaching both in the discourse of Jesus and in the reflection of it in certain other statements of the Evangelist. A regular *schema* of contrasts with closely related forms of expression may here be recognized. It serves the formulation of the most pervasive and clean-cut differentiation between the natural and the supernatural found anywhere in Scripture. On the one side stand “the kosmos” (“this kosmos”), “the earth,” “the earthly things,” “the things beneath”; over against these stand “heaven,” “the heavenly things,” “the things above.” It will be noticed that this scheme lacks completeness only in that the term, *that world*, for the supernal region is not employed. The reason probably lies in the evil connotation which the word “kosmos” must have early acquired, since Paul also abstains from its use as a designation of the future eschatological state. Too pointed to be overlooked is its avoidance by Jesus in John 8:23: “Ye are from beneath; I am from above: ye are of this world; *I am not of this world,*” instead of, I am of that world. But apart from this, the terms named all imply the superiority and precedence of the higher sphere, and in so far entitle it to the predicate of “veritableness,” even where this is not explicitly combined with it as it is in other passages.

And this supernaturalism is all-embracing; it is more than the remedial and sporadic supernaturalism of redemption which restores the normality of things disturbed by sin; while including the latter, it reaches out much further into the structure and reconstruction of creation on the largest of scales. The destiny appointed for man is to ascend from the lower to the higher. Because man fell out of the latter through the deflection of sin, the supreme Representative of heaven had to descend and restore the harmony of the pristine appurtenance. The parallelism sometimes runs athwart the antithesis of redemption. In John 3:12 the birth from above, soterically speaking a thoroughly supernatural event, is none the less classified with the “earthly things” of which Jesus had been

discoursing with Nicodemus, evidently because our Lord places above it, as still more absolutely pertaining to “the heavenly things,” a yet higher birth, of the nature of which it were perhaps presumptuous in us to endeavor to form a concrete conception, although it has led theologians, and not merely ultra-dogmatic ones, but likewise some ultra-philosophical critical exegetes of the gospel, to assume a reference by way of indirection to what is theologically called the eternal generation of the Son by the Father within the Godhead.

It is further noteworthy that in certain contexts of the gospel the truth of Jesus’ witness is significantly associated with His preexistence, that is, with His original abode in the sphere of heaven. This, however, refers rather to the “veracity” of His Person and words than to their “veritableness,” so that, strictly speaking, it falls outside of the present discussion. Still, it may be remembered that, in so far as the things spoken in witness are information brought down from heaven, “things heard and seen” by Jesus, they would be at the same time “veracious” and things concerning the “veritable,” so that the two conceptions would practically flow together (cf. John 3: 12, 13, 19, 21, 31-33; 8:14; 17:17; 18:37; I John 2:8; 5:21). It cannot be otherwise than that the words of Him who is by nature and origin the “veritable” One should partake of the same character precisely because they are His. His kingdom is not of this world (but of the heavenly world), and for this very reason He came from the higher into the lower world that He should bear witness unto “the truth,” and that every one that is of “the truth” should hear His voice (18:37).

The precise connotation can in some instances be tested by the terms appropriate to what is opposite to “the truth.” When in I Thessalonians 1:9 Paul speaks of the readers having turned from idols “to serve the living and true God,” the opposite is, of course, “false gods,” but one immediately feels that in this “false” a totally different judgment is expressed than that of the untruthfulness of the pagan divinities. The idea is obviously that if not absolutely the existence, at least the proper reality and power belonging to the divine are denied to these so-called gods. In this sense the Christian God is “the only *alethinos* God” (John 17:3); what the opposite means Paul has succinctly expressed in calling the pristine objects of worship of the Galatians such as “by nature are no Gods” (Gal. 4:8). The ordinary meaning of “false” can certainly not be applied to the law with which the grace and truth come by Christ are contrasted. For it is said of this law that it was given “through Moses.” The use of “through” instead of “by” presupposes that Moses was only the instrument in giving the law, and this again has for its supposition that the actual lawgiver was none other than God (John 1:17). And this of itself refutes the charge of Gnostic tendencies sometimes brought against the gospel, particularly on the basis of this passage.

The law was not yet the highest, antitypical grace which was necessary to constitute it “truth”; it was typical adumbration, but it was not on that account “false” in the invidious sense. The contrast is the same as the epistle to the Hebrews expresses in 10:1: “The law having a shadow of good things to come,

not the very *eikon* of the things," etc. But the Gnostics maintained that the law was "false," deceptive, void of veracity. The utmost charge that the New Testament (Paul, Hebrews, John) brings against the law relates to its inefficacy; hence in that passage just quoted from Hebrews the author adds "can never . . . make perfect." The worship in spirit and truth, to which our Lord points the Samaritan woman forward, has not for its opposite a totally "false" worship. At least with reference to the worship observed by the Jews in Jerusalem it is said by Jesus, "We worship that which we know." The reason given for this is that "salvation is from the Jews." The dispensation that gives birth to salvation must be absolutely "veracious"; the good cannot come out of the evil. And it ought to be noted that Jesus by use of the plural pronoun "we" explicitly includes Himself in the number of those who worship according to the Old Testament rule, a thing impossible to conceive had He, or the Evangelist for that matter, regarded this rule as "false" in the odious sense.

Because of its pervasive construction of the universe on the principle of two strata and its derivation of the highest ideal and redemptive things from on high, the Fourth Gospel may be justly characterized as the most intensely anti-evolutionistic document in the New Testament, so far as the derivation of the origin and progress of religion is concerned. Nevertheless refuge is sometimes had in it as an arsenal furnishing evolutionistic ammunition. Those who employ this method must be indeed hard up for a text on which to hang their modern, quasi-scientific fashion of teaching or preaching.

Not long ago an academic preacher distilled evolution from the statement in John 10:10, "I am come that they might have life, and might have it more abundantly." There are at least a score, if not more, passages in the Gospel which emphasize that the life represented and communicated by Jesus does not grow up from beneath, but descends from above, and receives its increase from above. The slightest scientifically exegetical and historical acquaintance with the document ought to have protected against such a caricature. In John 8:23 Jesus claims for Himself, in the most unequivocal manner, His not being from beneath, but from above. He is simply "not of this world." And what is true of Jesus is, of course, on the principles of the Johannine teaching throughout, in the statements both of Jesus and of the Evangelist, applicable to the disciples, for in no document is the identification of Jesus with the believer more emphatically affirmed. Hence the strand that runs through the Gospel tracing the detachment of the disciples from "the world" back to the choice or love or the gift of God from eternity.

It were a mistake, however, to conceive of the contrast as primarily intended to convey philosophical ideas. The difference between "the true things" and "the not-true things" is not conceived after a Platonic or Philonic fashion. The world above is not called "true" as though it contained a higher reality of being in the substantial metaphysical sense. Both spheres are equally real. The difference comes in through an appraisal of quality and importance. What is practically

involved is the principle of ultimate spiritual value in regard to destiny. The practical name for this is the principle of “otherworldliness.”

In conclusion a few words may be added as to the effort of the language to mark the differences of conception involved by the use of specific words. Only to a partial degree does such effort show itself. The language had no means in the noun form to express the difference between “veraciousness” and “veritableness.” Here the one word *aletheia* had to render service for both. For distinguishing these two concepts in their adjectival form, two words were available, or rather one word with two endings, a weaker and a stronger one. From the one stem spring *alethes* and *alethinos*. As the prolonged ending with the long vowel in the penult indicates, the latter is the stronger, intensified form.

Now, in the abstract it would have been possible to allot one of these two forms to the one meaning, the other to the other. But words and word-forms are not so mechanically parcelled out. A form carrying peculiar intensity will as a rule cling to the general idea in every one of its shades of meaning, and render its service of intensifying impartially. So it has happened here. The intensifying word *alethinos*, instead of binding itself to the meaning, veritable, which is doubtless the more intense one, if the two meanings be conceptually compared, has not separated itself from the meaning “veracious.” It has been continued in use where the necessity of saying “intensely veracious” offered itself (cf. John 4:37; 7:28; 8:16; 19:35; Rev. 15:3; 16:7; 19:2,9, 11; 21:5; 22:6).

But, while veracious can on occasion acquire this emphatic meaning, which summons the intensifying *alethinos* to its aid, the concept, veritable, carries the intensity in itself, and consequently makes regular use of *alethinos* for expression. There is but one instance of the sense, veritable, where *alethinos* is not employed, viz., John 6:55.¹ To that extent, and to that only, it may be affirmed that to veritableness corresponds in the Greek of the New Testament *alethinos*. But we must be careful not to reverse this by saying, as some expositors have done, that *alethinos* uniformly means *veritable*, in the technical meaning defined in this paper.

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¹ If we could follow the ordinary rendering of both A.V. and R.V., “my flesh is meat *indeed*”; “my blood is drink *indeed*,” this one exception would fall away. But a comparison with the original will show that not the adverb *alethos* is read here, but the adjective *alethes*. The latter cannot mean indeed. At the same time, the context forbids giving it any lower meaning than veritable. The exception therefore stands.

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