

## Thinking Christianly: Experience

*By Pastor Ricky Stephen*

### John 18:33-40:

<sup>33</sup> Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?”

<sup>34</sup> “Is that your own idea,” Jesus asked, “or did others talk to you about me?”

<sup>35</sup> “Am I a Jew?” Pilate replied. “Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?”

<sup>36</sup> Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place.”

<sup>37</sup> “You are a king, then!” said Pilate.

Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.”

<sup>38</sup> “What is truth?” retorted Pilate. With this he went out again to the Jews gathered there and said, “I find no basis for a charge against him. <sup>39</sup> But it is your custom for me to release to you one prisoner at the time of the Passover. Do you want me to release ‘the king of the Jews’?”

<sup>40</sup> They shouted back, “No, not him! Give us Barabbas!” Now Barabbas had taken part in an uprising.

### Pilate’s Question and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Culture—Truth as Power and Truth as Self-Expression

Pilate’s question, “what is truth?”, is often related to our current experience of living in a ‘post-truth’ culture.

Western cultures assume the only truth that is valid is what is repeatable by experiment.

However, most of the things we use to organize our lives aren’t verifiable through those means—things like love, compassion, social welfare etc. So, these things are considered ‘beliefs’ or ‘values’.

Richard Dawkins has come right out and said it before “Much as we might wish to believe otherwise, universal love and the welfare of the species as a whole are concepts which simply do not make evolutionary sense.”

Two consequences arise out of this. First, and this is what our passage is really commenting on, truth is linked to power. Only those with political power can enforce things. Jesus’ discussion with Pilate is essentially about this, Pilate wants to know if He’s a king.

N.T. Wright translates Jesus' response:

"My kingdom isn't the sort that grows in this world," replied Jesus. "If my kingdom were from this world, my supporters would have fought, to stop me being handed over to the Judeans. But it's not like that. My kingdom isn't the sort that comes from here."<sup>1</sup>

While Christian revelation has been used for violence, Jesus does not express His power or grow His kingdom with violence. Might does not make right.

The second thing that happens is that life becomes about self-expression. This is best demonstrated by Elsa in *Frozen*. She has to 'let go' of all traditions and responsibilities and embrace the magic within herself.

Truth, in post-truth cultures, also becomes about self-expression. As Aleksander Solzhenitsyn observed, there are now as many centers to the universe as there are people.<sup>2</sup>

Carl Jung, earlier in the twentieth century, literally encased this as the goal of his psychotherapy. To help a person 'individuate.' To create for themselves their own myth, to be the hero in their own journey.<sup>3</sup>

Where do we go from here? What is truth, really?

### **Can we know the truth, really?**

Given how dismissive Pilate's question is, I think it's safe to assume his question is not so much 'what is truth' as 'can I know truth?'

What's the Christian perspective on this? Well, it's yes and no. In Scripture, you get places like Proverbs: "out in the open wisdom calls aloud, she raises her voice in the public square" (Prov. 1:20) And Jesus himself constantly holds people responsible for their lack of adherence to the truth, exasperated with them because of how self-evident it is. At one point, after speaking in a parable, Peter asks for the meaning. Jesus responds, "are you still so dull?" (Matt. 15:16)

And yet, we have passages like 1 Corinthians 13:12 where Paul writes: "For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known."

We also have whole books like Ecclesiastes, where the 'Teacher' says "...I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned this, too, is a chasing after the wind." (Eccl 1:13-14) All that seeking didn't matter, didn't help, didn't prove anything.

It sounds like when it comes to 'can we know truth' the answer is, yes, we can know *enough*. At least enough to be held responsible for not adhering to the truth. But there are things that will remain out of our grasp.

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<sup>1</sup> Wright, John for Everyone Pt. 2, pg 112.

<sup>2</sup> Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*

<sup>3</sup> See, Carl Jung, *The Red Book*.

In Ephesians 6:14, truth is the 'belt' in the armor of God. Belts hold up and hold together. Most of our society operates most of the time close to the biblical understanding of whether we know truth. We need to believe there is truth for our legal system to work, among other things.

### **Our Bodies and Truth**

Experience within the Wesleyan quadrilateral—Scripture, tradition, reason and experience—functions much like a witness in a courtroom. The testimony is valid, but there are checks and balances to ensure the perspective of the witness isn't clouding judgment.

The experiences of our bodies and information from our senses are held up as a valid way to know things in Christianity. Just listen to the scriptures:

John starts his first epistle with the words: "That which was from the beginning, which we have *heard*, which we have *seen with our eyes*, which we have *looked at* and our *hands have touched...*" (1 John 1:1).

Or Luke's gospel begins with: "Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us [concerning Jesus etc], just as they were *handed down* to us by those who from the first were *eyewitnesses* and servants of the word." (Luke 1:1-2)

Thomas said he would not believe unless he touched the scars on Jesus' body. And Jesus lets Him touch His scars.

The experience of our senses, of our bodies, is seen as a validation of the truth of the Gospel. It's seen as a valid way of knowing things.

This emphasis on our bodies being able to perceive and experience truth challenges most of us. It encourages us to remember our bodies and pay more attention to our sense experience. The Bible, especially in the Hebrew language, tends to point us towards embodiment—all the words for emotions relate to body parts.

### **All Experience is Interpreted**

But our bodies are not just experiencing reality, they are interpreting it. Augustine, in Book X of his *Confessions*, argues that we experience all things through memory.

A man who was on a hike once felt something scrape the back of his leg. He kept hiking only to pass out and find out he'd been bitten by a poisonous snake—his body interpreted the data incorrectly. When he returned to do that hike again, he was scraped by a stick and almost passed out in pain—because his body interpreted as a snake.

Our bodies interpret reality, they don't just experience it. So, we need to have other external ways of testing and verifying the truthfulness of our experiences. The best approach to our experiences is to be curious and inquisitive.

### **Examples of what to do with experience**

How does one do that? Two examples of our experience and its relation to truth.

Often our emotions do point us to truth and right action. My wife once told off a bunch of guys at a Christian college for being unkind to an opposing team. Her anger and rage at seeing them heckle an opposing team in inappropriate ways gave her the energy she needed to confront them.

Feelings are information. Sometimes we intuitively know what is right and our feelings help us move there. Sometimes, we need to bring our feelings before others. If someone says something that hurts or challenges us, we should tell them what we experienced and ask them what they meant.

A famous second example. A man once left his decades long girlfriend for their stepdaughter—who was 22 years younger than him. When asked why he thought that was ok, he answered “The heart wants what it wants. There's no logic to those things. You meet someone and you fall in love and that's that.”<sup>4</sup>

Let's submit this example to scripture, reason, and tradition.

What does Scripture say? Having been in a decades long relationship and had children with a woman, this guy should have been married to her. Sex is something for one man and one woman in covenant bonds for life. Strike one.

A quick walk-through Leviticus 18 and 19 makes it clear sex and romantic relationships within a family is a big no-no. You don't uncover a woman's nakedness and that of her daughter. Strike two.

How about reason? Men are most attracted to women who are of a childbearing age due to a biological desire to reproduce. To feel more 'chemistry' with a young woman over the older one he was committed to is, just that, chemistry. Not necessarily something to build your whole life upon, that.

Also, attraction is a tricky thing. Dr. Norman Doidge, famous for his work on neuroplasticity, points out that our attraction is determined by our experiences of bonding. If we were abused, neglected, or suffered unhealthy attachment patterns from guardians, we're likely to be attracted to people who repeat those patterns.<sup>5</sup> One study found women who were raised by alcoholic parents were twice as likely to marry alcoholics.<sup>6</sup>

Had this man been a thinking man, he might have concluded that the 'mutual attraction' of this young woman—who had been abandoned as a child—could be a confused desire for parental affection. Strike three.

Tradition: the easy assumption of this man is the assumption of that great philosopher Elsa. The assumption that following feelings leads to the best life. Well, regarding sex and relationships, there's a long history in Christianity of people who live celibate—including Jesus and Paul. I don't doubt the intense joy and fulfilled lives of either of these men, even though they suffered deeply. Their lives were some of the richest lives of meaning and joy found in history.

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<sup>4</sup> Woody Allen in a Time Magazine interview [here](#).

<sup>5</sup> Doidge, *The Brain that Changes Itself*, Ch.4

<sup>6</sup> Found [here](#).

Beyond that, you'll also find much discussion in tradition about eros or erotic love and what it really is. Eros is just the desire for intimacy, closeness, and connection. Often expressed in romantic love, yes. But not only. It points to the loves that are higher than itself.<sup>7</sup>

So, had this man been a Christian, he might have reached the conclusion that this intense feeling of attraction was his heart speaking, yes. But the heart rarely speaks plain English. Perhaps, he was lonely and needed to reach out to friends. Perhaps he was stressed and overwhelmed and liked the attention and could have found a more productive way to deal with his stress. Perhaps, this feeling was because there was something in his common law relationship he needed to address. The experience was not the truth, but it could have led to truth *had he thought about it*.

### **Conclusion: The Way, the Truth, the Life**

When Pilate asked the question “what is truth?” the answer many people would give today is the answer of this man—the heart wants what it wants. But, of course, the deep irony of this episode is that Pilate asks “what is truth” with the one who is ‘the way, the truth, and the life’ is standing right before him.

Jesus offers us ‘the way’. A method for living in truthfulness. A way of suffering that leads to new life and transformation.

He offers the truth. A reliable way for interacting with reality. His truth ‘sanctifies’ us, it helps reform our experiences. Renews our minds. Means that our history does not have to be our destiny.

He offers us the life. The indomitable life. The everlasting life.

God doesn’t just want you to know Him. He wants you to experience Him. Our faith is built off the experiences of real people in the real world. Open yourself up to that experience.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What spiritual experiences have you had? How have you made sense of them?
2. How have you understood 1 Corinthians 13:12? What does it mean to know only in ‘part’?
3. What does it look like to be intellectually humble and believe in truth?
4. What practices could help us be more in tune with our bodies?
5. Where have you experience your judgment clouded by past experiences?
6. How is being in relationship with Jesus—the truth in person—unique among approaches to truth?

Prayer:

Pray for each other and especially for Jesus to help ‘renew our minds’ and provide healing for the things that may have us interpreting reality through broken lenses.

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<sup>7</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, on Eros.