

What is Truth?: A Pentecostal Ethic

There are few things scarier than genuinely and openly stepping out in pursuit of truth. It is easy to be dogmatic but it is difficult to find the humility and courage necessary to begin unsettling one's own limited understanding for something truer and purer than what we have already known.

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I was heading back home to Harrisburg, PA after a few good days in Montgomery Alabama. For those that travel enough now that flight delays are frequently accompanied by complete strangers bonding over their frustrations with their airline. It is a good custom that cuts time off your wait. I happened to strike up conversation with an interesting woman also coming from Montgomery and heading to Harrisburg International Airport. We both had layovers in Charlotte, and so we struck up conversation. I explained to her why I was in Montgomery the past couple days. I was there as part of a [Red Letter Christians](#) gathering which this year focused our attention, as Christians leaders, on the good work of Brian Stevenson and the [Equal Justice Initiative](#). In response, I found out that she was a lawyer who had spent her entire life working on criminal justice reform, among other things. She was also a person of faith, initially growing up Quaker, and then moving around in various protestant denominations. Though she was an older white woman on the verge of retirement and I am a (not sure if 30s are still counted as young?) black male, we found common ground and shared some of our experience and stories.

As announcements that our flight was finally arriving started coming through the airport intercom, most people stood up and started gathering closer and closer to the gate, as if our presence would somehow speed up its arrival. Of course, it couldn't change that timing and so my new friend and I resumed our conversation. We talked a little more about our faith background which enticed a new person to join in, clearly enticed by the conversation. This middle aged white man had been listening in for a while, and now he felt free enough to join our conversation. He was also on his way to Harrisburg. He was also a person of faith. He was Presbyterian. And so we had an interesting ecumenical moment there, even as a few other people listened in as we talked about our different traditions that have shaped us.

My original friend, the older white female lawyer, suddenly turned the conversation from religion to politics with a quick comment about some of Donald Trump's cabinet choices and possibilities. I shared some of my concerns as well. Her main concern at the moment was environmental. Though both religion and politics are supposedly both taboo topics in the public square, it was the turn towards politics that obviously made our newest dialogue partner (the white middle aged man) a bit uncomfortable. He actually verbalized that he didn't want to talk politics. So he briefly backed out, and the lawyer and I continued on. Of course, politics are an enticing topic nonetheless and so our third friend eventually slipped back into the conversation. The conversation was focused on global warming and the deregulations that my lawyer friend thought were going to be initiated that would cause irreversible harm to the earth.

In response, our now fully returned dialogue partner questioned how we can really know that this is true. In response she cited the research of the science community, and she even knew the percentage of scientists that affirmed these trends. He smirked, and said "data." For him, it was liberal partisan research that could not be trusted. She insisted, that based on the numbers, it is in fact not a partisan issue at all and that scientists across the board can see the trends and understand that the research is solid. He, however, was not buying it and was not budging.

I've been aware of the fact that we have slipped into a deeply post-factual society. This came to a devastating climax, of course, during our election season. Not only were there deep distortions to the truth flying around in the media (which is already the norm), but there was an absorbent amount of fake news as well. The end result is that most people clung to what they already wanted to believe; black lives matter is a terrorist group, the government is covering up a planet that will hit the earth,

etc. Some of the fake news was believable, some of it was absurd, and some just intentionally slanted. And though I think some of the worst cases were from the far right, the left had many fake news articles being passed around through social media as well. But in either case, it makes meaningful conversation near impossible because people are basically living in alternative universe when it comes to what they understand to be true. The way we perceive reality doesn't mean that is actually the way things are.

After the group conversation ended, probably with each of my new white friends frustrated with one another, I continued talking to the lawyer. I explained that I thought that her approach was destined to fail. Her appeal to data, even if it was solid research, would not be persuasive because many people have been socialized to see such sources as mere liberal propaganda. People can easily find their own sources to confirm what they already believe, or fall into sources that will redirect what they believe towards a blatantly non-factual story. Seeking the truth is not as simple to grab hold of as we would like to think. When everyone takes for granted that they are already right, it is hard to imagine the possibility that one needs to openly search for truth. We are all socialized by various influences. We all have biases and limitations. What is at stake is whether we are really humble enough to dialogue and listen to other perspectives, weighing the evidence and arguments, and wise enough to be open to wherever our pursuits for truth lead us.

My final advice to my lawyer friend was that we all need to find new modes of communication that recognize we have become a post-factual society. We can no longer make the straightforward arguments, instead we must enter into dialogue within other people's frameworks. That is if we seek to be persuasive. Of course, some could care less about being persuasive. I fully get it. It's not your duty or responsibility. As a follower of Jesus, however, I believe I am called to more. And so with a Pentecostal spirit, we must speak the tongues of others. From within their language, and hence their linguistically structured world and framework, we must find ways of seeing, alongside our new dialogue partners, beyond the limitations of what has been said to be true. There are few things scarier than genuinely and openly stepping out in pursuit of truth. It is easy to be dogmatic but it is difficult to find the humility and courage necessary to begin unsettling one's own limited understanding for something truer and purer than what we have already known.

I have found that following Jesus actually demands not staying settled in my own beliefs. The call to follow him is a disruptive invitation to leave behind everything we

take for granted as we join such a revolutionary journey. And we are all invited to come. We all need to do some serious reflection around how we evaluate facts and what we consider to be true. We all are finite beings, so hopefully along the way we can become better listeners, and more Pentecostal, in that we begin to speak the good news of God from within the tongues of others.