

What Is Truth?

MOLLEURUS COUPERUS

5

The article in which Donald J. Ortner sets forth his views of the dialogue problems of science and religion, and the one in which Raymond F. Cottrell responds, involve a question which has troubled man ever since the dawn of history. It is the question that was voiced with such pathos by Pontius Pilate: *What is truth?*

Truth may be defined (*a*) as a statement of facts as they are known at the moment, or (*b*) as the way things really are, or (*c*) as an agreement of true facts and true statements. An essential characteristic of truth is its harmony with all other truths. If there seems to be conflict between the facts as they are understood in two fields of knowledge or thought, such as between science and religion, then an unbiased reexamination of the data and their interpretations in both areas is required. All of us reach maturity with a heritage of preconceived opinions, prejudices that are difficult to ignore, half-truths, and fallacies — all of which contribute to the conflict between truth and error in the individual, in the church, and in society in general.

An unbiased reexamination of an area of seemingly conflicting truth, therefore, is not easy, to say the least. In most individuals and organizations, it requires the passage of time — often a long period of time. For some individuals, even a lifetime seems too short a span in which to correctly relate tradition and long-held convictions and opinions to subsequently discovered fact and truth. An honest and serious attempt to accommodate all available data in one's concept of a specific truth must eventuate in a process of growth as knowledge, insights, and commitments develop.

There will be occasions when the evidence bearing on a problem may not be sufficient to make a decision as to where the preponderance of evidence

lies, and one may have to suspend final judgment and say *I do not know*. We must take care, however, that our preference for a certain opinion is not the underlying reason for remaining on the intellectual fence, or that we avoid facing the issues as they are by using an excuse like the phrase *the facts are not all in*. The absolute total of data, of course, is never in, and we must take our stand on what is actually available to us at any one time in our life.

In the human situation, truth is and must be progressive. It has been so in all of man's history, no matter how much truth was opposed and repressed at times. Doctrines and dogmas that were formulated with great care have often been looked upon as complete and final by those who authored them. When dogmas have been clothed in infallibility, then new insights and the demonstration of new facts have often been condemned as heresy, and persecution or schism has inevitably followed. The doctrine that was to be the basis for progressive understanding, knowledge, and growth became in reality a wall to keep out further truth.

Most of the problems that have arisen over conflicts between religion and science in the Christian churches during the last four centuries have been due, to a large extent, to a belief in some form of doctrinal infallibility, coupled with a faulty understanding of the intrinsic nature of truth. How different the relationship between science and the Christian Church might be today if the Church had been dedicated to a *continuing* quest for truth instead of imprisoning itself by static dogma and tradition. A church that claims to project a true picture of its God must first have respect for the coherence of all truth within God's creation if that church is to mediate trust in the God of that creation.

The concept of the essential unity of all truth, as well as an understanding of the progressive nature of the unfolding of biblical truth, has been a prominent part of Adventist belief. These statements by Kenneth H. Wood in the *Review and Herald* of April 3, 1969, reflect this concept well: "This illustrates a point that is beyond debate: truth never opposes truth. When we cannot see immediate harmony between revealed truth and discovered truth, between the Bible and science, between Scripture and reason, between the writings of Ellen G. White and the Bible, or between science and the writings of Ellen G. White, the problem usually is that we lack facts. At other times we are simply misinterpreting facts. Truth is always consistent with itself."

Ellen White stated her attitude very clearly on several occasions between 1881 and 1892, as illustrated by these statements from *Counsels to Writers*

and Editors: "The truth is an advancing truth, and we must walk in the increasing light. . . . There is no excuse for anyone in taking the position that there is no more truth to be revealed, and that all our expositions of Scripture are without an error. The fact that certain doctrines have been held as truth for many years by our people, is not a proof that our ideas are infallible. Age will not make error into truth, and truth can afford to be fair. No true doctrine will lose anything by close investigation. . . . The rebuke of the Lord will be upon those who would be guardians of the doctrine" (pages 33-38).

Truth, like freedom, is kept vital only at the price of *eternal vigilance*. Former expressions of truth may no longer reflect accurately the facts as we know them now. When this is so, they are then inadequate or defective declarations of *present truth*. A Christian's commitment to truth may be expected to be stronger than anyone else's. Failure to demonstrate this commitment presents a false picture of the character and nature of Him who is called in Scripture "the God of truth" — in whose likeness man was made and who has promised man the Spirit of truth to guide him into all truth, that man, like his Maker, might *love* the truth.