



We are moving towards a mindset where personal perceptions and feelings have authority to define what is true and right.

# Truth, tolerance, & science

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***This article could be read and discussed by senior students as a stimulus to discussion and reflection.***

In 2006, the world-renowned *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* declared its Word of the Year to be, “truthiness”. Truthiness was originally coined by the American satirical comedian Stephen Colbert and is defined as:

The quality of a claim seeming to be true, or feeling true, even if it isn't supported by logic or factual evidence.

The humour in Colbert's word came not because we find silly made-up words funny, but from his insightful observation that our view of what we deem to have authority for defining truth is shifting. He was observing, back in 2006, that we are moving towards a mindset where personal perceptions and feelings have authority to define what is true and right. In this view, our preferences and feelings can make a partial claim to truth and be ‘truthy’.

In a recent US presidential campaign, it became obvious that the notion of absolute truth (true truth) may be increasingly disposable in Western culture. Accusations of ‘fake-news’, coupled with the tendency for politicians to make substantial claims that are not based on any apparent rational or factual evidence, has led cultural commentators to suggest the birth of the ‘post-truth’ era.

Has what is true and right actually changed? In an objective sense, it is still the same reality, and world, that it has always been. So what has shifted? Truth? As a society, we used to believe that many things could be said to be true, or untrue; but, increasingly, we don't. Why not? To answer these and other questions about truth, we need to explore the changes in cultural storytelling about what we believe to have the authority to make claims on truth.

To help illustrate, consider the responses of a recent video survey done on an American university campus asking students, “Is there any difference between male and female?” Responses included:

“There is not much difference besides which society forces on us.”

“If you think you are a male or a female, that matters much more than biology.”

“Most sociologists agree that the concept of gender is more of a societal construct.”

Can you imagine the answers that might have been given 20 or 30 years ago in similar interviews? You may have actually received a confused pause as the students might have been thinking something like, “Of course there is a difference; what a dumb question. Where were you during biology lessons and sex education classes?”<sup>1</sup>

What has changed to explain this shift? Is it that we now know more than we used to about gender and biology? Or, has the source of authority changed for seeking truth in these sorts of questions?

My feelings about what is true might be completely different from your feelings about what is true, and my feelings about what is true might be completely different from what I felt to be true yesterday.

### **Sources of authority for truth**

When considering sources of authority for truth, we can think of things like *The Oxford Dictionary*, *The Australian* newspaper, or Wikipedia. However, I am suggesting that we consider more fundamental sources; the things we might mention when we finish the sentence, “This must be true because . . .”. How would you tend to finish that sentence for the things you know to be true? Which one of the following might you likely claim:

“This must be true because science has proved it.”

“This must be true because that's what the majority of people now believe.”

“This must be true because it is actually true for me.”

These possibilities represent three sources of authority common in the cultural storytelling of the West (and sometimes our classrooms):

1. Science, reason, and repeatable experimental evidence
2. Group agreement
3. Personal experiences, intuition, and feelings

Science, and the ability to hypothesise and experiment to provide evidence, and make conclusions, is a wonderful gift from God. Science can help us to access truth, but it has limitations. The brokenness of the world that taints all things, also taints science and scientists. Even the most honest and hardworking scientist will still make mistakes, even if accidentally or naively. Science is also limited because it is not, by design, able to answer certain questions. Questions like, “What is the purpose of humanity?”, “Why did the world begin?”, or “What happens to the essence of me when I die?”, are not able to be answered using the scientific method. Science is good, but not an ultimate source of truth. This leads us to ask the important question, “Does absolute truth (true truth) exist?”.

### **Could the real truth please stand up?**

The above views of truth range from:

There is absolute truth and it can be known.

To . . .

There is no absolute truth, only the truth that we feel to be true (relative truth).

The twenty-first century is characterised by a shift towards truth not being completely knowable and being, in fact, constructed by the knower.

We are in a time of transition between these two extremes being the general view held by society. In the nineteenth century, and first half of the twentieth century, it was strongly held that truth was absolute and could be known. However, the twenty-first century becomes characterised by a shift towards truth not being completely knowable and being, in fact, constructed by the knower. Hence, the suggestion that Western society is heading into a 'post-truth' era.

### The truth about truth

*God's Word is the ultimate source of truth and authority for all of life. The biblical view of the world that it provides, gives a way of understanding all aspects of the world and life, including truth. The biblical view has sympathies with current societal views. For example, the view that absolute truth exists is shared by science and the biblical view. A perspective that the biblical view shares with the relative view is that we all have a tendency to see truth shaped by personal perceptions. The biblical view provides a rich alternative to the extremes of both while recognising their merits.*

Science will claim that truth is ultimately knowable by human effort using the scientific method. If science hasn't discovered it yet, it just hasn't yet—but it will. The biblical view recognises the blessing of science with its ability to come to a detailed understanding of the intricacies of the world. However, it suggests a discernment towards science for the following reasons:

Science and scientists are not perfect.

The scientific method is limited and cannot answer all types of questions.

Science is good but it has been impacted by human rebellion. It has great capacity as a source of authority and can produce a deep, rich understanding of this world, but we must recognise its limits. We therefore seek to be discerning and to not idolise science as a source of ultimate authority. The biblical view is that truth can't be *completely* known through human endeavour—the brokenness of humans will mean that truth pursuits will always fall short in some way.

The biblical view agrees with relative truth that people have personal perceptions, and that these are worth noting. Part of the beauty of creation is that we have our own personal, unique identity and the ability to think and feel apart from others. This is God's good design. However, the biblical view acknowledges that even our thoughts and our feelings are tainted by human rebellion and cannot be completely relied upon.

The relative view concludes there is no absolute truth—truth for you is truth for you, and truth for me is truth for me. The biblical view acknowledges absolute truth exists while appreciating that our perceptions will always affect— to varying degrees—how we access this truth.

We can seek to know the world truthfully. However, the biblical view acknowledges that we will only ever be looking through a window on truth that has, at best, slightly frosty glass. This is summed up with the following analogy:

I attended a session of basketball referee training with my daughter recently. It became clear to me quickly that some of the rules of basketball are black and white (e.g., if any part of the ball touches any part of the court outside the line, or the line itself, it is out). However, some of the rules are more nuanced and require a judgement to be made by the referee (e.g., a foul is contact by an opposing player that disrupts the motion and intention of the player with the ball). To help understand the different positions on the authority of truth, consider the following three basketball referees and their view of truth when calling a foul:

The referee with a confident, optimistic (scientific) view that truth is absolute and can be fully known, may say, "*When it comes to fouls, I call them as they are!*"

The referee with a view that truth is constructed through personal perception may say, "*When it comes to fouls, they don't exist until I call them!*"

The referee with a biblically shaped view of truth might say, "*When it comes to fouls, I call them as I see them and, in humble service, I endeavour to call them correctly.*"<sup>2</sup>

Imagine now these three referees having a drink together after the game. They each have fundamentally different beliefs about the authority for truth. What does tolerance look like in this setting?

If someone wants to now make a claim like, "I believe that there is a difference between male and female", then making the claim is seen as intolerant even if they happen to believe in the right of others to think differently.

## Tolerance

The present cultural trend towards truth being constructed (relative truth) is also associated with a trend towards a redefinition of tolerance. Previously, to show tolerance meant that you accepted the reality that different people could and would hold different views. We are now, however, seeing that to be deemed tolerant one must actually *accept* the different views of others (or at least hold them as equally valid as your view). This is a move from accepting the *existence* of different views to having to accept the *actual* views.

Back to the post-game discussion by the referees. The previous definition of tolerance could see the three refs laughing and chatting while acknowledging that they understand each other's belief even if they didn't agree with it.

The new definition of tolerance suggests that for each referee to show tolerance, they would have to *agree* with the view of their colleagues. If they want to still hold their own view as true they are forced to adopt a relativist position on truth.

Can you see the implications here? If someone wants to now make a claim like, "I believe that there is a difference between male and female", then making the claim is seen as intolerant even if they happen to believe in the right of others to think differently. This is a substantial shift, and the irony is that this new view of tolerance is actually, by definition, intolerant.

To understand this from a biblical perspective we come back to the notion that this world is broken. Until the world is fully restored and the Kingdom of God fully realised, many people will believe a multitude of things. This is accepted by Christians. A society that allows for different perspectives to be held and graciously discussed, is nurtured within a biblical framework. The Christian view of tolerance is then, by definition, highly tolerant.

When someone makes a claim of intolerance towards you, it is important to understand on which definition of tolerance they are basing their claim. Do they believe that it is acceptable for a wide variety of views to be held in society, even if the owner of a particular view believes it to be true? Or do they believe that there must only be one correct view on all things? If the second position is held, may you courageously, where appropriate, take opportunities to humbly and graciously suggest that they may actually have an intolerant view on tolerance.

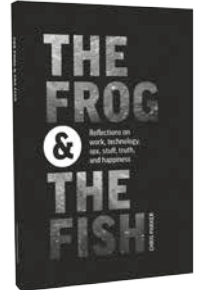
## References

Anderson, W. T. (1995). *The truth about the truth: De-confusing and de-constructing the postmodern world*. Michigan: G.P. Putnam's Sons.

## Footnotes

1. Obviously, with the influence of feminism, interviewees may have suggested sentiments around the need for both genders to have equal rights. However, even notions of equality must be based on a level of assumption of difference.
2. This metaphor was originally proposed by Anderson (1995).

This is a modified extract from a book recently published by the National Institute for Christian Education called *The Frog and the Fish: Reflections on Work, Technology, Sex, Stuff, Truth, and Happiness*. The book is written for young adults and makes an excellent graduation gift for those completing their time at a Christian school.



## ! Questions for discussion with students:

- How do you feel about the claim that we are heading into a 'post-truth' era?
- Is it possible to know the actual truth about anything fully or perfectly?
- What is *your* ultimate source of authority to know that something is true?
- How much do you feel you can rely on science for developing truth?
- When is it enough to simply feel strongly that something is true for it to be true for you?
- Is it possible to know the actual truth about anything?
- If something is true for me, does it then have to be true for you?
- Can tolerance itself ever become intolerant? How? When?



Chris is a lecturer and presenter for the National Institute for Christian Education and the editor of the *Christian Teachers Journal*. Through the adventure of teaching mathematics, science, and technology in Christian schools for 13 years, Chris grew to love helping children to see *all* of life through the lens of the gospel. Chris and his wife, Coco, live in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney. They have two children and a growing collection of ukuleles.