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Vol. XLI

March 1970

No. 3

## EDITORIAL NOTE:

This brief study is one of a series of articles on religious organizations and denominations in America. It was prepared by Arthur Carl Piepkorn, graduate professor of systematic theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.

PLYMOUTH BRETHREN  
(CHRISTIAN BRETHREN)

"Plymouth Brethren" is the popular designation for a religious movement that originated in England and Ireland in the mid-1820s. The early adherents were unhappy about the baleful effects of the intimate connection that existed between the Established Church and the government, about what they considered unspiritual ecclesiasticism and dead formalism in worship, and about the denominationalism that divided Christians from one another. They took the self-designation "Brethren" directly from the Sacred Scriptures; other names by which they were known were Christians, Believers, and Saints. The name "Plymouth Brethren" derives from the fact that the largest and most important of the early congregations, or "assemblies," met in Plymouth, England. In the British Isles and Canada today many assemblies of "Open" Brethren (see below) call themselves Christian Brethren; in Canada they have registered themselves under this name with the Canadian government. The bulk of the Brethren in the United States call themselves Assemblies, and some use the designation "assemblies of Christians who meet in the name of the Lord Jesus alone," but there is a growing tendency to answer to the name "Plymouth Brethren." Nevertheless, the movement has never formally accepted any designation.

Early Brethren leaders included Anthony Norris Groves (1795—1853), an Exeter

dentist who became the first of a long line of Brethren foreign missionaries, the German-born philanthropist-preacher George Müller (1805—1898) of Bristol orphanage fame, and, most prominently, John Nelson Darby (1800—1882). Darby, trained for the law and a graduate of Dublin's Trinity College at 19, was briefly a clergyman of the Anglican Church of Ireland. By 1828 he had associated himself with the Brethren. He spent the rest of his life preaching, writing prolifically, and traveling tirelessly in behalf of the Brethren movement.

Beginning in 1848, a series of "divergences" and secessions divided the movement. A split in the Plymouth Assembly led in 1848 to a fundamental division that persists to this day. It separated the "Open" Brethren from the "Exclusive" Brethren. In 1848 Open Brethren believed, as they generally continue to do, that they might receive to the Lord's Table any believer who is personally sound in faith, even though the congregation or assembly from which he came might harbor erroneous teaching. The Exclusive Brethren, under the informal leadership of Darby, regarded "separation from evil as God's principle of unity" and held that to receive to the Lord's Table a brother from an assembly in which error is taught, even though he might personally reject it, disqualified the receiving assembly from participation in what often came to be called the "Circle of Fellowship." This circle is a joint body of mutually approved assemblies, with the decision of one binding on all; the influence of an individual leader in such a body is of course sometimes very great.

The only formal division among Open Brethren took place in 1889. Limited largely to the British Isles, it resulted in the organization of a relatively small number (fewer

than 100) of "Needed Truth" assemblies.<sup>1</sup> Otherwise all the schisms, from 1881 on, have taken place among the Exclusive Brethren. These divisions reflect the seriousness with which the Exclusive Brethren take their role of representing visibly the purity of doctrine and life that the church is to have.

The divisions relate more to church discipline than to doctrine. Although they admit a degree of variety in teaching, the Brethren are still all in substantial doctrinal agreement.

While many assemblies and individuals have published statements of their beliefs, the Brethren regard and refuse creeds as unnecessary. They look on the Bible as verbally inspired and inerrant in the original writings, and they take it as their only authoritative guide. They are Trinitarians. They stress both the deity and the complete humanity of Christ, as well as His virgin birth, resurrection, ascension, and intercession. They teach that God created the first human beings in His own image, but that as a result of sin all human beings have a sinful nature and are guilty, lost and without hope in themselves, and that they have incurred both physical death and the spiritual death of separation from God. In His amazing love God provided mankind with a Savior in the person of His Son. Few Brethren would affirm a predestination to reprobation; rather, they hold, God's will is for the salvation of all human beings, but He will not force anyone to receive this salvation. A right relationship with God comes alone through faith in Christ's all-sufficient sacrifice and shed blood, apart from works. Christ's own resur-

rection is proof that God accepted His atoning work. Those who receive Christ by faith are in that act born again and become children of God. Good works are the fruit of faith. A true believer cannot be lost; he should be assured of his everlasting salvation, not on the basis of his feelings or his experience, but on the basis of God's Word. His life should be one of devotion to Christ and of separation from all that is evil in the world.

The doctrine of the last things plays a prominent role in Brethren thinking. Christ, they hold, will come again to the earth's air to catch up ("rapture") all believers, living and dead. The Great Tribulation of Revelation 6—18 will follow, climaxed by Christ's return to establish His millennial reign. During the millennium the redeemed and reconstituted nation of Israel will play a special role among the peoples under the sovereignty of Christ and His raptured church. A short-lived rebellion will close the millennium, and the eternal age of the new heavens and the new earth will begin. The saved of all ages will enter eternal life, and the unsaved will undergo eternal punishment and separation from God in hell.<sup>2</sup>

The Brethren's doctrine of the church reflects Darby's spiritualizing ecclesiology and

<sup>1</sup> Various known as the Churches of God in the Fellowship of the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Churches of God in the British Isles and Overseas, this group has six churches in Canada and one in the United States (Trinidad, Colorado) with a total North American membership estimated at less than 300.

<sup>2</sup> The doctrine of the last things here outlined is more or less common to dispensationalists generally and is not the exclusive teaching of Brethren. While modern dispensationalism traces its ancestry by way of the *Scofield Reference Bible* back to John Nelson Darby, there are today many more dispensationalists in Baptist, Dunkard, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, and independent churches than there are in Brethren assemblies. In the Brethren community itself there is not complete unanimity in this area. Most Open Brethren are dispensationalists, but many in the younger generation seem to give it less than a central position in their thinking. In the Brethren assemblies of Great Britain there is a tradition going back to George Müller and others of his generation that does not accept dispensationalism.

the central dispensationalist distinction that he made between God's dealings with the church and with Israel. Unlike Israel, the true church does not include all that are born into it but only reborn believers. To maintain the relative purity of their assemblies, Brethren require candidates for full fellowship to confess their faith in Christ as Lord and Savior and give satisfactory evidence of the new birth. The Brethren receive them as members of Christ and do not think of them as having joined an ecclesiastical denomination. Brethren recognize that the overwhelming majority of those in the universal church are not Brethren.

Again unlike Israel, the church does not have a separate class of priests. This underlies the stress of the Brethren on the priesthood of all believers and their refusal to distinguish between the clergy and the laity. "Personal gift and spiritual power" from the Holy Spirit are proof of a call to ministry among the assemblies or on their behalf. Many Brethren preachers and teachers are not engaged in full-time ministries. Even those who do devote their full time to ministry are neither ordained nor salaried nor addressed by titles like "Reverend" or "Father." The means of support of these full-time workers are normally voluntary contributions from those coreligionists who care to "fellowship" with them, rather than stipulated remuneration. Unless they are engaged in missionary work at home or abroad, most full-time workers travel over a larger or smaller area. Brethren acknowledge and honor as elders and overseers (even though they may not always use the terms) the pious, gifted, and normally self-supporting individuals who provide for the assembly's spiritual needs. Brethren reject the idea of one person heading the congregation ("one-man ministry") as unbiblical and as inhibiting the exercise of the gifts that the Holy Spirit has imparted, but at the same time they do not practice an "any-man min-

istry." During the last generation a growing number of Open assemblies have invited full-time workers to associate themselves with a given assembly particularly, and these persons can become very much like conventional pastors. But even these men rarely do all the preaching or wholly give up itinerating, and they have no sacramental role.

The larger urban Open assemblies have often built attractive and functional "Bible Chapels." The smaller or rural Open assemblies and the Exclusive assemblies frequently call their meeting places "Gospel Halls"; some meet in homes.

The Brethren observe two symbolical ordinances, baptism and the Lord's Supper. Open Brethren generally practice only believer's baptism by immersion. Exclusive Brethren allow and in some cases prefer infant baptism, also by immersion, of the children of parents in fellowship ("household baptism") on the analogy of Old Testament circumcision. Some Exclusive assemblies permit believer's baptism for those families who prefer it. In no case do Brethren think of baptism as conferring conversion. Brethren celebrate the Lord's Supper ("the breaking of bread") at a separate meeting—the only meeting at which Brethren take an offering—every Lord's Day, usually in the morning. Any male who feels led to do so by the Holy Spirit may pray publicly, read and comment on a passage of the Bible, suggest a hymn to be sung, give thanks for the bread and wine, or pass the elements. Women may not speak in these meetings.

The Brethren aim at "apostolic simplicity" in their worship; there is no formal ritual or stated order of service. Brethren Sunday schools and preaching services resemble the parallel activities of nonliturgical denominations.

Open and Exclusive Brethren came separately to North America after the middle of the 19th century. Itinerant preachers from Scotland and Ireland planted most of the

early Open assemblies. Darby himself visited the Exclusive assemblies several times. After his death the latter began to divide, sometimes because of issues on this continent, sometimes because of controversies in the British Isles. The United States Bureau of the Census used arbitrarily chosen Roman numerals to differentiate them, and this mode of reference has persisted.

Brethren I ("Grant Brethren") were restricted to North America. They began in 1884, when about half of the Exclusives sided with Frederick W. Grant (1834 to 1901), whom the British assemblies had censured indirectly. From the 1920s on this group moved more and more toward an Open position. By the mid-1930s many of their urban assemblies had become Open; the remainder had formed Brethren VII and Brethren VIII. Their historic publishing house, Loizeaux Brothers, now of Neptune, N. J., the activities of which three generations of the same family have directed since 1876, became Open at this time.

Brethren II are the historically Open Brethren, with which many of the assemblies formerly a part of Brethren I have associated themselves. They generally welcome any born-again believers, regardless of denomination, to the Lord's table on the basis of a common *life* rather than a common *light*. They have no "Circles of Fellowship" and hold that discipline is a local matter for which each assembly is directly responsible to the ascended Lord of the church. They generally practice believer's baptism, although some of the assemblies that were part of Brethren I still permit "household baptism." Increasingly during the last generation a large percentage of these Brethren have had fellowship with individual Christians in the denominational church bodies and have participated in joint endeavors, such as Billy Graham Crusades, the Gideons, the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, and Christian Business Men's Committees with other

theologically conservative groups. Because they stress the independence of each local assembly, there is considerable diversity in practice. A tenth or more of the assemblies in this group stress the "old paths" and view with concern the cited joint activities with other Christians, along with such activities and agencies as summer camps, a Bible school, and "expensive chapels." Although such assemblies appear in the same lists with other Brethren II assemblies, they have preachers, conferences, and magazines that serve them alone.

Open Brethren have no central organization, but various service agencies have arisen on a regional or national basis in response to felt needs. *Letters of Interest*, a monthly periodical, reports on the activities both of the assemblies of Open Brethren and of about 450 domestic full-time workers; its staff represents the Brethren with the national government concerned in such matters as the endorsement of military chaplains. The closely related Stewards Foundation in Chicago lends money for chapel construction or remodeling, issues bonds, and provides annuities for investors. It operates a few hospitals that are staffed as far as possible with Christian doctors and nurses and with one or more full-time chaplains, and it has become connected in an advisory way with a few Christian retirement homes. The Fields is another service organization; it publishes a magazine by that name that reports on the activities of over 1,200 Brethren foreign missionaries (some 400 of them commended by North American assemblies, the remainder by Brethren assemblies in other lands) in over 50 countries. In a purely advisory fashion, The Fields assists these missionaries in other ways as well, for instance by negotiating with foreign governments, receiving and transmitting funds, arranging for transportation, and aiding with furloughs. "Christian Missions in Many Lands" is a frequent designation for Open Brethren mis-

sionary activity. Literature Crusades, Prospect Heights, Illinois, is a newer, aggressive recruiter of young people for short-term urban missionary activity around the world; many of these become permanent missionaries. Another of its activities is sponsoring a World Missions Conference on a triennial basis.

In general, Open ministers are the only ones who go to the graduate theological seminaries, usually conservative interdenominational schools like Trinity Seminary in Deerfield, Ill., Dallas Theological Seminary, and Fuller Theological Seminary. Proportionately the Open Brethren send out many more missionaries than the Exclusive Brethren and are more likely to have a higher percentage (sometimes a clear majority) of communicants from non-Brethren family backgrounds.

Brethren III, called the "Continental Brethren" because of the relative numerical strength of their European counterparts, came into being when the Brethren who had rejected Grant divided among themselves in 1890 over the ministry of a British leader, F. E. Raven (died 1905). Brethren III rejected Raven. In 1926 they united with the so-called "Kelly Brethren," a group that had come out of a schism in 1881 and that was limited to England. In 1953 Brethren VII joined this worldwide circle.

Brethren IV, called the "Raven Brethren" because they supported Raven in the 1890 schism, were at least until recently the largest group of Exclusive Brethren worldwide, although not in North America. Raven had a mystical inclination and was not always precise in his doctrinal formulation. When he died, a New York businessman, James Taylor Sr. (died 1953), gradually assumed unofficial leadership among Raven's followers, but certain doctrinal novelties that he introduced accelerated the alienation of the Raven Brethren from other Exclusives. His son succeeded the elder Taylor as unofficial

leader of this group. The junior Taylor's demands for increasingly rigorous separation from other Christians, for withdrawal from professional associations, for resigning offices in business corporations, for disposing of stock in them, and for refusing to eat meals with anyone with whom the Brethren concerned were not in fellowship led to the schism that produced Brethren X. The leadership of the two Taylors has given Brethren IV the name "Taylor Brethren." In the United States the Taylor Brethren are strongest in New York, in the older industrial areas as far west as Detroit and Chicago, and on the West Coast. They are also well represented in Canada.<sup>3</sup>

Brethren V, served by Bible Truth Publishers, Oak Park, Ill., is probably the largest Exclusive group in North America. They withdrew from Brethren III in 1909, when they sided with the Tunbridge Wells assembly in a jurisdictional dispute in England. Most of the English counterparts of this group entered the Kelly-Continental group in 1940, so that the "Tunbridge Wells Brethren" are now centered in North America and in certain foreign countries where they carry on missions. They hold that whole "Circles of Fellowship" may not properly reunite, but the reconciliation must take place on an individual basis.

Brethren VI, the "Glanton Brethren," no longer exist in North America as a group. They withdrew from the Raven Brethren in 1908 in a dispute about centralizing tendencies within this group. Never a large circle, the North American assemblies immediately began to look for ties with the Grant Brethren; Brethren VIII absorbed them completely by the end of the 1930s.

<sup>3</sup> See Bryan R. Wilson, "The Exclusive Brethren: A Case Study in the Evolution of a Sectarian Ideology," in the volume that he edited, *Patterns of Sectarianism: Organization and Ideology in Social and Religious Movements* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1967).

Brethren VII withdrew from group I in 1928. The occasion for the schism was this group's rejection of the ministry of a visiting English Glanton Brethren preacher, James Boyd, and by its advocacy of the case of an aggrieved Philadelphia businessman, C. A. Mory. In 1953 Brethren VII united with Brethren III.

Brethren VIII, served by the Erie (Pennsylvania) Bible Truth Depot, began in the late 1920s as the Exclusive remnant of Brethren I, after the Boyd and Mory controversies had caused many Grant Brethren assemblies to reexamine their principles and to become Open. At this time Brethren VIII linked up more closely with the Glanton Brethren in England. The most prominent preacher of the Brethren VIII circle was A. E. Booth (died 1950). Brethren VIII and Brethren III are now carrying on conversations looking to the possible union of the two groups.

Brethren IX is a small circle that withdrew from Brethren VIII around 1949, supporting a preacher by the name of Ames in his distrust of the teaching and practice of the British Glanton Brethren.

Brethren X withdrew from the Taylor Brethren around 1960 because of their dissatisfaction with the pronouncements of the younger Taylor. They consist of a few assemblies that maintain ties with a number of overseas assemblies of former Taylor Brethren who have not found their way into other congregations.

There may perhaps be other very small groups in the United States and Canada that have withdrawn from one or the other of the circles listed.

There are over 700 Open assemblies in the United States and over 350 in Canada, with an estimated 60,000 communicants. Information about the Exclusive assemblies is harder to come by. A responsible estimate puts the total number of Exclusive assemblies in the United States and Canada at probably

no more than 300 with a total of less than 10,000 communicants.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The estimates in this paragraph are for 1970. Students of comparative theology regularly lament the difficulty of obtaining authoritative information about the Brethren. This writer gratefully acknowledges the unofficial assistance so generously given by Mr. Paul F. Loizeaux, editor of *Help and Food*, Parkton, Maryland, and by Donald G. Tinder, Ph. D., assistant editor, *Christianity Today*, Washington, D. C.

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vance to the Plymouth Brethren are three chapters: (a) Peter L. Embley, "The Early Development of the Plymouth Brethren," chap. 7, pp. 213—43; (b) Gordon Willis and Bryan R. Wilson, "The Churches of God: Pattern and Practice," chap. 8, pp. 244 to 286; and (c) Bryan R. Wilson, "The Exclusive Brethren: A Case Study in the Evolution of a Sectarian Ideology," chap. 9, pp. 287—342. The approach of these chapters is primarily sociological, but they present important doctrinal and liturgical insights as well.

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EDITORIAL NOTE: This brief study was prepared by B. H. Jackayya, Dean of Concordia Seminary, Nagercoil, India.

#### 'Αλήθεια IN THE JOHANNINE CORPUS

'Αλήθεια (truth) is one of John's favorite words. It occurs 25 times in the gospel and 20 times in the three epistles. To understand the full implication of the word ἀλήθεια according to the Johannine usage, it is necessary first of all to understand the history of the term.

E. C. Blackman<sup>1</sup> speaks of three important uses of the word in the Old Testament:

In the Old Testament the word "truth" (*emet*) is applied to God. God is a God of truth. "The Lord is the true God" (Jer. 10:10). He is not "the true God" as contrasted with false ones but rather one on whom His people can rely. "Into Thy hand I commit my spirit; Thou has redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God" (Ps. 31, 5). "[He] keeps faith [*emet*] forever" (Ps. 146:6). "Truth means essentially reliability, dependableness, ability to perform what is required. . . . In itself truth is a fact or state which is unalterable and has to be accepted."

Second, truth denotes the quality of God's activity, for example, His "judging." "He will judge the world with righteousness and

<sup>1</sup> E. C. Blackman, "Truth," in *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, ed. Alan Richardson (New York: Macmillan, 1964), p. 269.

the peoples with His truth" (Ps. 96:13). "God will send forth His steadfast love and His faithfulness" (Ps. 57:3). "He can rightly be called a fortress, a refuge, or a rock, and his 'truth' is the reason why people can trust in him. In a universe which is constantly in flux and change, he proves to be the only unchanging reality."<sup>2</sup>

Third, truth is also what God demands of man. He desires it in the inward parts (Ps. 51:6); man must speak it (Ps. 15:2). He must seek it (Jer. 5:1) and walk in it (2 Kings 20:3). Here truth means unwavering conformity with God's will as made known in the Law: "All Thy commandments are true" (Ps. 119:151). In a more general sense, it also means faithfulness, trustworthiness.

The classic Greek meanings of the term are summed up by Bultmann as follows:

'*Ἀλήθεια* originally signifies a content of fact, or a state of affairs, in so far as it is seen, indicated, or expressed, and is completely manifested in such seeing, indication, or expression; with special reference to the fact that it might be concealed, falsified, or diminished. '*Ἀλήθεια* is the *complete* or *real* state of affairs. . . . As in forensic language *ἀλήθεια* is the state of affairs to be proved, over against the various assertions of the parties, so in the historians it is the historical state of affairs over against myth, and in the philosophers that which really *is*, in the absolute sense.<sup>3</sup>

From the above it is seen that the Hebrew word *emet* differs in meaning from the classic Greek *ἀλήθεια*. While the Hebrew word has the meaning of "faithfulness," "trustworthiness," "permanence," "sureness," the classic Greek word has the meaning of "truth" as opposed to falsehood or of "reality" as opposed to mere appearance. The

Hebrew is moral, and the classic Greek is fundamentally intellectual. In Hebrew the ontological element is stressed, while in the classic Greek word the cognitive element is dominant. The Hebrew word refers to verity, the Greek word to veracity; the Hebrew to that which is ideally true, the classic Greek to that which is factually true. The Hebrew words deal with persons or things as realities that one can lean upon. The classic Greek words deal with ideas or their expression in relation to facts.

Did the ancient sages of India say anything about truth? Yes, they did. The Hindu Scriptures, particularly the Upanishads, speak of the Ultimate Truth. A contemporary Indian philosopher summarized what they have to say in these words: "Ultimate Truth is the truth of truths. It is universal and eternal. It is self-valid, carrying its certainty and validity within itself and needing no external criterion. Truth coincides with Reality. It is a knowledge by identity or integral experience of Reality which we may call *Atman* or *Brahman*. We call it *Atman* (spirit) when we discover it within us by penetrating the different sheaths, physical, vital, mental, intellectual. . . . We call it *Brahman* when we discover it without us by probing the manifold, fluent world of appearances and discerning its one, abiding, substantive ground. Ultimate Truth is not perceived by sense nor understood by thought but is intuitively apprehended. It is a matter of immediate, spiritual experience. . . . All men desire truth, but only those rare souls who pay the required price can attain it. The price is indeed very heavy. They have to undergo a severe intellectual and moral discipline."<sup>4</sup>

Like Plato, the Hindu sages believed that truth could be attained by disciplined think-

<sup>2</sup> Otto A. Piper, "Truth," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, 4 (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 714.

<sup>3</sup> C. H. Dodd, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: University Press, 1960), p. 171.

<sup>4</sup> Sir Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan — John Henry Muirhead, *Contemporary Indian Philosophy* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1958), pp. 192—93.

ing (Yoga). It is something to be attained by man's truthfulness, austerity, right knowledge, and self-control. The Biblical understanding of ἀλήθεια differs sharply from the Hindu concept. In W. F. Howard's words, "truth is not a concrete conception of God to be apprehended by the intellectual so much as a revelation of reality to be received in a personal relationship."<sup>5</sup> Or as Emil Brunner puts it: "This truth cannot be held, or possessed. Its nature is, rather, such that it takes possession of us, lays hold of us. . . . The truth with which faith is concerned can only be received."<sup>6</sup>

In the New Testament the word ἀλήθεια is generally used in such a way as to combine the Greek and Hebrew senses.

The fusion of these two senses . . . in varying degrees in the NT yields some interesting developments of meaning. The meaning "that which has validity or stability," when carried over into the NT, makes it possible to speak of truth as something to be done (cf. John 3, 21; I John 1, 6) rather than simply believed or thought of, and to set truth in contrast with unrighteousness. . . . God's faithfulness and truth are together set over against human falseness, Rom. 3, 3-7.<sup>7</sup>

The word is used to signify that which has certainty and force, uprightness, judicial righteousness, reliability, trustworthiness, sincerity, honesty, the real state of affairs, the revealed reality of God, and true teaching (Eph. 4:21; Gal. 2:5; Rom. 3:3-7; 2 Cor. 7:14; 11:10; 1 Cor. 5:8; Rom. 1:18; and so forth).

But it is particularly in John's writings that we find the most distinctively Christian usage of the term ἀλήθεια. John uses the word more frequently than any other New Testament writer.

<sup>5</sup> W. F. Howard, *Christianity According to St. John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1946), pp. 185—86.

<sup>6</sup> Emil Brunner, *Truth as Encounter* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), p. 28.

<sup>7</sup> Blackman, p. 270.

Ἀλήθεια, according to John, specially denotes "divine reality," "divine revelation," "divine truth" as coming down to us. "And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding to know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 5:20). This is a point of great difference in the Christian faith as over against other religions. Divine Reality is not something which we seek after and find out for ourselves. It is not something that we invent or construct, but something that seeks and finds us. This truth is not in us. It is outside of us. It is revealed to us. And this revelation is of God Himself, not of truths about Him. Truth is something that "impinges on us." It is something that is to be humbly received. In Bultmann's words, "the reception of ἀλήθεια is conditioned neither by rational or esoteric instruction on the one side nor psychical preparation and exercise on the other; it takes place in obedient faith."<sup>8</sup>

The second major point that John makes in his writings is that *this divine Reality is revealed in Christ Jesus*. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). "Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). "I write to you, not because you do not know the truth but because you know it, and know that no lie is of the truth. Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ?" (1 John 2:21-22; cf. 1 John 5:6-7; Heb. 1:1-2)

Third, it is not only that the divine truth was revealed in Christ Jesus, but *He Himself is the Truth*. "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life; no one comes to the Father but by Me." (John 14:6; cf. 1 John 1:1-3)

Jesus Christ is not the "essence of all truths," because he is not a truth that is distilled

<sup>8</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, "Alētheia," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley, 1 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), 245.

from the things of this world, but rather his ministry indicates the goal for which this world is destined. . . . As the truth Jesus is not simply disclosing what is in God; he is the manifest saving presence of God in this world. As a result all that Jesus says and does and offers is true (e. g., John 7:18; 8:16).<sup>9</sup>

Fourth, John stresses the fact that *Jesus communicates Himself as the Truth* through the working of the Holy Spirit. "The Spirit is the Witness, because the Spirit is the Truth. There are three witnesses, the Spirit, the water, and the blood" (1 John 5:7-8). "You have been anointed by the Holy One . . . but the anointing which you received from Him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you; as His anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie, just as it has taught you, abide in Him" (1 John 2:20, 27). In the words of J. R. W. Stott:

This is undoubtedly a reference to the Holy Spirit. The forms of the Greek construction indicates that it is characteristic of the Spirit that He "bear witness" as it is of Christ that He came. The fact that He is said to bear witness gives evidence . . . of His personality, since testifying is an activity of persons. Of what His witness consists is not explicitly stated, but both the context and the teaching of the Epistle and Gospel suggest that He testifies to Christ. He is competent to do so, Jesus said, because He is "the Spirit of Truth."<sup>10</sup>

Jesus himself promised that his work will be continued by the Spirit of Truth (John 14:16; 15:26; 16:13; cf. 1 John 4:6; 5:7).

Those who accept this Truth, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, will have eternal life (1 John 5:11); they will be God's children (1 John 3:1-2; 1:8). Here, then, is the uniqueness of the Christian faith, namely, Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, the eternal Truth, made known to man in "the once-for-

all and for-all-men manner," who frees men, not from the bondage of ignorance but from the bondage of sin (John 8:32; 1 John 2:2). As children of God they will walk in the light (1 John 1:7); walk in the truth (2 John 4; 3 John 3-4); worship in spirit and in truth (John 4:23-24). It is this finality and universality of the act of God in Christ which gives the Christian faith its dynamic and assuredness. (An Indian is aware that this is what his Hindu and Moslem neighbors and friends in India need to know and have.) St. John has a special message both to the Gnosticism of present-day philosophic Hinduism and to the Docetism of Islam.

Finally, most characteristic of John's view of ἀλήθεια is the phrase "to do the truth." "If we say we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not the truth" (1 John 1:6 KJV). "We lie and do not live according to the truth" (RSV). "We should be both telling and living a lie" (Phillips). "Our words and our lives are a lie" (NEB). "He who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God" (John 3:21). So truth is not a matter of contemplation or speculation or something to be attained by mental or bodily exercises, but it is something to be received and obeyed, or rejected and disobeyed. The Gnostics of John's time

claimed a mystical intimacy with God and yet "walked in the darkness" of error and sin, paying no regard to the self-revelation of an all-holy God. Since God is light, such claims are ludicrous. Religion without morality is an illusion. Sin is always a barrier to fellowship with God.<sup>11</sup>

John gives an example of such an active following of the truth in 3 John 3-4: "For I greatly rejoiced when some of the brethren arrived and testified to the truth of your life, as indeed you do follow the truth. No

<sup>9</sup> Piper, p. 716.

<sup>10</sup> J. R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), pp. 179-80.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

greater joy can I have than this, to hear that my children follow the truth." What an example for all of us!

This, then, is John's delineation of what ἀλήθεια is. Truth is that which "came in the flesh" in the person of Jesus Christ. "Truth has come into being through Jesus Christ. This is the very core of the Biblical message. Truth is something that happens, that God does. Jesus Christ not only reveals, He at once fulfills and realizes the will of God."<sup>12</sup>

So John concludes his first letter with this greatest divine affirmation: "We know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding to know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son

Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols." (1 John 5:20-21)

The worship of idols, unreal and dead, is inconsistent and incompatible with that knowledge of the true God, which is eternal life, just as sin and selfishness are incompatible with the knowledge of God who is light and love. It is this incompatibility, this incongruity, of sin, of lovelessness and error with the true Christian, which is the underlying theme of the Epistle. Let the Christian once recognize who he is, what he has become, "born of God," "of God," "knowing God," "in God," the possessor of "eternal life" in Christ . . . and he will surely live a life which is consistent with, and worthy of, his Christian status.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Brunner, p. 154.

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<sup>13</sup> Stott, p. 197.