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Jesus Christ Is the Truth
Essay for the 69th Regular Convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod
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What an honor it is to be here and to be able to address you on a topic of tremendous importance: Truth. Jesus Christ is the truth. So He has said: “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). And so the inspired writers of the Holy Scriptures have written: “We have seen His glory,” writes John, “glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and *truth*” (John 1:14); so much is the Lord Jesus “the truth” that in his first epistle John can say, “We know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, [even] in His Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life” (1 John 5:20).

So, our task today is to turn our minds to this: Jesus Christ is the truth. We come at that statement with a handful of questions. First, if Jesus Christ is the truth, how are we to know the truth about Jesus Christ? Second, what is bound up in the Lord Jesus Christ being the truth? And finally, what does it matter for us?

I.

Our first question: If Jesus Christ is the truth, how are we to know the truth about Jesus Christ?

In answer to this, it is worth talking through the Lutheran approach to the Holy Scriptures. We might call it just the Christian approach. This approach simply lets the words of Scripture, as the truth of God, speak for themselves. It allows them to mean what they mean on their own terms — according to their usage in the Scriptures — without backfilling them with extraneous meaning, particularly without backfilling them with *new meanings* words have taken on over time.

So, before we dive into the meaning of the word *truth* in the Bible, let’s consider another example.

Everyone, probably even those who have taken only high school level history, is aware of what the Germans call Luther’s *Turmerlebnis* — his “tower experience.” It’s really a story about understanding words.

Up to the point at which Luther had his tower experience — sometime in 1518, it seems — he had been heavily under the spell of scholastic theology. Scholastic theology had developed in the Late Middle Ages. Thought of at its best, it was an attempt to organize Christian theology in a systematic way. At its worst — and the way Luther encountered it — it did several things. First, it forced the teachings of the Bible into a mold that was foreign to the Bible. In other words, it used categories derived from Aristotle to re-package what the Bible taught. Thus, for example, it became preoccupied with “substances” and “accidents,” rooted in the theory of “causes.” A well-known result of the application of these categories of thought to biblical teaching is the Late Medieval doctrine of transubstantiation. The substance of a thing cannot be composite.¹ Since Jesus said of the bread and the wine in the Sacrament that they are,

¹ Aristotle, *Categories* 2a13; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 3a. 75,3 (in *St. Thomas Aquinas: Summa Theologiae: Latin text and English translation, Introductions, Notes, Appendices and Glossaries* (Blackfriars/McGraw-Hill, New York and London: 1964–1981), vol. 58, pp. 59–63.

respectively, His body and blood, then their only essence is “the body and blood of Christ.” The only way not to have a mixed substance is to declare that the bread and wine have been changed — hence transubstantiation — into the body and blood of Christ. What then of the bread and wine, which are visible, palpable and gustable? They can be explained this way: They are accidents — things “added to” what the substance, the body and blood of Christ, are.² This, despite the fact that the Bible teaches very differently about all this. In 1 Corinthians 10:16, Paul asks the Corinthians: “The cup of blessing that we bless” — here the cup stands for the wine — “is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?” Here, clearly, the Bible teaches that what one sees, touches and tastes in the Sacrament is *both* the bread and the wine *and* the body and blood of Christ.³ Luther later boiled it all down this way in the Smalcald Articles of 1536: “Of the Sacrament of the Altar we hold that bread and wine in the Supper are the true Body and Blood of Christ” (SA III VI 1). No theory of causes, changed substances or accidents needed, just faithful replication of the teaching of the Bible. The bread and the wine are the body and blood of Christ. To handle the bread and wine in the Sacrament is to handle Christ’s body and blood; to handle Christ’s body and blood is to handle the bread and wine.

The second thing that happened in scholasticism was that the very words of the Bible were given meanings foreign to their sense in the Bible. The best known example is the one that lay at the root of the so-called *Turmerlebnis*. Listen to Luther in his own words:

I had indeed been seized by a remarkable burning to understand Paul in his letter to the Romans, but up to this point it was not the cold blood around my heart that stood in the way, but one single word that occurs in chapter 1: “The justice of God is revealed in this.” Indeed, I hated that word “justice of God,” which I had been taught to understand philosophically by the use and custom of all my teachers as having to do with “formal” or “active” justice (as they call it), by which God is just and punishes sinners and the unjust. ...

Until finally, when God had mercy, as I was meditating day and night, I paid attention to the context of the words, to wit: “The justice of God is revealed in this, as it is written, ‘The just by faith shall live,’” then I began to understand the justice of God as that by which the one who is righteous lives by God’s gift, namely, by faith, and that this was the meaning: that the justice of God is revealed through the Gospel, that is, a passive justice, by which God in mercy justifies through faith, as it is written: “The just by faith shall live.”⁴

Here, Luther notes that he had been stuck in his thinking about the term “justice”: His teachers taught him that it was, in scholastic terms, a “formal justice” or “formal righteousness,” whereby God’s notice of my righteousness is due to and subsequent to my own transformation from being a sinner to being a just or righteous man.⁵ Note what Luther noticed in the text of Romans 1: What makes a man just is not his

² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 3a. 75,5 (in *St. Thomas Aquinas: Summa Theologiae: Latin text and English translation, Introductions, Notes, Appendices and Glossaries* (Blackfriars/McGraw-Hill, New York and London: 1964–1981), vol. 58, pp. 72–77.

³ FC SD 7.54, 82; Martin Chemnitz, *The Lord’s Supper*, trans. J.A.O. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1979), p. 53.

⁴ Martin Luther, “Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther’s Latin Writings, Wittenberg, 1545,” WA 54.184.14–20, 186.3–8 (=AE 34.336–337).

⁵ See Allan D. Fitzgerald, O.S.A., *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), s.v. Justice, pp. 481–483; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 2a2ae.58,1 (in *St. Thomas Aquinas: Summa Theologiae: Latin text and English translation, Introductions, Notes, Appendices and Glossaries* (Blackfriars/McGraw-Hill, New York and London: 1964–1981), vol. 37, pp. 19–23).

inner transformation — is not his “formal righteousness” — but faith in the heart, which clings to Christ as the forgiver of sins. Context determines meaning. And with that nut cracked, the Wittenberg Reformation was afoot.

Such vocabulary issues were due also to what had transpired over time: the ensconcement of the Latin Vulgate as the “official version” of the Bible. The word for “justify” in Greek is the factitive term δικαιώω.⁶ In usage, in both secular culture at the time of the Bible as well as in the Bible itself, it is a forensic performative term: It doesn’t so much say what a thing already is; it declares it to be what it says and, by declaring it, brings it about. Better yet, in God’s speech, God says what He does and does what He says. Thus, even as He says that I am just and righteous, He is bringing it about by His speech. When Jerome translated δικαιώω, he used the equivalent Latin factitive verb, *justifico*, “make just.”⁷ But it came with baggage that never really got cleared up in the thinking of the church: Latin lacked the declarative, performative sense of the term and required that a thing that was “just” was or had already been transformed into a “just thing.”

II.

What is bound up in the Lord Jesus Christ being *the* truth?

When we get to the term “truth” in the Bible, we need to shed our preconceptions. Today, the concept of truth, broadly speaking, has varying measures: There is philosophical truth, logical truth, pragmatic truth, legal truth, empirical truth. There is the “truth” that all truth-claims are tendentious and assertions of the social power structure. There are “my” truth and “your” truth, which are welcome to be at odds with one another. But we don’t wish to linger there. “My” truth doesn’t do any good for a Buddhist who is fine with “my” truth even as she guards “her” truth closely. What is true legally may be false morally; and philosophical truth may be ripped to shreds by pragmatic truth, and vice versa, even as all these truths are “truths” that make the world go ’round in some way, shape or form.

Instead, our interest is in biblical truth. And here the incisive insight of Luther comes to our aid, this from the 1524 “Preface to the Psalms:”

In the Psalter, and here and there elsewhere, these two words often come up in proximity to one another: “mercy” and “truth.”⁸ Some have taken these words in a wild and crazy way; I have rendered them in German like this: “kindliness” and “faithfulness.” In German when we speak freely we say, “love” and “faithfulness,” as when we say, “He has shown me kindliness and faithfulness.” But I have not wanted to dare to translate so freely. For *hesed*, which they translate into German as “mercy” and I as “kindliness,” is actually when one demonstrates someone friendliness, love or favor, as Christ Himself, Matthew 12[:7], explains on the basis of Hosea 6[:6]: “I desire mercy and not sacrifice,” that is, I desire men to show friendliness, love, and favor rather than sacrifice.

⁶ Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, Henry Stuart Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1940), s.v. δικαιώω II., p. 429.

⁷ R. E. Latham, *A Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), s.vv. *justificare* and *justificatio* (see esp. *justificatio* 1.), p. 1519.

⁸ כָּל־דְּרָכֹת יְהוָה חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת, writes the psalmist in Psalm 25, “All the ways of the LORD are *hesed ve’ emeth* — mercy and truth.” The expression is found in Genesis 24:27, 32:10, Exodus 34:6, Joshua 2:14, 2 Samuel 2:6, 15:20, and Psalms 40:11–12, 57:4, 61:8, 85:11, 86:15, 89:15, 138:2. For a somewhat discursive treatment of Luther’s handling of the two words together and in the various editions of his Old Testament, see WADB 10¹ 94–95, n. 4. Luther’s insight is affirmed by modern scholarship. See *TDNT*, s.v. ἀλήθεια A.2.a and A.3.b. (1.234, 236).

Likewise, “truth” means “faithfulness,” [such that] one may rely on another and have recourse to him and *he* keeps what he has said and what one expects from him. Thus, God praises Himself toward us everywhere in Scripture for being merciful and faithful, that is, that He demonstrates love and faithfulness and extends to us every friendliness and favor, and we may confidently rely upon Him to act and remain faithful to what can be expected from Him. This faithfulness and truth is called *emeth*. [The word] *emuna* comes from that, which St. Paul himself translated as “faith,” in Romans 1[.17]: “The righteous lives by faith.” In the psalter it is often said, “Thy faith” or “in Thy faith,” for this reason, that He gives and builds such faith [the faith Paul speaks of] upon His faithfulness.⁹ As a result, the two words “truth” and “faith” are almost the same in Hebrew and are clearly swapped out one for the other, just as we say in German that he who is true and faithful “holds faith,” and, vice versa, whoever is untrustworthy is held to be false and unfaithful.

To boil it down, the LORD’s *emeth*, His truth, is His fulfillment of His Word and character *such that men may rely upon it*. Remember what we said earlier: God does what He says, and He says what He does. His Word carries out His purpose and will. As He is true, so is His Word — both because it makes true statements *and* because whatever He says, He fulfills. He speaks, and it is so. This is abundantly demonstrated in the Scriptures by tracing the LORD’s words, which betray His character and which are always performative, and His actions, which are the performance of His words and thus also of His character and being. Think of Abraham. The LORD spoke to him aged 75 (Gen. 12:1–4) and said that He would make him a great nation. He repeated the promise some years later (Gen. 15). Finally, when Abraham was 99 years old, the LORD repeated the promise (Gen. 17:16) and then fulfilled it when Abraham was 100 years old (Gen. 21:2). That fulfillment is the LORD’s *emeth*. And on it Abraham could stake his faith — his *emuna*. Another example: the LORD in accord with His merciful character and His own faithfulness to His covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, resolved to rescue a slave nation in great distress from a mighty oppressor, the most powerful nation in the Mediterranean at the time (Ex. 2:23–25). He promised Moses to do so (Ex. 3:7–8), and through the Red Sea, He delivered them (Ex. 14). Again, that was the LORD’s *emeth*. And Moses’ confession, that the LORD had rescued Israel from Egypt with a “strong hand and an outstretched arm” (Deut. 26:8) is Moses’ *emuna*.

The first bundling of *hesed* and *emeth* came in the LORD’s theophany to Moses on Mount Sinai. Just earlier, Moses noted that after the LORD had established the tent of meeting as the special locus of His presence, the LORD would there speak to Moses “face to face” (Ex. 33:11). In one of those conversations with the LORD, Moses requested to see the LORD’s glory (כְּבוֹד, Exodus 33:18; LXX: δόξα). So, the LORD directed Moses to go up to Mount Sinai. There, the LORD passed by Moses, saying, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in [kindliness] and faithfulness (יְיָ יִסְדֵּךְ וְיִחַדְךָ; LXX: πολυέλεος καὶ ἀληθινός), keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin” (Ex. 34:6–7).

Here, the LORD defines His *hesed* and *emeth* by what it performs: It forgives iniquity and transgression and sin. So, here we have a key concatenation: glory, kindness and faithfulness.

Importantly, this is the same concatenation that St. John invokes in his prologue (John 1:14): “We have seen His **glory, glory** as of the only Son from the Father, full of **grace** and **truth**.” We could rephrase John 1:14 to pick up the *Hebrew* sense of it as follows: “We have seen His **glory, glory** as of the only Son from the Father, full of **kindliness** and **faithfulness**.”

Hebrew Word	LXX Translation	Greek of John 1:14
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⁹ Noted also in *TDNT*, s.v. ἀλήθεια A.1 (1.233).

כְּבוֹד / <i>kavod</i> : glory (Ex. 33:11)	δόξα / <i>doxa</i> : <i>glory</i> (Ex. 33:11)	δόξα / <i>doxa</i> : glory
רַב / <i>rav</i> : abounding (Ex. 34:6)	πολυ- / <i>poly-</i> : greatly (Ex. 34:6)	πλήρης / <i>plērēs</i> : full
חֶסֶד / <i>hesed</i> : kindliness (Ex. 34:6)	-έλεος / <i>-eleos</i> : merciful (Ex. 34:6)	χάρις / <i>cháris</i> : grace, kindliness
אֱמֶת / <i>emeth</i> : faithfulness (Ex. 34:6)	ἀληθινός / <i>alēthinós</i> : faithful (Ex. 34:6)	ἀληθεια / <i>alētheia</i> : truth, faithfulness

Now, it is true that John selects slightly different *Greek* vocabulary than the Septuagint translators did. You can just examine the slide to see those differences. What is the same is δόξα in the Septuagint and δόξα in John's prologue. Differences appear with πολυέλεος ≈ πλήρης χάριτος and in the Septuagint translators' understanding that רַב applies only to חֶסֶד and not אֱמֶת. That said, the difference between the Septuagint's ἀληθινός and John's ἀλήθεια is one without a distinction: John simply, in a more Hebraistic way and more faithfully to the Hebrew text, uses a noun where the Septuagint uses an adjective (truth/true). While interesting in itself, we don't have time to dig into the issues. Suffice it to say that it stands on firm ground for multiple reasons that John's prologue is here evoking Exodus 34:6.¹⁰ In other words, Christ, the Word made flesh, is the enfleshment, the coming to realization, the performance of God's character and word of promise. He is God's faithfulness, God's truth. While Moses, as a cipher for the condemning Law, obscures the character of God, Christ, who is "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14), makes Him known (John 1:18), because, while Moses is the vehicle through which the Law was given, John says, grace and truth — which is to say, *hesed* and *emeth*, or kindliness and faithfulness — "came into being" (ἐγένετο) through Jesus Christ (John 1:17). It is not that these characteristics of God did not exist before: God is His attributes.¹¹ It is that, as one commentator puts it, "the phrase [grace and truth] does not [here] express the subjective character of God but the objective revelation given in the incarnate Word."¹² If one wishes to know — to hear, to see, to gaze upon and to handle with one's hands (1 John 1:1) — God's *hesed* and *emeth*, His grace and *truth*, one must know, hear, see, gaze upon and handle Christ Himself. In precisely this way could the Lord Jesus say to Philip on Maundy Thursday, "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know Me, Philip? Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

III.

What does this matter for us?

The implications of this are tremendous. Not only is Christ the *fulfillment* of God's truth *qua* faithfulness, He *is* God's truth *qua* faithfulness, as He Himself says, "I am the way, the **truth** [i.e., faithfulness], and the life" (John 14:6). It is from the moment of Christ's incarnation that "true worshipers will worship the Father" (John 4:23) in Spirit-wrought faith in the faithfulness of God, His truth: The highest worship of God is faith in His promises — in, through and fulfilled in the incarnation of His beloved Son. And those who worship the Father in truth, i.e., by faith in the incarnate Son, are themselves made ἀληθινοί, "true" — true, in the sense that they are the saved objects of God's faithfulness. The "way" to the Father lies

¹⁰ See *TDNT*, s.v. χάρις, κτλ., B. – C.3 (9.376–389). For further discussion, see William C. Weinrich, *John 1:1-7:1* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2015), 112–113, esp. 112: "Given the multiple allusions to the giving of Torah on Sinai in John 1:14–18, there can be little doubt that the Hebrew אֱמֶת חֶסֶד of Ex 34:6 (and later parallels) provides the OT background for the χάριτος καὶ ἀληθείας of Jn 1:14."

¹¹ Franz Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 1.428.

¹² Weinrich, *op. cit.*, 113.

open only to those who grasp Christ as the fulfillment of the Father's faithfulness. In this manner only is Christ the "way." And the "life" — the rescue from sin, death and eternal death — belongs only to those who grasp Christ as the LORD's "kindliness and faithfulness," who in His beloved Son alone forgives iniquity and transgression and sin (Ex. 34:6) through His death.

Unsurprisingly, as God's truth, Christ speaks the truth, i.e., He speaks with faithfulness. "If you abide in My Word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth," Jesus says (John 8:31–32; see also John 8:40, 16:7, *inter alios locos*). His words are not His own, but those of the Father (John 12:49). The Father's Word, as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and consubstantial with Him, is likewise truth (John 17:17), as is the Holy Spirit's, whom our Lord Jesus Himself calls the Spirit of truth (John 14:17, 15:25, 16:13). Sanctified by the Father's truth, His Word (John 17:17), and led by the Spirit of truth into all truth (John 16:13), even the witness of those who testify to Christ as God's truth is true (John 5:3, 19:19). Indeed, just as the Son's word gives life (John 6:36), who in the power of His fulfillment of God's faithfulness in bearing the sin of the world (John 1:29) offered Himself as the atoning sacrifice, so the word of those who have received the Spirit of truth bring life through a word that forgives sins (John 20:20), even as false words — words that deny that incarnation and therefore also that Jesus is the sin-forgiving faithfulness of God — are those of the antichrist and not of the Spirit of truth, but of the Spirit of error (1 John 4:1–6).

It is for this reason that our Lord Jesus Christ, whose Word is truth, bids His disciples remain in His Word (John 8:32). Quite simply put, apart from the Word of Christ, there is no Christ. Christ is the beating heart of Scripture; but one cannot have the beating heart apart from that which carries it, the Holy Scriptures. To hold the Scriptures at the center is to hold Christ at the center, and vice versa. Neither can be done without the other. The Scripture, God's Word, is true. It is faithful, just as Christ is the truth and its fulfillment, that is, the sacrificial performance of God's faithfulness to forgive sins.

IV.

Conclusion

That brings us back to the beginning of this little essay. You might say that what Luther encountered in the time he lived was a theology that had the appearance of being scriptural. The terms were all there: justification, righteousness, faith, grace. But for various reasons the truth, the faithfulness, of the Scriptures had been so obscured that it led to a falsification of the church's claims about Christ, so that He could no longer be found as the truth, as God's faithfulness to forgive sins through His death, despite the simplicity of Paul's Gospel: "I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3–4).

So, today we take Paul's words to heart: "I would remind you, brothers, of the Gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you" (1 Cor. 15:1–2). The business of our convention is none other than to hold fast that truthful Word, that faithful Word, that Word that forgives sins — for ourselves, to be sure, but for the sake of our neighbors and communities and world, who have not yet "heard or seen with their eyes or gazed upon or touched with their hands" Jesus Christ, who is the way, the **truth** and the life. For to know Christ as the truth, we must first know the truth about Christ, and that truth is His Word.

God's Word is our great heritage
And shall be ours forever;
To spread its light from age to age
Shall be our chief endeavor.

Through life it guides our way,
In death it is our stay.
Lord, grant, while worlds endure,
We keep its teachings pure
Throughout all generations. (*Lutheran Service Book* 582)

Amen.