



Beverly Heights  
Presbyterian  
Church

# scattered seeds.

THE MONTHLY MAGAZINE

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*Down to Earth*

# TRUTH



## ***Considering the TRUE:***

*As disciples of Jesus Christ, we are commanded  
not to lie or deceive, for we know the truth and it  
shall set us free.*

# Searching for truth in a fallen world.

By Art Flickinger

**T**he Psalmist wrote, “All mankind are liars” (Psalm 116:11). He didn’t say some are liars but all. Man’s default since the Fall from the Garden of Eden is one of a sinful rejection of truth.

How then are we supposed to find truth in a world in which lies are commonplace? And in a world which increasingly sees truth as relative?

I have been pondering these questions since the Covid-19 pandemic. The following reflects my reawakening on the importance of truth, not just for believers but as a hinge point culturally and for society. I am a pharmacist professionally, so I tend to look for facts when I make decisions. But in Covid, those deemed to be “experts” very often contradicted themselves. Worse still, they silenced those who dared to question them.

As Christians we begin with two presuppositions which are non-negotiable and essential to our worldview. First, there is a God. Second, He is knowable. In other words, truth is theocentric and absolute. Without God’s truth, we are lost.

The most famous (or infamous) inquiry into truth in history is recorded for us in the gospel of John (18:37-38), when Pontius Pilate cross examined Jesus.

“So you are a king, are you?” Pilate asks. Jesus answers, “You say that I am a king. For this

I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.”

Pilate then asks Jesus, “What is truth?” He then tells the blood thirsty mob, “I find no guilt in him,” but hands Jesus over to be crucified. Why did Pilate hand over a man he believed was innocent to a lynch mob?

Although the concept of a “mob mentality” didn’t exist then, we might speculate that placating the mob surely had something to do with Pilate’s acquiescence.

We’ve established so far that all human beings lie and embrace untruth, and that Pilate was blind to the truth. But the concept that mobs have a mentality – that groups of people behave differently as a mob than they might individually – was first put forward by social psychologists in the 19th century.

Modern psychology added another troubling layer of deceit to our understanding of the dilemma we face as humans. In his book *The Psychology of Totalitarianism* (published in 2022), Belgian author and clinical psychologist Mattias Desmet persuasively explains how a “mob mentality” can cause humans to become totally detached from reality.

Dr. Desmet is widely recognized as one of the world’s leading experts on a branch of social psychology called “mass formation psychosis.” An example of this is found in the rise of

the Nazi party in Germany starting in the 1920s. A very intelligent, highly educated population went barking mad. They rejected truth on a wide scale.

How did this happen?

Dr. Desmet explains how and its applicability to what happened worldwide during Covid. He sets forth five observations that lead societies to “mass formation psychosis.” According to his analysis, this occurred during Covid, which could have easily slipped into totalitarianism.

1. Societies blindly degenerate their beliefs into dogma.
2. Experiences of meaninglessness and social isolation increase.
3. Hopes are increasingly placed on technological solutions to problems inherent in human existence.
4. Public space is increasingly dominated by a pseudoscientific discourse of numbers, data and statistics that completely blur the line between scientific fact and fiction.
5. Once these criteria are satisfied, enter the “Strong Man” who promises order and protection.

“In Germany, a race theory, propagated by a fanatical demagogue, propelled a large part of the population into a curious state of mind,” Dr. Desmet writes. “People denounced relatives, friends and

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colleagues who in their opinion were not unconditionally loyal to the German People and its leader.”

He makes the case that the mass formation responsible for the rise of totalitarianism in Germany was in play globally in the response to the Covid pandemic. The parallels are stunning and frightening.

Where does this observation leave us as believers? How do we guard against our fallen nature? Our propensity to lie and deceive? Our blindness to truth? Our tendency to embrace moral relativism and fall into “mass formation psychosis”?

We (of course) need a standard against which truth and untruth is measured. The great Christian author C.S. Lewis expressed that standard clearly in his masterwork, *Mere Christianity*: “My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line.”

Our straight line is Jesus Christ. He is our true north.

Anyone who has used a compass and a map knows that one must find true north to navigate in the wilderness. Magnetic north and true north are not the same. If you follow magnetic north, it will not be true. You will not arrive at your destination. Following magnetic north leaves us lost, as does the crooked line of worldly relativism.

Jesus Christ is the only source of truth in the universe – our straight line, our compass, when we are lost, and to keep us from becoming lost.

*Elder Art Flickinger has served on our Session for the past 6½ years. A member of Beverly Heights for the past 42 years, he has been married to his wife Tracey for 44. Their four children came to faith and were baptized and confirmed at Beverly Heights. He and Tracey have three grandchildren.*



*Ecco Homo* by Antonio Ciseri (1871).



# The church of the sexual revolution.

By Carl R. Trueman

The website of Allendale United Methodist Church in St. Petersburg, Fla., says the congregation “is committed to anti-racism and radical solidarity with folx on the margins.” Last month the church featured a “special guest” for the children’s sermon at weekly worship.

Isaac Simmons, who uses the stage name “Ms. Penny Cost,” donned a high-slit sequin dress, denounced capitalism and praised liberation theology. In a follow-up post after the event, Rev. Andy Oliver, the church’s pastor, wrote: “Ms. Penny Cost was an angel in heels appearing to shepherds in the fields on the night shift, telling them that Good News

had arrived on their doorstep. What was once [on] the margins is the center.”

Churches are increasingly in the middle of cultural and moral controversies. Mr. Oliver’s denomination has dramatically fragmented over issues of sexuality, with many congregations leaving to join the Global Methodist Church, a new denomination founded in 2022 as a conservative alternative.

The Catholic Church is being torn apart, too. The Synodal Path in Germany, an ongoing national consultation of bishops and laity, has pressed for progressive changes in doctrine and discipline. Traditional Catholics



Rev. Andy Oliver and Drag Queen “Ms. Penny Cost” on the chancel of Allendale United Methodist Church in St. Petersburg, Fla., Oct. 2, 2022.

distrust Pope Francis's Synod on Synodality, a global listening effort, as a project to surreptitiously change church teaching, which has seemingly over-represented the input of disaffected laity.

The same applies to religious schools. Last year a priest at the University of Notre Dame wore a Pride stole while attending a "Coming Out Day Celebration" sponsored by PrismND, the university's "official LGBTQ+ undergraduate student organization." The school's student newspaper, the Irish Rover, recently reported that a faculty member was openly offering support to students seeking abortions.

North Park University, affiliated with the Evangelical Covenant Church, is in a legal dispute with Bradley Nassif, who claims to have been fired from the faculty because he maintained traditional Christian views of marriage and sexuality. And where there are no open conflicts, such as at Georgetown University, a Jesuit institution, that often means progressives have foreclosed debate.

In the 1920s American Protestantism underwent heated debates over the truth of biblical accounts of miracles and whether evolution is consistent with Christian teaching. But history isn't quite repeating itself. Denominations divided and congregations split, but life in general proceeded as normal. The issues currently dividing Christians – sex, sexual identity, the definition of a person – can't easily be isolated from society at large.

Whether you believe Jesus Christ rose from the dead may have formerly determined where you worshiped on Sunday, but it had no effect on where you worked or played. Differences on such matters, to borrow from Thomas Jefferson, neither picked any pockets nor broke any legs.

Unlike earlier debates over, say, the incarnation or resurrection, new disagreements have wider social implications for Christians – and everyone else. Institutions that maintain traditionalist positions draw not simply ridicule from the wider world but widespread calls for punitive actions against them.

Rejecting the values of the sexual revolution may not break anyone's leg, but today the breaking of hearts is regarded as equally violent and unacceptable. Examples include the Obama-era contraceptive-coverage mandate, battles over the legitimacy of same-sex adoption, and vandalism of churches leading up to and following the Supreme Court's decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*.

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The message of these events is clear: The terms of belonging to civil society have changed. In the early 20th century, debates about Christian orthodoxy took place within an America where the basic elements of Christian moral teaching were generally accepted. Today, such thinking stands at odds with the politics of identity that dominates elite institutions. That sets the scene for external culture war and internal civil war.

There's one more oddity of our present religious woes. Whereas the problems for Christian institutions in the early 20th century might be described as having been a crisis in the understanding of God – could he become incarnate, rise from the dead and reveal himself to his creatures? – the problems of the early 21st century are different in kind.

They can be characterized as a crisis in what it means to be human. Are embryos persons? Are sex differences morally significant? Is "gender identity" different from sex? It's ironic that disagreements about the creature may prove more devastating to the church than those about the Creator.

Carl R. Trueman is a professor of biblical and religious studies at Grove City College and a fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C. The inaugural speaker, in October 2021, of our Scattered Seeds Symposium, he is the author, most recently, of *Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution* (Crossway).

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# Mud and blood: the call to ordained office.

*By Kyle Bennett*

*When the  
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Pastoral ministry is a messy place. Growing up a pastor's kid, I observed the shadows that hover over the pulpit. I saw my father wrestle with them, and the resultant mud and blood on the floors.

This didn't affect my love for the Church and her Bridegroom. I continued to be actively involved in the churches my dad pastored. I studied ministry (and philosophy) at Geneva with the intent of going into some kind of ministry. I went on to become a youth and associate pastor at a church in Florida. Then seminary. Then teaching seminary classes.

I believed I was doing what I was supposed to be doing: edifying and equipping the Church. I was volunteering my time and talents through preaching, Bible studies and retreats. I became an elder in a PCA church and never missed a meeting. Surely, I was doing what I was supposed to be doing.

Save the voice. That voice – all along reverberating in my chest. It murmured for years. Nudging and convicting. Using the words of others to challenge me. *Maybe I wasn't doing everything I know I should be doing? Maybe my service was selfish?*

*Maybe I was afraid to come under something more? Maybe I was being disobedient?*

It was the truth. He wanted more. But I had no interest in answering, for I was doing enough. He was telling me I wasn't. He wanted ordained pastoral ministry, but I was comfortable with my contributions. I was overseeing ministries and offering my time and talents. Why should I come under an office with obligations and requirements?

Over the past year, Pastor Nate and Peter Chace have challenged me to see things I didn't want to see.

*Why are you being disobedient? Submit.* I was blind and the Lord used Nate and Peter to rub mud on my eyes. They helped me see exactly what I didn't want to see: all along, I was running from the truth.

I was serving from a distance because it was safe. I was leading from an armchair because it was comfortable. I was keeping my boots pristine by stepping over the mud and blood

that others would clean up. I convinced myself that I was serving Him when in reality I was serving myself. Truth be told, my "I'm doing enough" was a copout.

When the truth calls you, you answer. But you answer like Abraham and Moses and Isaiah. You answer and you say, "Here I am, Lord." You accept the call. You come under the One who owns you. You lay down your aspirations and ambitions. You lay down your agendas and anticipations. You die to self. You don't try to shush the truth like I did.

I was disobedient. I was afraid. I did not

want to bear the tremendous weight of ordained office. I had seen others look a few dragons in the eye and it wasn't pretty. I did not want to deal with difficulties and manage mess. I wanted ministry and blessing without mud and blood.

But I'm tired of running. I'm tired of being disobedient. My feet hurt and my sandals aren't even all that dusty. God knows, I've been sailing off in every direction to avoid the destination to which I know I've been sent. I've spent far too many nights in the belly of a fish. I'm ready to live on the other

favorite quotes from Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55), the Christian philosopher, which comes from one of his journal entries as he was discerning a calling in his life. It has never meant more to me than it does today:

"What I really lack is to be clear in my mind *what I am to do*, ... The thing is to understand myself, to see what God really wishes *me* to do. ... What good would it do me if the truth stood before me, cold and naked, not caring whether I recognized it or not, and producing in me a shudder of fear



*A contemporary statue (in Turkey) of Diogenes, the Greek philosopher who, with his lantern, sought an honest, truthful man.*

side of the-rolled-away stone.

So on Tuesday, April 11, 2023, I took the first step toward obedience. I went before our Session and shared that I am ready to respond to the call. I told them that over the past year I have sensed the call to pursue pastoral ministry here at Beverly Heights Church. They unanimously affirmed that call by endorsing me as a candidate for pastoral ministry.

Truth prevails.

In closing, I'm reminded of one of my

rather than a trusting devotion? Must not the truth *be taken up into my life*? That is what I now recognize as the most important thing."

*Kyle Bennett, Ph.D., expects his application as a candidate for ordination in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church to conclude within the next year or so. He is husband to Andrea; father to daughter Elliott (14) and sons Miles (9) and Calvin (5); and serves as director of our Preschool and principal of our Academy.*

# The price we paid for truth.

**S**peaking the truth and living according to its precepts is costly business.

Jesus, Who is the Truth, challenged His disciples: “If any man would come after me let Him deny himself, pick up his cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24). Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian who was hanged for his stand against Nazism and Hitler during World War II, famously wrote in his classic *The Cost of Discipleship*: “When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die.”

Numerous examples of the cost of truthfulness might be cited. But perhaps the most significant in the life of Beverly Heights Church was our departure 16 years ago from the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. denomination. Vivid memories remain of the heartbreak, worry and relief associated with our break.

At the heart of the decision to leave was the determination that we pursue an understanding of historic, biblical truth and follow where the Holy Spirit, *the Spirit of truth* (John 16:13), would lead ... no matter the cost.

The issue that prompted our action centered on the PCUSA’s leftward drift from biblical orthodoxy and its rejection of classic Christian doctrines such as the authority of Scripture and the unique Personhood of Jesus Christ as the fully

divine, eternal Son of God.

What led to my own decision to leave was the General Assembly’s adoption of a report on the use of so-called “sexually exclusive language” in worship, in which the three Persons of the Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), were replaced with less masculine terms such as “Compassionate Mother,” “Beloved Child” and “Life Giving Womb.”

I returned home from that meeting and declared to an adult Sunday School class the following Sunday: I cannot stay any longer. The reaction of the congregation was applause mixed with tears.

Members of Beverly Heights the next year (2007) voted 195-to-4 to leave the denomination. Yet the cost of such a nearly unanimous decision was paid in numerous ways over the coming years.

One immediate cost for following truth was financial. Our negotiated settlement with the Pittsburgh Presbytery required that we pay a \$250,000 “exit fee” (it was a ransom!) in order to maintain ownership of our property. On the final day of the calendar year for 10 consecutive years, we sent a check for \$25,000 to avoid a judicial proceeding with no guarantee that the denomination would not take possession of the building and dissolve our congregation.

The sweetest and most endearing reaction of some in the congregation was expressed in the concern that if we left the denomination, I would lose my PCUSA pension – a cost that many believed was too steep for me to endure. As Mary and I talked and prayed over the matter, we always believed that the cost of standing for Jesus and His truth was one worth paying.

By His grace, Mary and I are now living on that pension.

The cost of standing for the truth was not at all trivial to each of us associated with our church’s transition from the PCUSA to the EPC. Relationships were severed and, in some instances, broken. But these costs pale in comparison to the loss of freedom, material goods and even life that has been paid by many who have stood for Jesus and the truth over the history of the Christian Church.

Nor is the stand for truth always played out on the grand stage of human history. Each of us has opportunity, in the course of daily living and decision-making, to ask ourselves: *What do I know to be true? And how can I live in a way that’s consistent with that truth and honors the One Who said, “I AM the Truth”?*

*Rick Wolling is pastor emeritus of Beverly Heights Church.*