What is Truth?

Teresa Okure, shcj*

How do we find truth in Scripture? Clearly, our cultures influence our reading and shape our understanding of the Bible. In Scripture God’s word is communicated in limited and at times archaic human language and idioms, with all their inevitable cultural moorings, and we hear that word through the lens of a particular culture and life context. How do our cultures enable us to discover the truth in God’s word and be transformed by it, and how do they hinder us? Are there universal truths in Scripture that transcend cultural limitations? If so, how do we know what they are? Who decides the parameters of such truths? These are some of the fundamental questions that we will explore in this article.

The theme of this Trinity Institute conference is “reading through other eyes.” That could be understood as “I am reading through your eyes” and “you are reading through my eyes”; in community as I hear you read and interpret the Scriptures and you hear me read, I may gain insight from you and you may gain insight from me. We learn from one another. The Bible is essentially a community book, written for people living in communities of faith, and no passage of Scripture is subject to private interpretation (2 Pet. 1:19–21). We need to read together to be able to help one another see with new eyes; what our cultures may blind us from seeing, people from other cultures can help us to see

* Sister Teresa Okure, shcj, is Professor of New Testament and Gender Hermeneutics at the Catholic Institute of West Africa in Nigeria and a former Head of the Department of Biblical Studies and Dean of the Faculty of Theology. In 2009 she was co-guest editor of a special issue of the International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church on ecclesiology in Africa and is a contributing editor of Texts@Contexts, a book series featuring scholarship on select books of the Bible by authors from a rich array of social, cultural, and ethnic locations. She has published several articles and chapters in books nationally and internationally and authored and co-authored books. This paper is based on her presentation and written text given at the 2011 Trinity Institute, “Reading Scripture through Other Eyes,” on January 20, 2011. Its style reflects the oral and essentially audience-engaging character of the Trinity Conference.
more clearly in the light of the gospel. We need to look into our cultures to discover the seeds of the gospel in them. We need to hear God’s message to us as individuals and as members of a community, interpreted through the lens of our God-given cultures in which we are formed. That is one aspect of reading through other eyes.

Another aspect is that we approach Scripture not in order to bend it to our personal or communal interests and values, but with a listening and attentive heart that enables us to hear and receive a message that transcends cultural limitations—the limitations of the biblical authors, and our own. God has given to us the same Spirit that inspired the biblical authors. Jesus told his disciples that he had yet many things to say to them which were beyond their understanding at the time. Even the things he told them were often beyond their grasp because their culture and religion grounded them in a value system contrary to his own. But he promised to send the Spirit of truth to lead them to the complete truth (John 16:12–13). Openness to the teaching mission of the Spirit of truth, with a readiness and willingness to learn from or be taught by the Spirit, helps us to understand God’s word in Scripture, even if we find it to be a hard saying, as Jesus’ disciples did, because of our rootedness in our unredeemed selves and cultures. If the Scriptures are to offer a powerful, challenging, and transformative word to us in our very diverse sociocultural contexts, we need to develop new eyes for reading, grow new ears for hearing, and cultivate new hearts for receiving, keeping, pondering and loving into action what we hear. Jesus said to his disciples, “Blessed are your eyes because they see; your ears because they hear” (Matt. 13:16); we need seeing eyes to see what is out there, and to act on it. If we impose our cultural meanings and interests on God’s word, we deprive ourselves of the immensegraces and blessings God offers us in and through the Scripture. The challenge is, How do I see? How do I hear? How do I know?

Language as the Embodiment of Culture

Our culture is one aspect we must look at when we talk about finding truth in Scripture. Truth here does not mean what is true as opposed to false. It means that which is; what is real. The reality is that I see through my cultural eyes, I hear through my cultural ears and understand through my cultural mind. My culture upholds particular values and gives meaning to particular symbols. Culture is the
What is Truth?

DNA of a given people. It is the core heritage that each of us receives in the process of coming to life. Culture is about how we human beings hear, intuit, impute, communicate, and receive meaning, how we are enabled to see reality. Our words, actions, and worldview are inevitably stamped—and by the same token, conditioned and limited—by the culture into which we are born. We were born into diverse cultures; they condition us. Culture is not a matter of right or wrong; it is just a given.

Language is the embodiment of culture. It forms and shapes how we perceive and interpret reality. Sometimes our culture conditions even our mouths, our tongues. When our tongues are formed in a particular language, we find it difficult to switch to another one. Our tongues are so shaped and conditioned by our native language (mother tongue) that we find it difficult, if not impossible, to pronounce words that are not in our mother tongue. For example, in my language (Ibibio) the “kp” in the word Ekpe has one sound. Ekpe is a proper name; it also means “lion,” depending on the intonation. When foreigners to the language speak the word, they separate the “k” from the “p” and pronounce it ek-pe. And just as our tongues are shaped by our language, our ears are accustomed to listening to particular intonations. We never blame our ears for being fixed in a particular way of hearing, but instead we blame the speaker for speaking with an accent—as if we ourselves had no accent!

The miracle of Pentecost for me is twofold. The disciples were given the gift of tongues to speak the gospel; at the same time all the people gathered in Jerusalem were given the gift of hearing: they heard the gospel in their own languages. The people were not obliged to hear and understand the gospel in only one language. Every language, every culture could hear, understand, and in turn proclaim the gospel. That is a dimension of Pentecost we forget. There are no superior or inferior cultures. If we talk about fundamental human rights, we must also talk about fundamental cultural rights. The truth of culture requires that every language be heard speaking the gospel. But language and culture can also be used to dehumanize others: If you don’t speak my language, you don’t exist. If you don’t shape yourself into my cultural system, you don’t exist. If you don’t match my cultural worldviews, you don’t exist. We need the transcendence of the gospel to help us get out of these cultural ghettos. Jesus says we should take heed how we hear. Our ears need to be trained so that we can hear the
nuances in other's way of speaking, not only in terms of the words but also in terms of meaning.¹

Language is not an accidental in Scripture; it embodies the message of Scripture. The texts we have are cultured texts, written by individuals like you and me who lived in their own contexts, with their own cultural receptive frames. They could not have written except from within that reality. And they used the language they had, with the idioms they had, with the understanding they had of God, with the understanding of humanity they had at the time. The texts were written in ancient Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek language settings and cultures; they need to be translated into languages and cultural idioms we can understand today without betraying their meaning. Our desire to discover the truth of Scripture in community requires that we address the issue of translation, the language medium through which we receive the message of Scripture in our diverse locations today.

Many of our questions about the nature of the relationship between culture and gospel are embodied in the call to use inclusive language in our translation of the texts of Scripture. Inclusive language is an issue which causes great pain to many, especially women, and it applies not only to Scripture, but also to our theology and our self-understanding as the community of believers, the body of Christ. I once came across the story of a little girl who said this prayer to Jesus: “Jesus, I know you are one of them [the boys], but do you also love little girls?” Why did the little girl feel the need to say this to Jesus? I know also of a woman religious who said she could never forgive Jesus for becoming male. I have heard young men—and not so young, especially those in the clerical line—say that no matter what women may think and believe about themselves, Jesus was a male, so there is no way women can measure up to them or claim equality in dignity and status with them, especially when it comes to ministry and liturgy. These positions betray deep underlying pains and falsehoods which as the church community, the family of God, we need to address in the light of the truth of the gospel. What is “the truth of the gospel” in these matters? And does the language, the medium we use

¹ I have developed this point in my article, “‘First Was the Life, Not the Book,’” in Teresa Okure, ed., To Cast Fire Upon the Earth: Bible and Mission Collaborating in Today’s Multicultural Global Contexts (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2000), 194–201.
What is Truth?

in the reception and proclamation of this gospel, help to disclose and make to blossom, or instead to distort this truth?

In many cases, the resistance to inclusive language is rooted in the English cultural reality in which the word “man” is both specific (standing for the male) and generic (standing for humanity). This was not the case with Hebrew and Greek, the main languages of the Bible; nor is it the case with many, if not all, African languages. While some argue that the English word “man” includes women, others cope with the problem by arguing that actually the word “woman” includes men: wo/man. But by what argument can we persuasively say that “brother” includes “sister”? Or that “son” includes “daughter,” even in the English language? Or is the woman that God created and built as a separate creature from the man (Genesis 2) now so absorbed into the male in all its forms that she ceases to exist in her own right (that is, if Adam in Genesis 2:7 was originally male, not an androgynous creature, as some modern readers have argued)? Is the male the norm of what it means to be human, as Aristotle and the Scholastics, theologizing with their cultural framework, believed? Are women “misbegotten males,” in the words of Aquinas? We have to be very careful when using cultural frames to theologize with.

The issue of inclusive language is not a game of words; at stake is the fundamental issue of truth, the truth of Scripture, the truth of the gospel of justice (“justice” here understood as “truth in relationship”), the truth about our worth as male and female in God’s eyes and our mutual self-perceptions as male and female. How do we translate the Scriptures and do our theology in such a way that women know they are fully included in the gospel promises and as integral part of the community in their own right? That men, too, know and accept this reality?

In my view the first way forward is to recognize that the issue of language is essentially a cultural issue, be it the original languages of the Bible or that of their many translations, their receptions into different cultures through language. As in most African languages, in

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2 In Hebrew adam is primarily generic (see Gen. 1:26–27; 5:1–2); ish refers to the male, and also to husband. In Greek, the generic is anthropos (whence the English word anthropology), the male is anér (whence androcentric, formed from the genitive form of the word). Even Latin, the language of the Vulgate, which for centuries was the only recognized version of Scripture in the Roman Catholic Church, has homo (generic; whence such words as homicide) and vir (specific to the male; whence the word virile).
Ibibio (with its family Efik and Anang), the problem of gender and inclusive language does not arise at all with regard to the words God, Spirit, son, daughter, man, woman, sister, and brother. The Ibibio name for God is Abasi; its pronoun is Enye. The same applies for all proper and common nouns, male and female. I am not aware that we (the Ibibio) have a neuter noun. It is debatable whether our people ever saw God as father (Ete) before the advent of Christianity. Alongside Abasi was Eka Abasi (“mother of God”). This may indicate that in their view first was the female then the male God. In Ibibio, the word “spirit” is either retained or transliterated, not translated. We say “spirit,” or some say “sbirit.” The word for “man” (meaning exclusively “a human being”) is owo. The third person pronouns (he and she) are all rendered enye; their common plural is mmo. The problem of the pronouns for Jesus, Spirit, God, and Blessed Trinity, then, does not arise.

The English translation of John 1:14 is usually “the Word became man” (or even erroneously, “he was made man”). In Ibibio it is: “enyе akабаде еdi owo” (“he became a human being”). This translation is closer to the Greek, which is “the word became flesh” (“ho logos sarx egeneto”), where sarx refers to the human as opposed to the divine, as in Isaiah 40:6, “All flesh is grass.” Similarly, “son” (hyios), signifying what is begotten (not a male child), is eyen for both a boy child and a girl child. If there is need to specify that it is a boy child or girl child we say eyen eden and eyen anwan, respectively. Similarly, a female human being is awuwan (contracted from owo anwan or anwan,) and the male human being is awuden (contracted from owo eden or eden or weren, where the “d” and “r” are often interchanged). Their pronouns are the same: enye and mmo (singular and plural, respectively). For “brother” and “sister,” Ibibio/Efik/Anang has one word: eyeneka (literally “the child of my mother,” if they are siblings) and eyenete (“the child of my father,” for same father but different mothers). The rationale behind this is that the mother is the constant in a child’s life. So whoever one’s mother begets is one’s eyeneka (plural: ndito eka). Again, their personal pronouns are enye and mmo (singular and plural, respectively). The context makes clear without any problem to whom or what the pronouns refer. This phenomenon, as said before, applies to most, if not all, African languages.

What truth can we learn from this example in the current debate on the need for inclusive language? Is the problem due to the original
What is Truth?

ancient languages? Or is the English language of translation the problem? The question is important in the search for the truth of Scripture and culture. Women scholars have noted that even when the original languages use or mean the generic, English renders them as specific (male). Some African scholars (men and women) increasingly ask that we add the issue of translation to the postcolonial reading of Scripture now in vogue, and that we divest the texts of their British colonial and Greco-Roman imperial moorings—the most important of which is language, the key agent, carrier, and transmitter of culture. An awareness of the diversity of cultural readings in our translations helps us not to absolutize our language of reception over other languages.

It would be naive to limit the problem of inclusive language to the relationship and dignity of man and woman in church and society, or to translations of Scripture only. To take a particular instance: Jesus said to us his disciples, “When the Spirit of truth comes, it will lead you to the complete truth” (John 16:13). Some will probably be shocked at the thought of using “it” for the Spirit. Yet the Greek word for spirit, *to pneuma*, is neuter, not masculine. The shock would probably be greater if we were to translate this text as, “When the Spirit of truth comes, *she* will lead you to the complete truth.” Scripture links the Spirit with divine Wisdom, which is a feminine noun and figure both in Hebrew (*hochma*) and Greek (*sophia*). John’s Gospel presents Jesus as the Word (*logos*, masculine), but even here the Word performs the works attributed to Wisdom in the wisdom literature: the one through whom all things were created (Wisd. 9:1; Ps. 33:6). Paul sees Jesus, God-Word Incarnate as “the power and wisdom of God,” both feminine nouns in Greek (1 Cor. 1:24). In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus refers to himself (with John the Baptist) as the child of wisdom, therefore as wisdom (Matt. 11:16–19). In view of all this (though the examples are not exhaustive), we should be very comfortable to translate the text thus: “When the Spirit of truth comes, *she* [*enyé* in Ibibio] will lead you to the complete truth,” if we allow the truth and evidence of the gospel to guide us, rather than our cultural languages and usage which have conditioned us to see the Spirit as a “he” (*enyé* in Ibibio).

So we see that the language of Scripture is conditioned by the culture. And there is culture in the content of the texts as well. “Wives, be subject to your husbands in everything as you are to the Lord” (Eph. 5:22): that is a cultural part of the text. There are things in
Scripture that are culturally conditioned and not universally applicable.\(^3\) When, for instance, we read the letters of Paul in the liturgy and end with “this is the Word of the Lord,” how did the letters jump from being a letter of Paul to the word of the Lord? By canonizing the text, what did we canonize? The truth of culture in the text means I have a duty to interpret what I inherit, to make sure it takes me to the truth of the gospel. We need to ask hard questions of Scripture and tradition. How does the gospel, the canon within the canon of Scripture, understand God? How does it understand man and woman in relationship: in relation to God and to gospel, in the community and to one another? How does our penetration into the truth of the gospel help us to resolve these perennial problems? How do we allow the Spirit of truth to lead us progressively into the complete truth that will set us free in this matter?

Transcending Culture

While we are clearly cultural people, we are not just placed in a culture and that is all there is to it. As creatures made in God’s image and likeness, we have innate within us the ability to transcend culture, to know the truth that transcends culture. Otherwise we would not be here searching together to reach the truth. And not only are we made in God’s image and likeness, but as Christians we have been baptized, dipped into Christ. To baptize is to dip. If I have a glass of red dye and I dip a white cloth in it, the red dye stays in it. So as we are dipped into Christ, we are dipped into truth, dipped into the one who says, “I am the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6). In him as man, woman, or child we have equal rights, dignity, status, and responsibilities because we become part of him on an equal basis, through baptism by water and the Holy Spirit. Again “the truth” here is not the false, but “the main, the main” (as we say in Nigeria), that which is real, and in relation to which other truths are just symbols. The bread of life, for instance, means the real bread, the true bread, the one that gives life, the true life; and since it is the real one, it is not subject to decay and destruction. It is Eucharist, Christ’s own thanksgiving to God for us, his body and blood.

\(^3\) *Dei Verbum*, no. 12, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation of the Second Vatican Council, citing Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, III, 18, 26 (*Patrologia Latina* 34, 75–76), recognizes that while the whole of Scripture is divinely inspired, certain things in it are culturally conditioned, therefore not universally normative.
What is Truth?

In our search for truth together, we come with our cultural backgrounds and dimensions, but we bring them into this comprehensive truth that engulfs all of us, this person into whom we have been dipped and who says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” He came to show us how to find truth, what the referent point of truth should be so that it doesn’t depend on my understanding of truth or your understanding of truth, but on all of us together struggling to understand truth from his perspective. Ignatius of Antioch said in the first century, “Whenever they tell me ‘it is not written in the book,’ I tell them, ‘Oh yes, it is written, because our book is a person, Jesus of Nazareth.’” Jesus himself said that everything written in the Scriptures was about him. “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (John 5:39–40). As Jesus walked along with the disciples on the way to Emmaus after the resurrection, he walked them through the Scriptures to help them see that what had happened was not something that should shatter their world, their life’s hopes and expectations, but rather something that should make them jump up and shout for joy: “Hallelujah! It has come! It is done.”

When we are searching for the truth, we need the truth of the gospel as our guide and goal. The gospel does not emanate from me, or from you, or from our cultures. If it did, then there would have been no need for the Incarnation. The gospel is not for the one who became incarnate, the gospel is for you and for me, the gospel is for humanity, the gospel is for creation. And it has very specific characteristics: making the blind to see and the lame to walk, setting prisoners free, raising the dead, proclaiming the gospel to the poor, and celebrating God’s general amnesty to the entire humanity and creation (Luke 4:18–19). So it is a free gift that God has given to us. God loved the world so much that God gave his uniquely beloved Son (John 3:16).

In the last analysis, then, when we are talking about the truth of Scripture, we are not talking about a book, but a person, as Ignatius said. And as I struggle to understand the truth of Scripture, the first thing I do is to try to see Jesus as gospel. We join Paul who said, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is God’s power to save everybody, Jew and Gentile alike” (Rom. 1:1–2, 16)—those were the categories they had then; today we can add our own categories. So how was Jesus gospel? Because he is the way you and I have to walk. We
know that Jesus was born into a culture, inserted into a culture—the Jewish culture and the culture of humanity. He became like us in all things except sin (Heb. 4:15). Jesus lived through his cultural demands; he was circumcised, he went to the Temple at the age of twelve, he was baptized by John the Baptist and told him they should fulfill all justice for a start. Jesus lived in his culture, but at the same time Jesus was gospel enough to challenge in his culture things that were dehumanizing: oppression of the poor, exploitation of religion, exclusion of foreigners, tagging people as sinners and righteous, laws about eating with unwashed hands and the way one dresses—all the things that got in the way of the gospel, in the way of the truth. He dispossessed himself, took the nature of a slave, and became like us in all things, except sin (Phil. 2:6–11). He did that. And I think we too need to do that. And not only did he do that, but he paid for it with his life. Acts says he “went about doing good” (10:38), and the outcome of that good was the pain of the crucifixion. But that was not the end. There is no way with God that evil can be the end. “It is finished, it is complete” (John 19:13); “I have risen, and I am still with you.” In him and through him, God has now declared a general amnesty for all of creation and reconciled it to the divine self (Col. 1:15–20; 2 Cor. 5:17–19).

When then we talk about searching the truth of Scripture, the first place we need to look is in the person who is gospel. The truth of Scripture is rooted in a person who is gospel, God’s gospel. When we do that, insofar as we are following him, learning from him, being the good scribes, we need to incarnate in our own lives and cultural contexts what he did. What is there in the culture that is gospel? We affirm that. What is there in the culture that is dehumanizing, life-denying, God-opposed? We challenge that, while we commit ourselves to worship God, not idols. We do this, not because God wants to be worshiped, but because we want to live up to our vocation and call to be like God; we want to live up to our true identity as God’s children by worshiping God, that is, orientating our entire lives toward God as Jesus did (John 4:34). So that’s a challenge. We want to reject a culture that excludes and marginalizes people on the basis of race, color, language, religion, class, and their God-given sex, when God has included them in Christ and in the divine self. A culture of “me, myself, and I” (the false trinity), a culture in which God has to be grateful to me, a culture in which money is everything, a culture in which God has been reduced to our disciple and in which we check
in or check out, pick and choose from God’s injunctions as it suits us—you and I are the ones to confront that culture, with its shopping mall-inspired mentality, so that the gospel can be proclaimed, and can liberate everybody the way it wants, for our sole good.

Another model I want to give is Paul, because Paul was steeped head over heels in his culture. We read his pedigree in Philippians 3: a Hebrew born of Hebrews, as to the law a Pharisee, with zeal according to the law blameless. But then he met somebody. He met Jesus. And Paul had to revisit his entire cultural upbringing. It took him three years (depending on how we interpret his statement in Galatians 1:16–18) to revise all that, and to come up with the difference of what it means to be in the law—and as a Pharisee he was steeped in the law—and then to be in Christ. And he knew that he could not carry the baggage of what it meant to be in the law into being in Christ. In his culture, you kept the law and it kept you; if you didn’t keep it, you were accursed. He describes all that the law meant for him, and then he says that all that for him has become refuse, baggage, rubbish, so that he has to give it up in order to step into the gospel (Phil. 3:7–9). He steps into Christ, he steps into the goodness. God gave Paul to us as our apostle, so we also need to carry that model along and see what to do with it.

That sums up for me briefly what we mean by struggling with culture and gospel, two powerful models, our Savior and our Apostle. We are planted somewhere. Jesus was grounded in his culture; Paul was grounded in his culture. But they didn’t get stuck there. The culture shapes us and we shape the culture. It is not a question of leaving the culture; rather, it is a question of how does the culture help me to know who I am? And when I bring that into the gospel, what happens to me and to my culture? How do we apply this in our own context? How do I apply this in my own life? How do I apply this so that the gospel ministers to me and helps me to discover what is the real, the true? How do we know what are culturally limited understandings of God and humanity, and what is gospel, what is transcendent truth?

Living into the Truth

Two examples from the gospels where cultural and transcendent gospel values have clashed and continue to clash are the issues of divorce and the belief that wealth is a sign of God’s favor. When asked by the Pharisees, strict observers of the law, his view on the lawfulness of the practice of divorce (Matt. 19:4), Jesus simply referred them to
God’s created will found in Genesis (1:27, 2:24). In other words, Jesus was not instituting a new law. Like a true and faithful steward, accountable for God’s mysteries, he simply reminded them of what God had established at creation. Genesis is the first book of the Torah; its first eleven chapters belong to the order of creation and apply to all humanity. Its provisions therefore preceded those in Deuteronomy (24:1). When the Pharisees further asked Jesus why Moses “commanded” (made it legal for) them to practice divorce by issuing a writ of separation for the wife, Jesus replied that it was because of their “hardness of heart” or unteachability that Moses “permitted” or “allowed” (not “commanded”) them to divorce their wives. That notwithstanding, for him the inseparable union of husband and wife by which the two become one flesh, one person (Gen. 2:24), is God’s design for married couples from creation; it therefore cannot be nullified by a legal prescription of any human being (“What God has united let no human being separate”; ironically this is said to the Pharisees, the separated ones). Tough saying indeed in Jesus’ time, given the centuries of approved Mosaic legal practice. Tough saying for us, given our contemporary approved practices on this matter. Tough fruit for thought if we genuinely want to seek, know, and live by the truth of Scripture and of the gospel.

The disciples understood clearly the finality of Jesus’ Scripture-based position on divorce but found the teaching difficult to accept. Jesus did not revise his position to accommodate their amazement at his rejection of their law-approved cultural practice. He simply told them God’s abiding plan concerning marriage. Celibacy for him was not an acceptable preventive measure for divorce either. Today divorce is not only “permitted” or “allowed,” it has become so commonplace that in certain cases even before marriage, couples decide to agree on how they will divide their assets in the event of divorce. So what do we twenty-first-century disciples of Jesus do with this gospel message? Is this really gospel message or belief in an obsolete custom? Who has authority to legislate for divorce against God’s created provision because human beings experience difficulty in living their marital union to the end? Could the liberal laws we provide for divorce be a vote of no-confidence in married partners, a belief in their inability to work out their differences and let God-centered love (1 Corinthians 13) be the guiding principle of every aspect of their union? Do our laws concerning marriage and divorce no longer challenge us because we have become a law unto ourselves, believing that
God has approved and endorsed what we want, thus making God our disciple, one who learns from us? Or worse still, do we believe that God has nothing whatsoever to do with our life-choices; that they are purely our affair and God can take it or leave it? Have we developed and sustained a culture in which God is irrelevant in our personal and communal life? There is much fruit for thought and action here, if we really want to know the truth of Scripture in this matter.

Another example of conflict between gospel and cultural values is the issue of wealth and the economy. Jesus lived in a culture imbued with the belief that riches and wealth were sure signs of God’s favor. Conversely, poverty and physical impairment (such as blindness) were due punishment from God for one’s personal sins, or that of one’s family (see John 9:2). Jesus turned this cultural belief on its head: “Blessed are you who are poor, for the kingdom of God belongs to you” (Luke 6:20). The disciples (“those who were listening”) were stunned to hear that the rich have a hard time entering heaven; they asked, “In that case who can be saved?” (Luke 18:26). Jesus assures them that with God all human impossibility is possible. In his interaction with Zacchaeus, Jesus shows how it is possible for the rich to be saved (Luke 19:1–10). His non-judgmental presence in the house and life of Zacchaeus turned the latter’s life and world of values on its head. Jesus did not invite him to sell anything or make restitution for what he might have embezzled. He simply went to lodge and dine in his house, something decent and holy people did not do. Zacchaeus was so transformed by the encounter that he restored fourfold (though the law only demanded a twofold restitution) any wrong he might have done to anybody, and gave half of what was left as his to the poor. “Today salvation has come to this house,” Jesus told those who hesitated to embrace the tax collector, “for he too is a child/son of Abraham.”

In the story of Zacchaeus we see that the rich cannot enter God’s kingdom encumbered with the baggage of wealth and goods that God has freely given for the use of the community, without first freeing or divesting themselves of such (often ill-gotten) wealth. Wealth is ill-gotten when one person is swimming in it while another languishes in poverty, perhaps dying of starvation at the very door of the rich. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus is a case in point (Luke 16:19–31). Interestingly, the source of the wealth of the rich man or the reason for the poverty of Lazarus is not mentioned. The point is that the man is rich in a community where the covenant says, “There will, however, be no one in need among you, because the LORD is sure to
bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you as a possession to occupy” (Deut. 15:4). The condition for this is that the people abide by God’s own laws of sharing, not the laws of capitalism or hoarding for profit. The parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:13–21) may also have something to say to us here. Against this entire background, the woes on the wealthy in Luke 6:24–26 are to be understood as applying only to the rich who choose to close their hearts to the poor and needy, who pretend that they do not exist or simply blame them for their poverty, which is often caused by structural sin, social injustice, and anti-gospel ethical policies.

If we bring this situation face to face with the truth or teaching of Scripture, we have to ask ourselves whether Jesus’ teaching about the dangers of hoarding riches (Luke 12:13–21) has any relevance for us and for our world. Jesus tells us the truth that we cannot serve two masters, God and money (Matt. 6:24; Luke 16:23). Can we allow Scripture to help us rediscover and live by the gospel truth that will help us to accept and address the truth that money, wealth, and technology hoarding is a serious moral crisis and contrary to gospel values? The world and all it contains belong to God, whether we human beings believe it or not. If we did not give ourselves even our own lives, it is ironic that we can act as if the world into which we came and out of which we will go (as individuals and nations) is our property.

Scripture reminds us that we have nothing which we did not first receive, the primary and fundamental gift being the gift of life; having received it freely, we should not then behave as if it were not God’s free gift to us, or mortgage it for material wealth. This truth of Scripture again flies in the face of contemporary culture and attitudes toward riches and wealth. A madman in Nigeria saw people digging the

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4 We are familiar with another saying, “you will always have the poor among you,” which Jesus cites when the disciples harass Mary of Magdala for “wasting” “costly ointment, a pound of pure nard” on Jesus’ body (John 12:8). This text from the same Deuteronomy 15 (verse 11) is not an endorsement of the need to have the poor among us always. Rather, it contrasts the members of the community with those outside. Among the covenanted community, there will be no poor (verse 4). Among others there will always be the poor and needy; therefore the covenanted community is to open their hand to them in their need. When this is done, the number of the needy is reduced. If we see ourselves today as truly belonging to a global village, one human family, we should operate by the provision in verse 4, not by that in verse 11. Verse 11 can then be read as a critique of those who see nothing wrong in appropriating the wealth God intends for all, such that their action, born of selfishness (or hardness of heart) results in the perpetual existence of the poor.
What is Truth?

grave of a very wealthy man. Surprised at the size of the grave, he asked why they were making the grave so small. When told that the grave was the usual size, he rejoined, “How will you fit into this grave his fleet of cars, his many houses, and his multiple business ventures?” Qoheleth is right: “The rich man dies just like the poor, the wise just like the fool” (Eccl. 2:13–16). Death levels all ranks, even as birth ushers all into life, regardless of rank.

How do we understand these episodes today in our globalized world where economy forms the number one, all-embracing global concern of all? A world where mammon dominates as the universal god, and is served even by us who say we believe in God and are disciples of Christ? Today the entire global society and even our churches are preoccupied with economic growth and development. The world was petrified when it found itself on the brink of recession, revealing the moral bankruptcy both in the banking and consumer credit card system responsible for the economic meltdown. Efforts to restore the economy by creating jobs for the jobless are stalled, frustrated by the rich who hold onto or grab at the wealth that was intended to alleviate the plight of the poor. In the long run human beings who opt to enlist themselves in the service of mammon rather than allow mammon to serve them suffer from all this.

In a world where economic downturn or meltdown has caused so much fear, where people running companies file for bankruptcy possibly to discharge themselves from the obligation to help the poor, is there room for living this gospel truth about the difficulty of the rich to enter into God’s kingdom unless they right their lives with God in line with gospel ethics and values? How do we reverse together a global culture that emphasizes the need to sustain an economic system based on greed, rather than on moral and spiritual values that build up persons and energize humanity? A culture that replaces human beings with machines, as the workforce, in order to accumulate wealth and profit at the expense of human life?

Searching for Truth

We have been speaking of Scripture as texts—what is written, what is not written—which means reading backward in history. One dimension I want to speak of is that the Scripture itself has its own “improvement agenda”: it incorporates its own new/revised learning as it goes along. Perhaps a typical example is the issue of punishment and
forgiveness. In the Torah God punishes the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate God, and this was taught and believed as coming from God (Ex. 34:6–7). And then people like Jeremiah and Ezekiel began saying, It is not right that the fathers are the ones who ate the sour grapes and the children are the ones suffering from their action (Jer. 31:29–20; Ezek. 18:2–32). And so they revised that belief: sinners die, and that is the end of it. And God says to Ezekiel, “Son of man, is that right? Should it be like that? No, the sinner who dies, dies in his/her sin, but if a sinner repents he/she dies in his righteousness. So I am not unjust. Indeed I take no delight in the death of a sinner, so repent and live.” So we see the people changing and growing. By the time we get to the New Testament not only does the sinner not die: the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine in the desert and goes to look for the lost sheep (Luke 15:1–7). And God in Jesus sacrifices his life so we sinners may have life in its fullness; he becomes the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The changing view of punishment and forgiveness is there in the Scripture, and we need to examine if and how our own understanding of God has evolved over time.

If we are searching for the truth, the truth of the Scripture, the truth in our culture, we have to know what is or is not from God. For that to happen we have to know who God is. Jesus said, “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known” (John 1:18). And to Philip, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). If Jesus is the truth of who God is, then we have a whole lot of revision to do about a vengeful God, a God who punishes, a God who condemns, a God who requires sacrifice. The traditional understanding of sacrifice is that when you offend the gods of the land or need a favor from them, you get something and you sacrifice it to appease or please them. The atonement theology developed in the eleventh century by Anselm is something like that: in the feudal system, if you offended someone then you had to get someone of the same caliber as the person offended to say “I am sorry,” for that apology to stand. So if God was offended, then what greater person could you get than for God to come and to tell God, “I am sorry”? In this understanding, atonement has to do with us paying God back for the offense we have committed.

But when you look at the New Testament, and especially the letter to the Hebrews, we see God sacrificing the divine Self so that we might live. As fallen human beings we were radically incapable of
reuniting ourselves to God by our own efforts. So God had to come and do for us what we could not do. God effected the promised reconciliation, the enmity between us and Satan (Gen. 3:15) in person, through the incarnation. That’s a very different way of looking at sacrifice. It gets us into the heart of love, into the fullness of love and grace. And it is something we have left out in our theology about God and in our relationship with God. If God is love, then God is not hate; God is not vengeance. The problem is that we are still in our old cultural frames: you offend me, you pay for it; you kill my person, you have to be killed. That is us, and we transpose that to God. But when we look at the New Testament texts, and when we look at what actually happened, we see the Jesus who said, “Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing.”

So if we are searching for the truth of the gospel in God, then we really need to get back to the God of Jesus Christ. Jesus wasn’t a dogma to be believed in. He was a life to be followed. And he reached out to people in their own situations. He affirmed them, he taught them to love. If we Christians had been doing that for the past two thousand years, we wouldn’t have any problems in our relationships. As Gandhi said, the problem is not Christ, but that I have not met any of you who are like Christ. How God uses Jesus as the way to God is God’s business, not ours. How he is the Savior of all—that is God’s business. We are told to just proclaim the good news and God will do the rest. For two thousand years we have been proclaiming mostly bad news. It seems to me that about two thousand years later, what Jesus says still applies: the world has not known you; my own disciples have not known you. And yet it is in the knowledge of God that the true life and the discovery of the truth we are looking for stands (John 17:4).

Jesus did not write anything, other than on the floor of the Temple, not even on sand. He did not leave any writings. He left a life. For the Jews, the Torah was the organizing principle of their life. Jesus went further than that; he gave us a new Torah: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34–35). If we try to do that for one another, all things will fall into place. To what extent have we Christians made this new commandment of loving unto death (John 15:13) the organizing principle of our life, of our theologizing, of our self-understanding? Our gospel is a person, the
person. The bread broken, the life given. I have risen, I am still with you. Your greatest enemy is death; I have defeated that death in my person. Now I have risen. You have nothing more to fear. His salvation leaves out no one.

So what we do then is that we search together, we read together, we allow the word to minister to us; we don’t pontificate over the word. We do this not as external exercise out there, but as something that I will incarnate, I will imbibe, I will assimilate. And then I will become the gospel today in my own context. God’s power to save is the gospel, the gospel in each of us and in us together as God’s family. I pray that none of us may be ashamed of this gospel, but that together we may really, truly seek it with all our heart and soul, by each of us making a commitment to follow the Word who is the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. May God lead us to this fullness of truth.