

Truth,

Theology,

and

Perspective

An Approach to
Understanding
Biblical Doctrine

V E R N S . P O Y T H R E S S

“I am greatly honored that Vern has put my name on the dedication page of this good book. It helps us to understand God’s word not as a collection of individual truths, but as an organism in which each element of the gospel can be seen as a ‘perspective’ on others. The gospel is the same familiar message that it has always been, but in Vern’s exposition it gives us even more amazement, astonishment, and fruitful applications for our living.”

John M. Frame, Professor of Systematic Theology and Philosophy
Emeritus, Reformed Theological Seminary

“If you enjoy watching a master craftsman at work on something he loves, telling you the things he finds fascinating about it, then you will love this book. Vern Poythress lovingly rolls the theme of truth over and over in his mind and then explains its beauty and depth with a simplicity that is accessible to everyone. This book is both mentally enriching and spiritually edifying, presenting core truths of Scripture from angles many of us have never considered. Read, reflect, and give God praise!”

Marcus A. Mininger, Professor of New Testament Studies, Mid-America Reformed Seminary; author, *Uncovering the Theme of Revelation in Romans 1:16–3:26*

“This volume is written with the clarity and insight we have come to appreciate from Vern Poythress. It provides an edifying examination of major biblical doctrines and their intrinsic harmony by considering them in terms of the theme of their truthfulness.”

Richard B. Gaffin Jr., Professor Emeritus of Biblical and Systematic Theology, Westminster Theological Seminary; author, *In the Fullness of Time*

“‘Truth is what God knows.’ Beginning with this God-centered definition of truth, Vern Poythress explains how every major doctrine in systematic theology and every event in the world can be understood more deeply if we ponder its relationship to truth. Such a ‘truth perspective’ leads to numerous fresh insights into the relationship between truth and everything that exists. While he is always careful to be faithful to Scripture, Poythress demonstrates once again his remarkable capacity for creative thinking.”

Wayne Grudem, Distinguished Research Professor of Theology and Biblical Studies, Phoenix Seminary

Truth, Theology, and Perspective

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Truth, Theology, and Perspective

An Approach to Understanding Biblical Doctrine

Vern S. Poythress

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To John Frame, who taught me about perspectives

Introduction: Truth as a Perspective

IN THIS BOOK we use the theme of *truth* as one perspective by which to explore the riches of biblical teaching. It is not the only possible starting point, but it is one.

The Goal of the Book

We should explain a little bit about what we intend to do. We do not intend to *add* to biblical teaching or to the major doctrines already taught in the best books on systematic theology. Nor will we focus on *establishing* what the Bible teaches by surveying a large number of biblical passages on each topic and then developing extensive arguments based on these passages. Rather, we will be repeating what is found already in the Bible itself, in various passages. In addition, we will be repeating what is found in textbooks of systematic theology. What is new is that we will be using the theme of *truth* as a primary perspective on all these teachings.

By using truth as a perspective, we hope to encourage readers to appreciate more deeply the beauty of biblical teaching and its inner harmony. Any one aspect of doctrine, such as the theme that God is true and that the Bible is true, is in harmony with every other aspect.

Starting Assumptions

We should make clear at the beginning two convictions.

First, we should be convinced from the Bible that the Bible is itself the word of God. It is true and reliable in all that it affirms, with the reliability and truthfulness of God himself. Therefore, in the Bible we have a firm source for knowing the truth about matters that the Bible addresses.¹

Second, the explanations of the Bible in this book are in harmony with what is known as Reformed theology, as summarized in the Reformed creeds.² This book represents that kind of theology, rather than other streams of theology that disagree on some important points. Given the goal of this book, we will not be focusing on the disagreements but rather on the positive explanation of biblical teaching.

Using a Perspective

In discussing biblical teaching, we will be using a *perspective*, namely the perspective that starts with the theme of truth. This kind of use of perspective differs radically from the ideas sometimes found in post-

- 1 For confirmation of the divine authority of the Bible, readers may consult a number of excellent books expounding its authority. See, in particular, Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1948); and John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010). For questions of how to interpret the Bible, readers may consult Vern S. Poythress, *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1999); and Vern S. Poythress, *Reading the Word of God in the Presence of God: A Handbook for Biblical Interpretation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).
- 2 See, for example, <https://www.pcaac.org/bco/westminster-confession/>, accessed June 1, 2020. Westminster Theological Seminary and the conservative Presbyterian churches in the United States allow that its teachers may take exception to individual points in the confessional standards, but they must agree with the overall system of doctrine. See also the Three Forms of Unity, <https://www.urchna.org/sysfiles/member/custom/custom.cfm?memberid=1651&customid=24288>, accessed Feb. 2, 2021.

modern relativism. Relativism is skeptical about our ability to arrive at universal truth. But God speaks and makes known the truth, so a Christian believer should reject skepticism and relativism.

God is true and is true to himself. He speaks the truth in the Bible, which is his word. He displays who he is in the things that he has made (Rom. 1:18–23). He sends the Holy Spirit to renew our hearts, so that we may know the truth (Eph. 1:17–18). These realities about God imply that we have a firm basis for confidence in what we come to know as we read the Bible.³ Believers may, of course, still be mistaken on some points of doctrine. The existence of the Bible, and the gift of the Holy Spirit, do not make us infallible. But on central points of biblical teaching, we may come to a confident understanding of the truth. The Bible is clear in its central points, and the Holy Spirit is sent out by God to remove obstacles from the hearts of those who belong to him.⁴

With this much explanation, we are ready to begin.

- 3 On perspectives, see John M. Frame, “A Primer on Perspectivalism,” 2008, <http://frame-poythress.org/a-primer-on-perspectivalism-revised-2008/>, accessed Nov. 21, 2016; Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* (repr., Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001); Vern S. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2018).
- 4 The Westminster Confession of Faith 1.7 summarizes: “All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.”

PART I

THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

The Existence of God

DOES GOD EXIST? The Bible says that he does (Genesis 1 and many other passages). The created world testifies that he exists (Rom. 1:18–23; Ps. 19:1–6). Even unbelievers know God (Rom. 1:21) but suppress this knowledge (v. 18). The miracles and fulfilled prophecies in the Bible confirm his existence. We can also consider an approach that confirms the existence of God by starting with the theme of truth.

What is truth? Truth is what God knows.¹ There is a close relation between the truth and God. So inspecting the idea of truth can actually confirm the existence of the true God, the one who knows all truth.

¹ There is a little puzzle here, because, concerning anything that is false, God knows that it is false. So does God “know” all falsehoods? It depends on how we want to use the word *know*. I am using the word *know* in a fairly ordinary way. According to this usage, we can know something that is true. But we cannot know something that is false, that is, know it as true, because that is not knowledge at all, but mistaken belief.

Let us illustrate: God knows that $2 + 2 = 4$, but he does not know that $2 + 2 = 5$. (To claim to know that $2 + 2 = 5$ would be a mistake.) God also knows that it is false that $2 + 2 = 5$. But what he knows is *not* that $2 + 2 = 5$, but the affirmation, “It is false that $2 + 2 = 5$.”

Truth Exists

Let us consider the claim that truth does not exist. This is an unusual claim, but something like it can be heard from some postmodernists, skeptics, and mystics.

But if truth does not exist, then it is true that truth does not exist. So, there is *something* that is true. Hence, the assumption that truth does not exist is self-refuting.

Truth exists. Not believing that it exists is self-defeating.

Attributes of Truth

Let us consider a particular example of a truth: $2 + 2 = 4$. This is true everywhere, throughout the universe. It is true at all times. Its truth does not change over time.²

So truth has three key attributes: omnipresence (everywhere present), everlastingness (through all times), and unchangeability (immutability). Unchangeability is actually stronger than the mere fact of no change. We are saying not only that truth does not change but that it *could* not change. These three features of truth are attributes of God. God is omnipresent, everlasting, and unchangeable. (See table 1.1.)

Table 1.1: Attributes of God and Attributes of Truth

God's Attributes	Attributes of Truth
omnipresence	omnipresence
everlastingness	everlastingness
unchangeability	unchangeability

² For a similar exposition, see Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), ch. 14.

Truth as Eternal

We can make a further, more refined point about everlastingness. God is not subject to time or captured by time. He is superior to time. So we may say that he is *eternal*.³ The new heavens and the new earth, together with those who are redeemed in Christ, exist in the future without end, which means that they are *everlasting*. But they are still subject to time. God is different: he is superior to time; he is eternal. In addition, the truth that $2 + 2 = 4$ seems to be different. It is specified by God. As such, it is not subject to change with the passing of time.

Tensed Truths

In some ways, mathematical truths like $2 + 2 = 4$ are special, because they do not need to specify any one moment in time. Suppose, then, that we consider a truth that does have a time frame: Jesus Christ suffered under Pontius Pilate.⁴ The name Pontius Pilate fixes the time frame as the first century. There is also an implicit geographical frame, namely the location of Jerusalem, where Pontius Pilate was ruling. The verb “suffered” accordingly is in the past tense, to indicate that the time at which the event occurred preceded the time in which we are now living.

There is a sense in which we might say that the truth about Jesus Christ suffering is not an “eternal” truth, but a *tensed* truth, a truth about a particular event. But notice that the truth about the event can be distinguished from the event itself. The event itself happened in the first century in Jerusalem, and is never to be repeated. We cannot see it directly before our eyes. But we can talk about whether it

3 Vern S. Poythress, *The Mystery of the Trinity: A Trinitarian Approach to the Attributes of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2020), ch. 6.

4 Words from the Apostles’ Creed.

happened. (It did.) The affirmation that it happened is an affirmation that continues to be true, through all future times.

What about past times? What about the times *before* Jesus Christ came into the world? At those earlier times, the event of Christ's crucifixion had not yet happened. But it was *planned* by God already:

... you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. He was *foreknown before the foundation of the world* but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you. (1 Pet. 1:18–20)

... who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus *before the ages began*. (2 Tim. 1:9)

... for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and *your plan had predestined* to take place. (Acts 4:27–28)

Let us consider Acts 4:27–28 in more detail. The immediately preceding verses, Acts 4:25–26, cite Psalm 2, written a thousand years earlier, to confirm that the suffering and death of Christ were already planned by God. So a thousand years earlier it was already infallibly true, according to the plan of God, that Christ would suffer under Pontius Pilate *when the time came* for the events to take place. The truth about what took place was already true in God's sovereign plan. The truth is distinct from the events that it describes.

What about other, less significant truths? Second Kings 22:1 says that “Josiah was eight years old when he began to reign.” No passage of the Bible indicates explicitly that this coronation of an eight-year-old was planned beforehand before God. But the Bible does give us a general principle, that God has planned all of history, including its details: “[God] works *all things* according to the counsel of his will” (Eph. 1:11; see Ps. 139:16). So the same principle holds for minor truths. Every truth is omnipresent, eternal, and unchangeable.

We see impressive illustrations of the unchangeable nature of truth when God fulfills his prophetic word. Consider, for example, the special prophecy in 1 Kings 13:2 about Jeroboam’s altar: “Behold, a son shall be born to the house of David, Josiah by name, and he shall sacrifice on you [the altar] the priests of the high places who make offerings on you, and human bones shall be burned on you.” This prophecy was proclaimed by an unnamed prophet in the presence of Jeroboam (v. 1), the first king in the northern kingdom of Israel, after the split between the northern and southern kingdoms (12:20). It was fulfilled hundreds of years later: “And as Josiah turned, he saw the tombs there on the mount. And he sent and took the bones out of the tombs and burned them on the altar . . .” (2 Kings 23:16). This truth about the judgment on Jeroboam remains true forever.

We could multiply cases like this. The prophet Micah predicted that Jesus the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2). The prediction took place in the eighth century BC (1:1), hundreds of years before Jesus was born in Bethlehem (Matt. 2:1–6). Predictions like these confirm that God has an unchanging plan. The truths about this plan do not change. They cannot change.

Other Attributes of Truth

Other characteristics of truth match characteristics traditionally associated with God:

Truth is true. Likewise God is true.

Truth is *invisible*, though the things about which it speaks may be visible.

Truth is *immaterial*. That is, it is not a material thing like an orange, made out of atoms and with a particular location in space. Some truths are truths *about* material things. But the truths themselves can be distinguished from the things about which they speak.

Now let us consider two attributes of God together: *transcendence* and *immanence*. Do truths display both transcendence and immanence? It is easier to see that they do if we consider truths that apply to more than one case. For example, it is true that $2 + 2 = 4$. This truth applies to many instances, in which 2 apples plus 2 apples equals 4 apples, or 2 oranges plus 2 oranges equals 4 oranges. Truths that apply to more than one case *transcend* the world about which they speak. They transcend the particular cases. At the same time, truth is *immanent*, in the sense that it has bearing on particular cases. Transcendence and immanence are both attributes of truth. They are also attributes of God.

What about truths that are focused only on a particular case? Consider this truth: "Josiah was eight years old when he began to reign" (2 Kings 22:1). It deals with only one case, namely Josiah, at one time, namely when he began to reign. But even here, because the truth is true forever, it transcends the moment at which Josiah began to reign.

Truth is *infinite* in the sense that any one truth comes together with an infinite number of other truths. As an example, consider again the truth that $2 + 2 = 4$. It implies any number of other truths:

$2 + 2 = 4$.

It is true that $2 + 2 = 4$.

It is true that [it is true that $2 + 2 = 4$].

It is true that [it is true that [it is true that $2 + 2 = 4$]].

It is true that [it is true that [it is true that [it is true that $2 + 2 = 4$]]].

It is true that [it is true that [it is true that [it is true that [it is true that $2 + 2 = 4$]]]].

...

None of these truths simply repeats any of the truths on the preceding lines. So truth is infinite.

This particular example, of multiplying truths, might seem to be contrived. We are multiplying words. But we are not really changing anything about the world. Are we really adding anything significant when we add a truth that comments on the truth of the previous line?

It is true that we have not changed the world. Nor have we changed what is true about the world. But we have shown that there are an infinite number of truths. It is one way in which we may look into the infinite depths in God, which are also depths in the mind of God.

The addition of the expression “it is true that” may look like a contrivance. But if we start asking how it is possible to do such a thing, it opens up some profundities about language and about the human mind. A piece of language can talk about another piece of language. And this capability in language corresponds to a capability in the human mind. We can stand back from what we have already done, or what we have already thought, and try to see the whole scene again, from our “stand back” position. It is a way in which we are able to “transcend” the immediacy of our situation and the immediacy of our actions. We can *reflect* on the situation. And then we can reflect

on our reflections, and so on. This “transcendence,” so-called, is not the transcendence of God. But it is *imitative* of God’s transcendence. We are in effect imagining how to look down on a situation from a higher viewpoint. And the highest viewpoint of all is God’s. We are thinking God’s thoughts after him, though we are still doing it on the level of being a creature.⁵

In addition, truth is morally *absolute*. It makes an absolute claim on us to give it our allegiance. For example, it is true that the law of gravity implies that if you leap off a tall building, you will fall to the ground. Someone may struggle against this truth. He may wish that it were not so. He may wish that he could fly just by willing himself to fly. He may be deluded and think that he has superhuman powers. But all his wishing and thinking and willing do not negate the claim of the truth on him. If he ignores the claim, he will fall to his death.

Not every truth has such a dramatic impact. But every truth makes a claim. And everyone who ignores truth puts himself in danger.

Is Truth Personal?

People who do not want to believe in a personal God might try to escape such belief by imagining that individual truths, or the whole body of all truth, are just out there as an impersonal abstraction. But this alternative is not plausible. Truth is rational. Rationality belongs to persons, but not to rocks. Truth is language-like (even before we

5 Vern S. Poythress, *Logic: A God-Centered Approach to the Foundation of Western Thought* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), ch. 45; Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Mathematics: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), ch. 8; Vern S. Poythress, “The Quest for Wisdom,” in *Resurrection and Eschatology: Theology in Service of the Church: Essays in Honor of Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.*, 86–114, ed. Lane G. Tipton and Jeffrey C. Waddington (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), <https://frame-poythress.org/the-quest-for-wisdom/>.

express a truth in a particular human language). The complexity of many truths illustrates a complexity of language surpassing the signaling that takes place among animals. Language ability—of the complexity needed for dealing with truth—belongs to persons.

Truth and God

Truth has the attributes of the God of the Bible. These attributes include the fact that God is personal. Truth is another name for God. In fact, the Bible confirms this reality. Christ tells us that “I am the way, and the *truth*, and the life” (John 14:6). John 3:33 says that “God is true.” We are accustomed to moving in our thought from God to the truths that God knows. Because God exists, truth exists. But we can move in the reverse direction. Since truth exists, God exists, because God is the truth.

We need to add that these affirmations do not imply that truth is something *behind* God, something more ultimate than God. God is “the last thing back,” so to speak. He is the most ultimate origin.⁶ So truth exists in him, not “in back of him,” as if it were something outside of God to which he is forced to conform.

We may appeal at this point to the doctrine of divine *simplicity*. “Simplicity” is used here as a technical term in theology. It does not mean that God is “simple” for us to understand. Rather, it means that he is not made up of parts into which he could be divided. He is “simple” in contrast to being *composite*. Consider an example. A pencil is a composite item, since it can be divided up into the lead, the wooden shaft, and the eraser. Since God is immaterial, it is impossible to divide him up into material parts. But it is also impossible to

6 Vern S. Poythress, *The Mystery of the Trinity: A Trinitarian Approach to the Attributes of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2020), ch. 3.

divide him up *conceptually*, into abstract concepts that would precede him and subject him to their requirements. Truth is an example of one such concept. Truth is not more ultimate than God. Rather, it is a way in which God is.⁷

An Application

Since every truth reveals God, we can be confident in talking about God to unbelievers. Frequently, they do not acknowledge God's presence in their lives. But he is there. They rely on him. As Romans 1:21 reminds us, they "know" God, but they suppress that knowledge. They know God even in the process of saying anything that is true. The challenge for us is not to speak into a situation of complete ignorance, but to speak about God and his redemption in Christ. And then we pray that God may send the Holy Spirit to change their hearts. May he use our speech, our expressions of truths, in bringing unbelievers to faith.

For ourselves, the display of God in truth should stimulate thankfulness. Every truth that we know derives from God, who is glorious in his omnipresence, his eternity, and his unchangeability.

⁷ Poythress, *Mystery of the Trinity*, ch. 9.