

Telling the Truth

The first attack ads of the political season are airing now. Extravagant in their claims and vicious in their tone, they remind us that nothing is necessarily true just because somebody says it.

They also provide an instructive analogy to the task of preaching. Too often those of us who preach find ourselves seduced by the same kinds of exaggerations we deplore in our sermons on the ninth commandment.

All truth is God's truth, and all preachers worthy of the name want to tell the truth. But discerning where the truth is actually found seems to grow more difficult day by day. Something isn't true just because you or I want it to be. It isn't true just because it fits our theological or sociological or political prejudices.

Indeed God's truth is sometimes in direct contradiction of that which the majority "knows" or believes to be true, e.g., the Baptist approval of slavery in the American South.

How do we know when something is true enough to tell? No truth test is foolproof. But there are some indicators we can trust.

First, to be considered true an assertion must be independently verifiable. Scientific protocols hold that nothing is proven to be true that can't be duplicated. Faith, of course, is not science and therefore can't be held to scientific criteria.

But a preacher who claims, "This is God's will!" needs to be ready to say why he or she believes that. And he or she needs to recognize that others may be equally certain God's will is just the opposite.

In the church, corporate discernment means that individual assertions come under the scrutiny of the body. The church as a whole decides where God's will lies for the congregation.

Second, though, to be considered true an assertion needs to be true in its

implications. Too often we see this in research. A study comes out saying, "Moderate drinking is healthy for your heart!" The study is trumpeted in the media. A few weeks or months later another study says "Moderate drinking leads to brain damage!"

Taking "truth" from too narrow a perspective is always dangerous. Cumulative wisdom over time is safer. Time allows the weaknesses in an argument to become clear.

Third, to be considered true an assertion should be from a known, reliable, proven source whose perspective is clear. Far too many preachers get their "facts" from other preachers' sermons, or from talk radio, or off the Internet. Such sources may be true, but they may also have an agenda which tempts them to bend the truth to their own purposes.

It's even OK to glean information from those biased sources, though, as long as you know they're biased and make that bias clear when you transmit the information to others.

Fourth, truth tends to simplicity. The logical principle called Occam's Razor says you should never increase beyond what is necessary the number of variables needed to explain a phenomenon.

In plain English that means the simplest explanation is usually the best. If we haven't yet found any weapons of mass destruction after months of diligent searching, it's probably because there aren't any there.

Finally, for Christians, truth will always be in harmony with the Spirit of Christ as revealed in Scripture and experienced in the life of the believer and the church. National Socialism and the Ku Klux Klan both claimed to be Christian. No amount of truth bending could make them so. So it is today with the claims of political parties, popular movements, the media, social engineers, economic powers and ethical columnists.

A pastor who wants to tell his or her people the truth will constantly be testing

<https://ethicsdaily.com/telling-the-truth-cms-4103/> April 28, 2004 Ron Sisk

what he or she learns and hears against the measure of the One who is the “Way, the Truth, and the Life.”

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