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## Sixty

As I put together *TCF News*, I note that this edition is Volume 60 Number 1. What a huge tradition as a result of many people's work over decades! But now it is time to rethink how we do it in a digital age.

In 2017, TCFNSW will attempt to engage teachers primarily, but not exclusively, through electronic media. Our website [www.tcfofnsw.org.au](http://www.tcfofnsw.org.au) has the accumulation of material from the last 15 years. It has been reorganised and outdated items removed. A *Facebook* page has been opened for discussion [www.facebook.com/groups/126165657429402/](https://www.facebook.com/groups/126165657429402/)

But just having a website and *Facebook* page is not enough. Christian teachers need to be directed to this site and engaged in conversation through the *Facebook* page. To this end, some members have undertaken to visit the page regularly and make a comment or respond to someone else's comment. You don't need permission to join, the *Facebook* page is public. Each month at least one discussion topic, based on a new or existing website article will be nominated for discussion.

This month's *TCF News* opens an issue of growing concern across the world, how information and facts are affected by people's pre-existing beliefs and attitudes. Prompted by the advent of Trump to the US Presidency, it asks deeper questions for Christians and especially Christian teachers. More than topical, it represents a challenge to all of us.

John Gore

## ***Truthiness* - the new reality?**

Stunned by the success of Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential elections, many Americans and others across the globe have asked - how could this be? Some have used new terms like *post-truth politics* and *truthiness* to explain what has happened in the USA and other places.

*New Scientist*, 3 December 2016, features an article *Seeing Reason* by Dan Jones in which he puts forward the proposition of *truthiness* (*claims that feel right, even if they have no basis in fact, and which people want to believe because they fit their pre-existing attitudes*). In the discussion, he raises the issues of climate change denial and vaccination rejection as examples where the scientific evidence is ignored or downplayed to allow people to follow and support their pre-existing views and prejudices. He also argues from research, that the most scientifically literate are likely to be the most polarised because, having more

understanding of the facts, and facts are good, they are more capable of manipulating them into their world, and often political, view. In Britain, the Brexit campaign to stay in Europe contained facts, facts, facts, but it didn't work. At play were other beliefs that overruled the facts and raises another issue about where people get their facts from? For two thirds of the USA its *Facebook* - unfiltered and subject to all the prejudices and biases imaginable as well as containing factual statements. But is this worse than newspapers or other media outlets? In a similar vein, the recent trend for advertising and propaganda to be displayed as a genuine news articles rivals the emails received to asking to disclose bank account details to take advantage of funds to be transferred to you. Where the truth is, becomes *who can you trust?*

In further evidence, the research shows that simple facts like showing the birth certificate of President Obama didn't satisfy everyone about him being born in the USA. Using facts to get people to change their minds is very problematic, mud sticks and they often don't change opinions or beliefs. Here in Australia, a One Nation candidate recently said that he believed that the Port Arthur massacre and of a photo of an asylum seeker child washed up on an Italian beach were fabricated. Facts find it hard to penetrate when the beliefs are that guns are good and asylum seekers aren't.

### **A Christian perspective**

This discussion raises an important issue as to what extent people's beliefs affect their attitudes and actions and shape their worldview. As Christians, and as educators, this is a major area of interest to us and, while the article portrays *truthiness* as negative, there may be a more positive side to consider

First of all, the negative. Christians are like the rest of the community influenced by a range of religious, political, cultural and social views. They find it hard to get through the maze of political opinions that are not just a feature of election campaigns, but of day to day news, so that they can be sure about the facts. They vote for a range of political parties and can be easily worn out and not know the sources to go to for facts unembellished by commentary or presentation style, even if they are available. Some rely on one news medium and rarely turn to other sources to see if there is a different slant on the facts. Finding truth can be elusive and Christians often find themselves being challenged by scientific facts which they have to work into their own beliefs. Are they different or should they be different to the rest of the community?

In these matters, Christians should be different and their foundation in Jesus Christ ought to transcend their understanding of the facts and help them to develop their Christian stance in the world. There is a positive perspective to *truthiness* if it's the expression of relationship with Jesus, not denying the facts but absorbing them into their foundation - Jesus Christ. The aim is to get your *truthiness* closer to the truth. Here are some examples for why Jesus Christ makes a difference and can positively affect *truthiness* by ensuring that facts have an impact and pre-existing attitudes are challenged and brought into line with faith. (Colossians 1:15-17, Ephesians 1:22, John 1:2-4, Matthew 7:1-5, Galatians 5:1, 1 John 1:8)

#### **1. Jesus Christ is Lord**

Christians recognise that Jesus is God and creator of all. The world belongs to him, was made by him and for him and an outcome is that Christians can embrace science as revealing God the creator. They will not always embrace the applications of science, but every discovery has the power to reveal the creator. These facts when integrated into a Christian's *truthiness* provide a different base for decision making.

However, Christians retain a healthy scepticism about some scientific discoveries, like some medical breakthroughs, where the research is paid for by drug companies. Facts need analysis and often further verification before being accepted.

2. God is good

Unlike the fear, despair and anxiety that grips the media to get attentive readers, Christians know that God is good and will ultimately prevail. God loves us and sent Jesus to die for our sins. In Jesus' death and resurrection he overcame sin and death. The world moves towards his coming again in glory. While the effects of sin still ravage the world and personal relationships, Satan has been defeated and the goodness of God will prevail. With this different perspective to others, Christians can be positive and not engage despair and fear. The foundation of their *truthiness* is a different world perspective.

3. Openness to the world

Because God is in control, Christians can be open to others and to what is happening in the world. They will not want to close themselves off from other people, no matter how difficult they might be, or from what is happening in the world, however bad that might be. Being open to others and the world means that Christians can engage with others and with issues. Being in the world but not of the world means being engaged, and only then can the Christian be salt and light. God is good and in control and Christians can be open to the others and the world. Their *truthiness* should reflect the source of their beliefs and a greater willingness to accept the facts.

4. Recognising bias in self and others

If Christian *truthiness* is to be different and have a positive side, Christians will need to develop a critical stance to their own understanding, prejudices and biases and to those beliefs, values and attitudes held by others. One way of combating the negative side of *truthiness* is to be prepared to engage in critical reflection to allow the facts to have more influence and direct *truthiness* to something closer to the truth. Self-reflection and critical analysis are essential elements of addressing *truthiness*.

5. Freedom to change one's mind

Christ has freed his followers from the power of sin and death to be his ambassadors in the world. Their openness to that world gives them the freedom to consider the facts and to admit they were wrong. Stubbornness, like *truthiness* can have both a positive and negative perspective. As positive it allows one's core beliefs (faith) to be maintained in the most difficult circumstances, but as a negative influence it blinds the Christian to the truth allowing them to hold onto inappropriate bias and prejudice. Christians using their critical thinking skills ought to be open to changing their minds and not being locked into worldly or Biblical positions that in the light of new facts or understanding cannot be justified. Even views based on the Bible have had to change in the light of greater understanding - that the earth was flat, that slavery was permitted, that the Jews were responsible for the death of Christ, and for many, that women can be equal in ministry (a work in progress) and still there may be other Biblical beliefs where a change is yet to come.

Integrating facts into the foundation of Jesus Christ does not make Christians morally superior in the worldly sense. In fact, intellectual arrogance can be a facilitator of *truthiness*. But Christians know their sinfulness and the way in which sin can overcome them in day to day thinking and actions. Like others, they get it wrong. However, they should be more open to changing their minds (repentance) by being open to the Holy Spirit working in their lives. It is always disappointing to hear of intransigent Christians steeped in prejudices that do not

reflect their foundation - Jesus Christ, and I, as much as anyone else, need to make sure I am not one of them. *Truthiness* really is an example of *we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.* (1John 1:8)

### **Implications for education**

At a time when governments and educationalists are concerned about the decline in Australian student performance reported in recent international tests, it is good to think about what sort of education we want children to have. While learning facts is important, how students process facts is perhaps more important for their future and for society. Of critical importance is that students be taught to analyse and test facts with an understanding of their own prejudices and biases and with a preparedness to challenge not only the facts but these prejudices and biases. If this sort of education cannot be taught to students, then it can be expected that they will enact this *truthiness* on the world around them.

One of the issues educators face, is that they have been good at helping students to find bias and identify misinformation, but have been less successful in helping students to challenge their own world views and be aware of their own prejudices and biases so that they can address the facts and integrate them without manipulating or rejecting some to fit with their prejudices and biases. Religion, cosmology, philosophy of science and philosophy generally have but the smallest mention within the curriculum and certainly not enough to address this issue. While good teachers have always assisted students to consider alternatives and look for bias and prejudice, it is not common for students' views (beliefs), not consistent with facts, to be directly challenged without causing such dissension that a teacher's judgement about how to lead classroom discussion is brought into question as students and parents complain that their *truthiness* is not being given proper exposure and reinforcement.

Teachers will need more curriculum support and supervisor support if these matters are to be addressed or they may find themselves being left out on a limb for daring to suggest that students are engaging in *truthiness* and not allowing the facts to speak for themselves. While students with religious views are often the subject of classroom challenge, the dominant secular humanist and pluralist views within classrooms are mainly unchallenged and taken for granted.

Perhaps the special religious education teacher (SRE- scripture) has contributed most to addressing *truthiness*. They challenge the worldview of students and they, and more recently their materials, often come in for criticism as some schools and parents want to challenge the content of their lessons because it does not fit their secular based *truthiness*.

In a post Christian society, where secular pluralism is dominant, Christian teachers and SRE teachers are well placed to address these issues, but they will have to keep examining their own *truthiness* to make sure that they are living out their faith in Jesus Christ and being themselves what they want their students to become. Their belief in the goodness of God and their openness to the world can of itself be a challenge to the *truthiness* of others. These teachers will be subject to criticism, but their calling was never to a peaceful life, but to the continuous threat of persecution for having Jesus Christ as their foundation.

I remember my wife telling me about a student who supported Von Daniken's theories about aliens visiting the planet in ancient times. After being turned upon by his classmates and ridiculed he finally responded *I believe because I want to believe*. Understanding the negative side of *truthiness* about how beliefs can override the facts can be very depressing. But there

is also a positive side for Christians and an opportunity, not a threat. For Christians, the challenge of *truthiness* is to strengthen their foundation in Jesus Christ by critically analysing the facts, allowing them to challenge prejudices and biases, and by not filtering the facts to accept only those that agree with their current attitudes and prejudices. If Christians cannot accept the facts, change and better align themselves with their foundation Jesus Christ, then *truthiness* will prevail and they will be truly *Trumped*.

John Gore

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