

Wednesday March 27, 2013

## **Our truths keep marching on**

By Jim Taylor

All over the world, this week, Christian churches will read a Bible verse in which a cynical Roman governor named Pontius Pilate asks Jesus, “What is truth?”

Jesus doesn’t answer. Perhaps he didn’t need to. As he told his disciples, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

That verse is, I think, my motto. Other people have other mottos – like the guy in a crowded grandstand who brandishes a sign declaring, “John 3:16” As if the unchurched he’s trying to evangelize should already know what John 3:16 says.

But I would make one minor amendment to my verse. Because I don’t believe we can ever fully know the truth. It will always be one step ahead of us.

So I would say, “You will seek the truth, and the seeking will set you free.”

## **Everything evolves**

Recently I’ve been reading *The Evolutionaries*, by Carter Phipps. He argues that the principle of evolution underlies everything. Not just biological evolution, so despised by biblical literalists. Rather, he says, everything evolves.

Yes, even the sciences. Chemistry, physics, mathematics – all made quantum leaps as new discoveries shook the ground that their practitioners considered immovable.

People once believed the earth was flat. That sun, moon, and stars circled the earth. Copernicus and Galileo launched a new paradigm. Today, we accept that even our sun is not the centre of the universe. Indeed, the universe has no centre; everything is the same distance from the original point...

Each new paradigm takes previous knowledge a step farther.

Thomas Kuhn made that point way back in 1962, in *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*. New paradigms shake up the status quo. Old truths no longer explain things as well as the new one does.

Even human consciousness has evolved. Individual consciousness evolves, of course –babies progress from utter self-centredness, to membership in a family, to differentiating themselves from their family, to adult awareness....

But humans as a whole have also evolved. Biblical people could not have understood the concepts behind nuclear energy. Or wi-fi. Or vaccinations. Even if someone could explain these “truths” to them. Because they hadn’t evolved the mental infrastructure yet.

I don’t mean they were wrong. Given their capabilities at the time, they came up with the best truths they could. What’s wrong is insisting that their ancient truths trump everything we’ve learned since then.

## **Always forward**

None of this claims that truth is relative – that one truth is just as good as another, regardless of its basis.

Because truth, like time, always moves in one direction. It is a one-way arrow. Always seeking a fuller understanding.

Newness alone does not constitute truth. New ideas can be dead ends, leading nowhere. But testing those dead ends still leads us forward.

Truth never goes backward. We can never stuff the genie back in the bottle.  
If that's true, then every truth we assert today will someday be supplanted by a more comprehensive truth.  
That's why I say that seeking the truth sets us free. Free of bondage to old ideas. Free of mental and spiritual straitjackets.

Free to seek truth wherever it lives.

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## YOUR TURN

The letters about last week's column on Bible translations ran the gamut from mocking literalism to nostalgia for fine language.

Margaret Carr admitted to a fondness for the KJV language: "I have to admit I like to hear the Christmas story read from the King James version but I feel offended when our minister blesses the readings 'from God's Holy word' no matter which version is read. I could almost quote from memory the Christmas story as I have heard it for many years but now I am older and wiser I use The New Oxford Annotated Bible, a gift from a dear friend."

"I'm all for good modern translations," Jean Hamilton wrote, "but leave Isaiah's 'great with child' alone. Anyone who doesn't understand 'great with child' has never been great with child! 'Pregnant' doesn't quite do it."

Jane Bennett: "I agree with your comments about the wording in the wedding services... I do, however, LOVE the King James version of some passages and psalms. Particularly the 23rd Psalm. It is poetic and moving, and I find other versions far less impactful. Maybe I am the one who is old-fashioned?"

Grace Hawke too noted her mixed feelings: "I have always been frustrated by those who insist that the King James Version of the bible is 'the only one that was inspired by God'..."

But "for those of us in my age range [I am 71] it is the most familiar version. The 23rd psalm perhaps doesn't sound as poetic..."

"Personally I have four different translations I like to read from. It helps me 'get the gist' of what the original Greek, Aramaic, Hebrew - whatever - was trying to get across. How in the world can people not understand that the more 'updated' translations only help to understand more clearly the word of God. Aren't we trying to bring the Word to as many people as we can?"

Daine Robinson recalled "a comment overheard during a gathering of church folk (who, by the way, thought the KJV was the bee's knees). The person said (quite confidently): 'Jesus spoke English!' This person belonged to a UC congregation that revered (to the point of worshipping) the King James Version of the Bible. The KJV translation was the literal, spoken word of God - thee's, thou's, doeth's and all!

"While I believe that the words of the Bible are pathways to understanding (finding?) God, I don't believe for a moment that God ever intended that the written words of the Bible (regardless of the translation) were meant to be worshipped as if they were God herself."

John Clinton also had some hard words for biblical literalists: "Some folks prefer the original KJV because: 'Those words **in red** are exactly as Jesus spoke them. 'And besides, if English was good enough for Jesus....'"

And Miryam Hammond recalled a CPE class being told that "the students should use the King James Bible when they led worship because 'If it was good enough for St. Paul it was good enough for everyone!'"

Noel McLaren, a retired translator of Old Testament texts, writes, “While I have a few favourite translations, I do not lock in on any one or two. During my student days one of my instructors gave me some advice, ‘Before you can translate you must interpret’. We needed to find out where possible what the original writer meant, and what it meant to his or her original readers.

“The translators of the KJV had numerous rules they had to follow. One that I find most interesting was that they had to use a version of English that was already archaic by 1611. While has a lyrical quality to its words, it must be re-interpreted if one is to communicate with those in the market place who lack a great degree of Biblical understanding. Paul used 'koine' or marketplace Greek in his writings.”

Indeed, I might add, that’s one way modern scholars distinguish Paul’s own letters from those who later wrote in Paul’s name.

Isabel Gibson: “As an editor, I'm a fan of plain language - as a writer, I sometimes get carried away with my own 'rolling phrases'. Jesus, of course, wasn't writing, he was speaking - maybe sometimes with an ear to his own oratory, maybe sometimes in 'smack them upside the head' mode. Paul, in contrast, was writing - but to specific congregations with specific things going on. I wonder what he'd think about his epistles being read two thousand years later.

“It's a testament (as it were) to the continuity of the human experience that we can still read this stuff - in any translation - and find resonance for our own lives. And if Jesus and Paul aren't wondrous enough, think of how we still read Isaiah's (second Isaiah's?) words to the exiles in Babylon and find our hearts lifted.”

Dale Perkins encouraged me to read a new story of Jesus, The Liars' Gospel, by Naomi Alderman. “What I'm enjoying most,” Dale explained, “is how Alderman has taken a totally different approach to telling the Jesus story. Too much in it for me to describe here (actually I'm still reading it as I write), but the thing I'm appreciating is how completely novel it is to hear the story of Jesus ( Alderman uses the Hebrew name 'Yehoshuah' )... And she knows and can use several languages and is a consummate historian and social anthropologist. I think you would be captivated by the book; I know I am.”

Likewise, Donna Crook asked, “Have you read ‘God's Secretaries’? It really does make one see the King James in a different light!”

Robert Caughell suggested the bride in question might simply be trying to make her wedding memorable: “Couples today are trying to make their weddings unique by having it performed in exotic locales or by anything to ‘outdo the Joneses’, so to speak. Years ago weddings in Dunnville were simple until the next tried to outdo the previous one. We went from having one limo for the wedding party to having two limos, then a limo and a horse drawn carriage, etc., until someone said enough! Life is complicated enough without having to deal with the above.”

Thanks also to Kerry Brewer, Mary Collins, and Bill Peterson for their letters.

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## **PSALM PARAPHRASES**

Psalm 118 is supposed to be the song that the disciples sang as they went out from the Upper Room towards Gethsemane. It feels a shade ironic that the same psalm (if different verses) is assigned for Easter morning.

14 God's rainbow arches over me; I fear nothing any more.

15 For what can conquer God?

Before the beginning, and after the end,

God is, and God will be.

16 Everything works together for God's goals.

17 If I am on God's side, then nothing I do is wasted;

Like sunbeams dancing on a lake, even my weakest efforts  
will gather into a glory, the glory of God.

18 Gales may buffet me; storm clouds may darken my face,  
but God will never give up on me.

19 I will arise and go now;  
I will sink into God's watery womb,  
20 and rise again into a new life.  
A new day has dawned.

21 God will look after me.  
22 As a piece of driftwood becomes a work of art,  
so my Lord will find new uses for me.

23 Do not try to second-guess God, for God is greater than all our imaginings.  
24 This is the day God gave us -- let us rejoice and be glad in it.

For this and other paraphrases, you can order *Everyday Psalms* through Wood Lake Publications,  
[info@woodlake.com](mailto:info@woodlake.com) or 1-800-663-2775.

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## HYMNSIGHT

My friend Ralph Milton, who published his Rumors newsletter for many years, has something special for you. It's called HYMNSIGHT, and it's for any church that currently projects the words of hymns and prayers, or plans to.

Ralph writes, Since retiring, I have rediscovered my old love of photography, and found creative use for my pictures in the life of First United where Bev and I worship. Our entire liturgy is projected, so that people read responses and sing hymns from screens. I use my photos to add color, vitality and depth to all the hymns and most of the liturgy.

In the course of this, I have developed slide sets to go with 600 hymns, plus about two thousand slides, in both the standard screen and the newer wide screen shape. You can use all of them, in any way you wish, without permission, and absolutely free, as long as it's non-profit and church related.

All you need to access the website is go to:

<http://www.hymnsight.ca> [www.hymnsight.ca](http://www.hymnsight.ca)

In addition to all that visual material, there's a comprehensive "how-to" manual for those who are new to the idea of using projected visuals in church, and for those who have already begun.

HymnSight provides a set of suggested visuals to go with each hymn, but the words to the hymn are not there, mainly for copyright considerations.

Please take a look to see if this service scratches where you itch. If you think it's worthwhile, please let some of your colleagues in ministry know about it. And if you know of a website that could benefit from a link to HymnSight, why not add it?

Blessings,

Ralph Milton

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## YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca). Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other web links worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, [www.seemslkegod.org](http://www.seemslkegod.org);
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [www.traditionaliconoclast.com](http://www.traditionaliconoclast.com)
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write [reynoldsrap@shaw.ca](mailto:reynoldsrap@shaw.ca)

- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write [alvawood@gmail.com](mailto:alvawood@gmail.com) to get onto her mailing list.

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#### TECHNICAL STUFF

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Sunday called Sharp Edges, which tends to be somewhat more cutting about social and justice issues. To sign up for Sharp Edges, write to me directly, at [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca), or send a note to [sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca)

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