

# Preservation of the Truth

Joseph D. Small



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*For my mother and father, with gratitude*

*Dalen S. Small †1995*

*Joseph D. Small, Jr.*

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# Preface

*Theology* is a disagreeable word in the church, not only because people disagree about theology, but because theology is often thought to be unpleasantly abstract, abstruse musing that has little to do with the real life of people and churches. *Theologian* has become an angular word reserved for academic practitioners of an arcane skill, certainly not a description of pastors and church members.

Yet theology is never absent from the church. As we worship we pray, sing, listen to sermons or preach them, celebrate sacraments, share money, and greet others. We also come together in church committee meetings, study groups, and mission projects. These and other church activities combine with our experiences of family, job, friends, and events to make us think and talk about the presence (or absence) of God in our world and in our lives. Thinking and talking about God and God's Way in the world is the work of theology, and so there is a sense in which we are all theologians.

We may be very bad theologians, of course, and our theology may have more to do with our desires and dispositions than with God. Yes, all Christians are engaged in theological thinking and speaking, but Christian thoughts and words may be simpleminded, wrongheaded, unrealistic, and even dangerous. Even though all of us who think and talk about God are "theologians," most of us devote little time and effort to our calling. All too often, this results in the kind of careless, naive, and irregular thinking that is no more appropriate in the church than in business or government, no more acceptable in theology than in sociology or economics.

As Christ's disciples, we are called to serious, sustained thinking and talking together about God and God's Way in the world. We are called to seek God's truth attentively, to explore God's truth comprehensively, and live God's truth faithfully. None of this is easy. Theology is hard work, demanding time and effort. Theology, like other worthwhile pursuits, requires more from us than casual inattention. Our common calling to serious, sustained theological work is important for each of us individually, because it enables us to receive, appreciate, and live the abundant life God gives. It is also important for the church, because when theology is neglected the

church tends to wander aimlessly, easily seduced by cultural notions of institutional worth.

It is my hope that this little book will be an occasion for serious, sustained theological exploration in the church. I do not presume that it is the whole truth about the preservation of the truth, but I have some confidence that the issues it raises can help persons and groups in the church inquire more deeply into the truth of the gospel and the urgent necessity of preserving this truth for the generations of Christians who will follow us. I also have confidence in the capacity of congregations to undertake the hard theological work that leads to deepened faith and broadened faithfulness.

My own thinking about the faith has always taken place in the company of others, especially with congregations and communities of colleagues. I have served as a pastor in the Towson (Maryland) Presbyterian Church, The First Presbyterian Church of Westerville, Ohio, and the Twelve Corners Presbyterian Church in suburban Rochester, New York. The saints in these congregations attended faithfully to my preaching and teaching, but they were my theological teachers and colleagues as well. These churches helped me become the kind of theologian that ministers are called to be, because they were the theological communities that congregations are called to be.

My theological work has developed and deepened through conversations with friends and colleagues in the Office of Theology and Worship of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Over the years, this remarkable group of theologians and liturgists has widened and sharpened my vision, enabling me to see essential things that I might not have noticed on my own, and would not have understood as well. My appreciation extends to wonderful ecumenical colleagues in the Faith and Order Commissions of the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches, and in the Theology Department of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. I am also indebted to countless pastors throughout the church, especially those who have joined me in practicing the disciplines of the Company of Pastors.

I am grateful beyond measure to my wife, Valerie—a Presbyterian elder, assistant stated clerk of the General Assembly, and keen interpreter of Scripture. Daily, her energy, intelligence, imagination, and love present me with theological insight and personal joy. But more, she is the one “To whom I owe the leaping delight . . .”

All of these and many others are my teachers, colleagues, friends, and companions in a common quest to preserve the truth of the gospel.

*Louisville*

*The Resurrection of the Lord, 2004*

# Introduction

Mission statements, vision statements, mission work plans: the church is awash in them. Congregations, governing bodies, and church institutions spend an inordinate amount of time preparing generalized statements of what they are to be and do. Unfortunately, church mission statements often bear a disturbing resemblance to the mission statements of grocery stores and pharmaceutical companies, employing marketing language to stress quality products and friendly service. Perhaps that is why they are so easily forgotten.

The churchly effort spent on devising mission statements would be better directed to a brief section in the first chapter of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s *Book of Order*. Embedded in the church's preliminary principles (G-1.0200) is a short list of the "Great Ends of the Church." These six great purposes of the church's life—the life of every congregation and the whole denomination—express direction for mission with a clarity and substance that is rarely found in the isolated, temporary products of church committees. The Great Ends of the Church are

- the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind;
- the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God;
- the maintenance of divine worship;
- the preservation of the truth;
- the promotion of social righteousness; and
- the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.

The church's constitution presents us with six great aims to direct our life together, six basic works of the church that are foundational to who the church is and what the church is called to do.

Nearly a century old, this statement of the Great Ends of the Church was developed by the United Presbyterian Church of North America between 1904 and 1910. The Great Ends were preserved in the church's constitution when the United Presbyterian Church of North America united with the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America in 1958, and then again when this combined body, the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, was reunited with

the Presbyterian Church in the United States in 1983 to form the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The endurance of this little testimony from a small predecessor church is evidence of the Great Ends' capacity to inspire faith and faithfulness.

The Great Ends of the Church is not a list of disconnected items, but a holistic vision of the church's life. A church cannot be faithful to the intention of the Great Ends by choosing to emphasize proclamation of the gospel to the neglect of worship, or to guard the truth of Christian doctrine while ignoring social righteousness. The great purposes of the church are intimately related to one another, and none can be fully understood apart from the whole. Their interrelationship is shown in an interesting way if we pair them from the outside in:

- the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind *and* the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world
- the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God *and* the promotion of social righteousness
- the maintenance of divine worship *and* the preservation of the truth

Note how these pairings break through some of the partitions that mar the church's landscape. No evangelism apart from demonstrating life within God's rule and no living the gospel without proclaiming the gospel. No care for ourselves without care for the world and no justice apart from personal relationships. No worship that neglects truth and no theology without praise and prayer. None of the Great Ends is independent of the others, and each depends on the others.

This book deals with only one of the Great Ends of the Church, "the preservation of the truth," but it is one in a series of six books exploring all of the Great Ends. Each of the books will be better appreciated when read together with the other five. All of the books will be appreciated more fully when read together with other people. Because the books are about the great ends of the *church*, church-centered reading enables individuals and groups to explore the implications of the Great Ends for congregational, governing body, and denominational life.

A few comments about language may be helpful to readers. The English language has developed in ways that sometimes express gender exclusivity, employing masculine nouns and pronouns to refer to all people. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) recognizes this problem and acknowledges that the diversity present in both church and world is not always reflected in the language of the church. "Definitions and Guidelines on Inclusive Language," adopted by the 197th General Assembly (1984) and reaffirmed by the 212th General Assembly (2000), provides guidance

that can help the church overcome the linguistic limitations embedded in English-language expressions of the Christian tradition.

The church's policy is clear that every effort should be made to use inclusive language with respect to the people of God. In fact, inclusive language for the people of God is no longer controvertible in most of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The church's clear commitment has even helped us to understand that the original inclusivity of some biblical, creedal, and liturgical texts has been masked by gender-exclusive English translations! As with everything that I write, this book attempts to be gender inclusive in every reference to God's people.

Language for God presents a more difficult problem. "Definitions and Guidelines" is clear that our language for God should be as intentionally diverse and varied as that of Scripture and tradition. Thus, we may use the full range of designations for God. "Definitions and Guidelines" is also clear that the Trinitarian designation "Father-Son-Spirit" is not to be altered, although it may be supplemented. (I say more about Trinitarian language in chapter 3.) The problem of language for God becomes particularly difficult with pronouns, however. The English options are *he*, *she*, and *it*. Use of *it* and *itself* to refer to God would be inappropriately impersonal, so we are left with a choice between masculine and feminine pronouns. "Definitions and Guidelines" recognizes the difficulty, suggesting the use of nouns rather than pronouns, for example "God shows God's love" rather than "God shows his love." Some writers substitute passive for active voice, as in "God's love is shown." Others eliminate the pronoun: "God shows love."

The English language does not lend itself to natural solutions. The church's legitimate concern for inclusive language sometimes has the unintended consequence of depersonalizing our talk about God and each other. Plural nouns, passive verbs, and neutral pronouns abound while gendered images are banished. While exclusive or predominant use of male terms is clearly inappropriate, inclusive language should be just that—inclusive—not excluding all hint of gender. This is particularly true when everyone realizes that linguistic conventions do not imply the belief that God is a male being.

I confess that I do not know a good solution, particularly in the case of pronouns. I have tried to work around the limitations of English grammar and syntax, but there are times, especially when indicating God's active engagement in the world, when the use of masculine pronouns seems unavoidable. At those points I can only trust we all know that God is beyond gender. God is neither male nor female, but rather the One who declares, "I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst" (Hos. 11:9).

# What Is Truth?

To know all is to see all, and omniscience is God's alone. I state the obvious, I suppose, for if God exists, so does truth and if there was no God (a thing not to be imagined in seriousness, but a philosophical jest alone), then would truth disappear from the world, and the opinion of one would be no better than that of another. I might also reverse the theorem, and say that, if men come to think that all is merely opinion, then they must come to atheism as well.

—Iain Pears, *An Instance of the Fingerpost*<sup>#</sup>

The last week of Jesus' life passes before us in a blur of rapidly changing events and shifting emotions. The days race from the odd celebration of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, to a near riot in the Temple, ominous teachings, a farewell meal with disciples, a night in the garden, betrayal, arrest, trial, execution . . . and then, improbably, resurrection to new life. Yet in the midst of an unseemly stampede to Golgotha some scenes unfold at a more measured pace. The evangelists pause to narrate a few moments in reverent detail, so that they almost appear to creep forward in slow motion.

Jesus' appearance before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate is a scene of unusual poignancy (see John 18:28—19:16). Jesus of Nazareth, so recently hailed by adoring crowds, now stands accused before the power of Rome. He has been betrayed by one of his disciples, denied by another, and abandoned by all of them. He has been rejected by religious authorities and shuttled off to undergo judgment by political powers. Now he undergoes a petty interrogation by a provincial official, providing enigmatic responses to an exasperated Pilate.

The religious leaders have done all they can do. While they are able to arrest and accuse and even punish, they have no authority to

execute. So, early in the morning, they hand Jesus over to the Roman governor. Pilate asks Jesus how he pleads to charges of blasphemy and sedition: “Are you the king of the Jews?” Jesus responds obliquely, asking if the accusation is Pilate’s own or if it comes from others. The governor makes it clear that Jesus’ own people have brought the charges, and that what he wants is a plea—guilty or not guilty? Again Jesus replies unsatisfactorily, “My kingship is not from this world.” Grasping at whatever he can, Pilate takes this as an admission: “So you are a king?” Jesus dismisses Pilate with a brief “So you say,” before stating what he wants to declare: “For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” Then Pilate utters the words we remember him by: “What is truth?”

Does Pilate ask the question cynically? hopefully? dismissively? curiously? We don’t know. Perhaps we do not even know how *we* intend the question when it passes through our minds. In an extended meditation on this scene, novelist Frederick Buechner imagines that Pilate asks the question “. . . because in a world of many truths and half truths, he is hungry for truth itself or, failing that, at least for the truth that there is no truth. We are all of us Pilate in our asking after the truth. . . .”<sup>2</sup> Buechner may be right. There are times when we know the discomfort of living in a world of half-truths and too many truths, times when we want so much to find the firm ground of truth on which to stand. But perhaps Buechner is too optimistic. We may not even bother to ask Pilate’s question because we have become resigned to the suspicion that, in a world of half-truths and too many truths, there is no real truth to be had, and so no reason to ask after it.

## **Truth and Truths**

Our culture is strangely ambivalent about truth. On the one hand we take it for granted that there are indisputable truths, facts that can be proven beyond doubt by the use of scientific method: our planet is round not flat, cigarette smoking increases the risk of disease, there is good cholesterol as well as bad,  $E = mc^2$ , and more. We live much of our lives in the confident belief that truths about the natural order of the physical world can be known, and that we can rely on those truths in the decisions we make. Perhaps more important, we can go through our days without having to think about these truths; we simply assume them. We do not have to decide about everything all the time.

Death and taxes are not the only certainties. Everyday life is lived in taken-for-granted certainty about “the way things are.” We do not have to think about everything all the time because almost everything is simply *there*, self-evidently real. The truth about everyday life is that it is full of truths we accept without having to be conscious of them, much less prove them. Day follows night, household appliances work, plants need water, transportation systems get us to our destinations, eating too much food will cause us to gain weight, computers operate, moderate exercise is good for us, and CD players function. Life is not perfect, of course, so there are times when things “go wrong.” But even then we are confident that they can be fixed. Moreover, we are confident that knowledge about the way things are will lead to improvements so that things will get even better. There is an order to everyday life and an order to problem solving in everyday life. Our culture assumes that there is truth about many things, and that this is truth we can count on daily.

Yet our culture also supposes that there are things about which there is no truth. Most dramatically, the culture assumes that there is no true social or moral order, or that there are many different but equally true social and moral orders. It seems that beyond the everyday arena of scientifically provable technological certainty there is a confusing maze of conflicting preferences. Whatever “truths” exist appear to be nothing more than relative, personal points of view. No one perspective is true while others are false. All are true in their own way, and so all must be respected.

This commonplace assumption that “truth” is a matter of perspective and preference also encompasses much of our everyday lives.

- I know that asparagus is delicious, while my son knows that asparagus is revolting. I am sure that Haydn is superior to twentieth-century composers, while my wife is certain that Rachmaninoff’s music is far more elegant. Are these only matters of taste, with no standard of truth to decide who is right and who is wrong?
- I am committed to public education, while others are certain that private school education or home schooling is better for children. I almost always vote for Democrats, while my father almost always votes for Republicans. Are these simply matters of opinion on which reasonable people can differ?
- I believe gambling is destructive, while most people in my state think it is a good way to raise public funds. I am uneasy about the implications of cloning research, while many see it as the

way to eradicate dread diseases. Are public policy options simply a matter of political preference?

From small matters like the wisdom of the designated hitter rule in baseball to important matters like the morality of the death penalty, there seems to be no one truth that is evident to all. More tellingly, the designated hitter rule and the death penalty are placed on an equal footing. Our culture assumes that they are both simply matters of judgment about which reasonable persons may disagree.

What is truth? Perhaps the question comes down to what is truth for you, truth for me, truth for each person. These personal truths seem to emerge from our differing experiences so that truths are as numerous as the vast array of distinct individual histories. Even when truth escapes the confines of personal life it remains tied to the experience of particular groups. Thus, truth appears to be different for African Americans than for whites, different for women than for men, different for Asians than for Westerners. We are aware that even the once commonly shared American Story is no longer cohesive. European Americans may celebrate Columbus's discovery of the new world while Native Americans grieve it as the first incursion in a savage conquest. White Americans may look reverently at the founding fathers while African Americans see only slaveholders who counted their chattel as three-fifths human. What is truth?

Alasdair MacIntyre notes the absence of shared truth about moral issues in our society: "The most striking feature of contemporary moral utterance is that so much of it is used to express disagreements; and the most striking feature of the debates in which these disagreements are expressed is their interminable character. I do not mean by this just that such debates go on and on and on—although they do—but also that they apparently can find no terminus. There seems to be no rational way of securing moral agreement in our culture."<sup>3</sup> MacIntyre is right about the interminable character of societal disagreements over dramatic issues such as abortion, gun control, and homosexuality. But for the most part, our more ordinary disagreements are quickly "resolved" simply by living comfortably with our differences. We believe that diverse personal perspectives should be respected and so we tolerate a wide range of beliefs, affirming that all persons have a right to their own moral, political, and religious "truths." The principle is so certain that we respect the right of others to believe in alien abductions, the curative power of pyramids, and the global reach of the Trilateral Commission. Although we think some views are silly, even outlandish, we are content to allow people the space for their

convictions as long as they do not intrude on the space reserved for our own convictions. We have our truths, others have their truths, and we are all suspicious of anyone who claims to have THE truth.

## **Segmentation and Privatization**

Certain deep characteristics of our culture affect the way we understand truth as well as shape the character of the truths we affirm. One especially noticeable cultural characteristic is the *segmentation* of social structures into distinct subsystems. Our society is no longer dominated by great institutions that establish cultural norms while providing goods and services for the majority of the populace. Instead, the social system is segmented into differentiated subsystems that function to meet the specialized needs of various subgroups within the society. Education, for example, is no longer a unified system with agreed-upon goals, methodologies, and institutions. Dick and Jane have gone the way of McGuffey's Readers. From preschools to graduate schools, education is a collection of discrete philosophies, distinct goals, specialized procedures, and diversified curricula, all presided over by independent institutions. Segments of the education "system" are only loosely interrelated; the parts are more visible than the whole, and each of the parts is designed to meet a specialized need with a specialized service.

The mass media provide a striking illustration of segmentation in contemporary culture. In the 1950s and well into the 1960s, AM radio was the only radio for most Americans. Most stations on the AM dial had the same format—"top 40"—which meant that all teenagers and many adults across the country shared the same music. Now, the FM dial is an array of specialty stations offering different styles of music for diverse tastes while AM has become the haven of talk radio, ranging from news to sports to advice. The "Big Three" television networks are a fading memory as cable and satellite systems deliver 40, 80, 120, 200 channels into our homes. Most of these cable channels are designed to appeal to the specialized interests and tastes of increasingly differentiated viewers. National weekly magazines like *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Look*, and *Life* have disappeared while niche magazines have multiplied, catering to every interest of every demographic subgroup.

Not too long ago, North America was characterized by a cohesive social structure presided over by basic, integrative institutions. Government, business, labor unions, schools, the media, and other unifying elements provided society with comprehensive patterns of understanding. These institutions were not monolithic, of course, and the

cultural cohesion they fostered was not absolute. Even so, “the man in the grey flannel suit” and “the establishment” were easily identifiable cultural markers. While the social structure was not unitary, it did provide broad patterns of recognizable, shared meaning. For many, the church was one of society’s basic, integrative elements. The church was a community that encompassed a wide range of communal values, shaping life into a whole and providing cohesion to family, school, job, and leisure. Now, even for its members, the church is but one of society’s segmented institutions dealing with the specialized area of “religion.”

Social segmentation contributes to the *privatization* of decisions. In a highly segmented society such as ours, patterns of belief, patterns of association, and patterns of action are no longer shaped by customary arrangements. Everything is a matter of individual choice and private decision. People do not assume that there are paths that they must follow or authorities to which they are accountable—whether families, or advisers, or systems, or institutions. Instead, persons assume that *they* are the authority deciding which of multiple possibilities to choose. Great social structures shrink before our eyes: government is not trusted, business is not believed, schools are not authorities, for *each one of us* decides whom to trust and what to believe.

Segmented social structures both serve and encourage private decision. We are not confined to deciding if there is a show we want to watch on ABC, CBS, or NBC. Now we can choose among The Discovery Channel, several ESPN channels, A&E, Black Entertainment Network, multiple movie channels, CNBC and MSNBC, two or three shopping networks, MTV and VH1, PBS, Nickelodeon, and more. Cable TV is only an obvious instance of segmented social structures that reinforce the ubiquity of choice. Each one of us decides about everything, secure in the assumption that our choices are ours alone. Others may make different decisions, and that is their right, for the only absolute is the freedom to choose. Privatization of decision may be most apparent in our “private lives,” but it is not limited to leisure choices. The arena of personal preference encompasses every area of life. Our culture declares that we are not constrained by family, community, church, profession, or nation. The right to choose is ours alone.

Our society functions on the model of a sprawling shopping mall. Specialty boutiques are scattered randomly throughout the mall, catering to diverse tastes while offering new possibilities and encouraging impulse purchases. The church is confined to religious shops located in one wing of the mall, competing with one another for

a dwindling market share. As people wander through society's shopping mall, they are free to choose whether to enter any of the religious boutiques and what, if anything, they will buy.

None of this is meant to paint a nostalgic portrait of the golden past when America was unified, or to curse the destructive fragmentation of contemporary society. Social cohesion can stultify as well as harmonize, and diversity can enrich as well as segment. I do not even intend to suggest a stark contrast between the present and previous generations. Even the 1950s had its beatniks, and contemporary society's segments are oddly conformist. Yet North American culture changes, and life today is different from life in previous generations. It is of more than passing interest to be conscious of cultural changes and to describe them with a measure of accuracy. Unless we are able to discern our situation, we will be as unaware of the forces that shape our lives as we are of the air we breathe.

### **The Mall within the Church**

What is true of our culture is also true within the church. The contemporary church is no longer a community of shared certainty in commonly acknowledged truths. Unwilling to grant authority to creeds, institutions, or persons, we have become impatient with theology, distrustful of doctrine, and indifferent to institutions. Leaders are tolerated in the church only as long as their leadership is in agreement with our own views or confined to matters that are peripheral to our concerns. The church has never been a unified community of unanimous views, of course. A casual reading of the New Testament letters is sufficient to confirm that the church has been characterized by diversity from the beginning. Yet the New Testament letters assume that unity in the faith is a central aim of Christian community. That assumption does not go unquestioned among us.

We live in a pluralistic world, and so we desire a church that is inclusive of the world's rich diversity. Our celebration of diversity goes beyond appreciation for the natural variety of race, ethnicity, gender, and personal gifts, however. We also make room in the church for a wide variety of preferences, opinions, convictions, and beliefs. Many people within the church simply assume that theological and moral truths are different for different Christians. Since a wide variety of beliefs emerges from a wide range of personal and communal experience, even *Christian* beliefs are thought to be diverse.

Several years ago, a "worship team" gathered at one of the church's national conference centers to plan the Sunday service. Since the

theme of one of the week's conferences was the Nicene Creed, it was suggested that the Creed should be confessed following the sermon. The proposal was met with uncomfortable silence until one team member suggested brightly that "we could say the Creed slowly, giving people time to stand for the parts they agree with and sit down for the parts they disagree with."

Standing and sitting to express agreement and disagreement with the Creed may seem particularly silly—or particularly tragic—but it is a parable of the way things are in the church. "God alone is Lord of the conscience,"<sup>4</sup> we say, and so it seems that all beliefs should be respected in the church—even encouraged—and that no attempt should be made to impose one "version" of the truth. The church lives within the culture, and so it is not surprising that the culture's acceptance of multiple truths is found within the church.

There was a time, not too long ago, when the culture's confidence in the demonstrable truths of science extended to certainty about universal social, moral, and religious truths. There was widespread social agreement about such verities as "justice," "democracy," "Christian morality," and "the American way." No longer. Court TV, low voter turnouts, network sitcoms, Iran–Contra, the Clinton impeachment, and the Florida vote count in the 2000 presidential election all demonstrate the lack of social consensus and the assumption that truth is relative to different persons or groups. Before the term *postmodern* became stylish, sociologist Peter Berger described the implications of all this for the church. Noting that the English word *heresy* comes from the Greek word *hairein*, "to choose," Berger describes the contemporary situation: "In the matter of religion . . . the modern individual is faced not just with the opportunity but with the necessity to make choices as to his beliefs. This fact constitutes the heretical imperative in the contemporary situation. Thus heresy, once the occupation of marginal and eccentric types, has become a much more general condition; indeed, heresy has become universalized."<sup>5</sup>

Berger's clever play on the common root for *heresy* and *choice* may highlight the contemporary unimaginability of heresy as well as the universality of choice. What would count as heresy today? Are heresy trials conceivable in the church? A group of New Testament scholars dismisses the authenticity of Jesus' words and deeds, some theologians reject the incarnation, a bishop denies the resurrection, many preachers ignore the cross, and thousands of Christians believe in reincarnation. Yet all of these views are seen as choices, not heresy.

What is truth? Is it nothing more than personal preference or group opinion? Certainly, we are uncomfortable with the idea that a person

or an institution could determine what is “true” and compel our assent. But that is only part of the story. We are also uncomfortable with the idea that there are no standards of truth, no bases for shared conviction. The Presbyterian Church’s centuries-old Historic Principles affirm that “God alone is Lord of the conscience,” but they also declare that “no opinion can be either more pernicious or more absurd than that which brings truth and falsehood upon a level, and represents it as of no consequence what a man’s opinions are.”<sup>6</sup> We know that both truth and falsehood have consequences. What people believe to be true does matter, and sometimes it is a matter of life and death.

What is truth—that all races are equal in human dignity, or that some races are inferior to other races? What is truth—that diseases are God’s punishment for sin, or that diseases are natural occurrences for which cures should be found? What is truth—that a fetus is a human person at conception, or at birth? What is truth—that all peoples have the right of political self-determination, or that states have the right to preserve their national integrity? Clearly, what we believe to be true has consequences for personal, group, and political behavior. The consequences are sufficiently weighty that the search for truth is vital. Without knowledge of the truth, we become captive to the will of a majority or to the force of a minority.

### **Who Is Truth?**

“What is truth?” Pilate asked. We don’t know whether he really wanted to know or simply wanted to end an annoying interrogation, whether he was earnest or cynical. However, we do know that the question he asked is vitally important, perhaps even a matter of life and death. But Pilate did not get an answer to his question. The trial scene ends abruptly as the narrative moves on to the horrors of a lynch mob, torture, ridicule, and death. But if we are familiar with the Gospel according to John, we already know the Bible’s answer to Pilate’s question.

Earlier in John’s narrative we read about a baffling conversation that Jesus had with disciples who were confused and frightened by his talk of betrayal, departure, and death (see John 13:21—14:7). On the night of the last supper he would share with his disciples, Jesus announced that he was leaving and that he was giving his disciples a new commandment: to love one another as he had loved them. Ignoring Jesus’ announcement of the commandment to love, Peter blurted out the obvious, direct question, “Lord, where are you going?” But he did not get a direct answer, only the vague response that where