

3.8 What is Truth?

Aim

- To understand the dynamics of truth – the relation between fact and interpretation.
- To understand the standards of human communication.

Procedure

- Invite a volunteer to act out a given set of gestures in front of the whole class. The class should appoint three reporters who will report back on the event. The reporters keep their pens and papers ready. The actor performs while the whole class watches. After this, the reporters take three minutes off to individually write their reports. They then present their reports one by one to the whole class.
 - Note: the reporters must not communicate with each other; the actor must not disclose verbally what he is acting out.
 - The whole set of actions is in silence and is as follows:
A man is preparing to welcome his fiancé. He switches on the tape recorder and enters the bathroom. He begins his shower bath. Next, he happily wipes his back with a towel. He is visibly happy and dances along. He wraps a towel around his waist and then comes out of the bathroom. He begins to dance before the tape recorder. Suddenly he hears a knock at the door and is ashamed to discover he has only a towel on. He hastily puts on his clothes, combs his hair, powders his face and then goes to the door. On opening it he welcomes his fiancé into the room with an ecstatic embrace.
 - Give time for the reporters to prepare their reports.
 - Ask each reporter to read out their reports individually.
 - Then ask the students to point out which of the three reports were closer to the fact?
 - The reports will invariably have three different interpretations of the action performed. They will tend to move between fact and opinion. Draw the students' attention to the differences. Ask them to identify the phrases and words used by the reporters to explain and interpret the event (the 'how' and 'why') beyond merely stating what happened. In this way the class will be trained to sift fact from interpretation.
- or
- Invite a guest speaker from the media, preferably an editor from a notable media house to give a talk on truth and interpretation, fact and opinion.

Input

- Despite centuries of argument, philosophers and the Ologians are still unable to agree on what truth is. Even if there were agreement on this basic question, how likely is it that the Roman Catholic Church and other organisations would agree on the "truth" about abortion or that a president and his challenger would agree on the "truth" about the state of the economy? Indeed, the exercise has shown us that in report-writing the truth in its factual form eludes us. We are more likely to receive information filtered through interpretations of the actual event.
- However, if there was a definition as to what truth is in journalistic terms, it would be that truth is information that is factual, closer to the event – what we call objectivity as distinguished from interpretations or subjectivity.

Standards of Human Communication

- What makes Christian communication different from any other form of communication? It should contain the elements of:
 - **Empathy-** Here we share with the one to whom we speak. Empathy is saying "here I am to share the hurt, the sorrow, the shame with you." Empathy is often said to be like walking in the other person's shoes.
 - **Incarnational-** We show God in ourselves and in who we are. We do not speak the word on its own but we practise it in our own behaviour with others.
 - **Healing-** The aim is to cure, not to cause the wounds. The purpose is to build up rather than destroy. The goal is creative rather than destructive.

Materials Required

- Copies of the story in the procedure.
- Pen and Paper



To fulfil these elements our communication will hold the standards of:

1. **Truth** - We will not lie to obtain commitment to ourselves or our cause. We will communicate reality and not deception. We will be true to ourselves as well as to our people.
2. **Freedom** - We will allow people to make free choices for themselves. I cannot live any other person's life of faith for them. It is not helpful then to seek to coerce or force my views or opinions or ideas upon others. I will share them and offer them for the people to make the choice.
3. **Responsibility** - We are held responsible for what we demand of others through our communication. If we are asking others to take risks, then we have to be responsible for sharing those risks and for what may happen to others because of our demands. Jesus never called on people to do things he himself would not do.

Truth

- In reporting the fact, it is important for the reporter to answer the question: 'Who? What? When? Where?' concerning the event. Often reporters are not actually present at the site and pick up the answers to these questions through eye-witnesses who, if they are available, see things from their points of view. Thus, invariably interpretations creep in and actual facts get distorted.
- Then there are two other questions: the 'Why' and the 'How' of the event. The reasons for the facts are not always easy to find. The committee searching for a new university Chancellor announces that the field of candidates has been narrowed to five, but the names of the five are not released. Committee members are sworn to secrecy. What can you do to get the names? Should you try?
- Other times it's hard to tell what the facts mean. The High Court refuses to hear a case in which legislators are questioning the constitutionality of a state spending limit. The court only says that there is no "justifiable controversy." What does that mean? Who won? Is the ruling good news or bad news and for whom?
- Sometimes it's even hard to tell what a fact is. A presidential commission, after a yearlong study says there is no widespread hunger in Somalia. Is the conclusion a fact? Or is the fact only what the commission said? And how can you determine whether the commission is correct?
- Daily journalism presents still more complications. Usually, as a reporter you have only a few hours, at most a few days, to try to learn as many facts as possible. Then, even in such a limited time, you may accumulate information enough for a story of 2,000 words, only to be told that there is space or time enough only for 1,000 or fewer. Thus, you may have to limit your story only to the bare facts leaving behind other contextual information that will usually help the reader to get a more accurate picture of the story.
- On reading a story, or in our case, a report, the readers have two choices: either to believe what they have read as true or to suspend judgement for want of more evidence. Nevertheless they themselves are prone to be affected by various shades of bias when forming their own opinion of the event.
- Despite the elusiveness of truth in journalism, there are two questions that every responsible journalist should ask about every story: Is it accurate? Is it fair?
- Accuracy is essential in every detail. Every name must be spelled correctly, every quote must be just what was said; every set of numbers must add up. And that still isn't good enough. You can get the details right and still mislead unless you are accurate with context, too.
- In traditional African society, the Amhara of Ethiopia were taught secret musical notes to establish the authenticity of written notes (messages).
- Truth, then, is the goal. A sincere media person strives to attain it but may never really reach it since interpretations based on biases are bound to affect the communication process. However, they must nonetheless strive to be truthful.
- It requires a sincere heart, a perceptive eye and a discerning mind to sift fact from opinion, truth from interpretation and these are qualities every media person should possess.

Review

1. Truth in its factual form eludes us. We are more likely to receive information filtered through interpretations of the actual event.
2. Empathy, incarnation and healing are what make Christian communication different from other forms of communication.
3. To fulfil the above elements, our communication has to hold standards of truth, freedom and responsibility.
4. Truth is information that is factual, closer to the event – objectivity.
5. Sometimes it's hard to get the facts. At other times it's hard to tell what the facts mean. And yet still it's hard to tell what a fact is. Adding to this dilemma of truth telling in journalism, limits on story lengths compromise the communication of these facts.
6. On reading a story, the readers have the choice either to believe what they have read as true or to suspend judgement until they get more evidence. Nevertheless they are prone to be affected by various shades of bias when forming their own opinion of the event.
7. Despite the elusiveness of truth, every responsible journalist must always be accurate and fair in his report.

Reflection

1. For a journalist, a hunch, based on previous occurrences of a said event is what normally leads to the discovery of truth in a story. In what ways can a journalist refine his discovery skills to be able to find the best obtainable version of the truth?
2. What is it that makes the difference between Christian communication and other forms of communication? What are the different elements?

Relevant Skills

Record a piece of news or get a newspaper cutting and identify what information is true, and what is subjective. Identify words that led to your conclusion.

Resources

BOSCOM-INDIA. 'SHEPHERDS' FOR AN INFORMATION AGE. Matunga: Tej Prasarini, 2000.

References

Social Communication Departments AMECEA and IMBISA. Basic Human Communication. Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa. 2000.

