

Know the Truth

Toxic...Pt. 7

We are on the end-run of a series on toxic church culture – how to spot it, how to fix it, and how to avoid it in the first place. We’ve said that a church’s culture is the thing that sets it apart more than any other dynamic – say, denomination or geography. It’s the unspoken “vibe” that comes through regardless of what the official values state. To use Jesus’ analogy, we’ve said culture is the church’s eye – if it’s a good eye, the body is filled with light, but if the eye is bad – toxic – the whole body is lost in darkness.

And this matters because toxic churches do a lot of damage in our world; to people and to the good news of the gospel. So for the first half of the series we identified some of the warning signs of toxic church culture and then for the last few weeks we’ve been talking about the marks of *good* church culture – or *tov* church, the Hebrew word for “good” which we are lifting from an excellent book on the subject by New Testament scholar, Scot McKnight, *A Church Called Tov*.

Two weeks ago I introduced his “Circle of Tov” which lists seven values of a healthy church and – while we won’t take the time to drill down on each of them – I did want to highlight a few of the especially

critical ones. The whole list is *Tov* churches nurture empathy, grace, are people-focused, truthful, just, service-oriented and Christlike. We talked about empathy last week, we’re going to talk about Christlike to finish up next week.

But today, I want to talk about truth. The nomenclature we’re using is *Tov* churches **Tell the Truth and Resist False Narratives**. Now, McKnight lists this virtue as number four on his list, and I don’t know if the circle is meant to be in an order of importance or not. Maybe it’s round like King Arthur’s table for the same reason – that everyone is in equal standing. But I happen to think this is the most important virtue, because if you put anything ahead of the truth, you will lose the truth *and* the thing you put ahead of it as well.

For instance, last week we talked about the importance of empathy – of putting ourselves emotionally in another’s place in order to stand with them in their trials and pain. But if you do that without truth, it will implode on you. First of all, if you’re not truthful with the person, your help can easily become enabling. But if you’re not truthful with *yourself* – about your motives for wanting to empathize; is this a savior’s complex or something? – you could wind up manipulating them instead of helping.

Truth is at the top of the pyramid. So put truth ahead of empathy and you get both. But if you get it out of order – if you put empathy ahead of truth, you get neither. It works that way with all the virtues. Think of honor – this is what the story of *The Emperor's New Clothes* is about – if you put honor ahead of truth, you get neither; a naked king is dishonorable. But if you put truth *ahead* of honor, you'll get both.

And the pyramid works this way because it is God's design. There's a place where the Apostle Paul gives a definition of the church, what he calls, (**1 Timothy 3:15**)“...*God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth.*” Now, what is it about the church that makes it “the pillar and foundation of truth”? It's certainly not the people in it – we'll talk about that momentarily. No, it is because of the one to whom the church belongs. It's not *my* church. It's not really even *our* church. Who's church is it? It's Jesus's church.

And Jesus makes a startling claim. It's a claim that forever blows away any of those “Jesus was a good teacher but never claimed to be divine” arguments that you hear from time to time. No, no, let's have none of that. When you really look at what Jesus claims, he's either a liar, or a lunatic...or he is what he claims to be.

And in **John 14:6**, he makes the grandest claim of all, “*Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”*” Jesus doesn't just practice the truth, he *is* the truth. This is why, as Christians, we should evaluate everything – and I do mean *everything* – through a Jesus lens.

So God established the church to be the foundation of truth...because Jesus *is* the truth...and then, the trinitarian nature of truth is completed when we see how we can be agents of that truth. Jesus says in **John 16:13**, talking about what's going to occur after his departure, “*But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth.*” So God is the author of truth, Jesus is the truth and the Holy Spirit enables us to know and to do the truth.

So do you see why it's so devastating when God's people do not operate in the truth? As McKnight says, “So if God is the truth, our faith is the truth, and we are to walk in the truth, anything that opposes the truth or undermines the truth is not of God and not part of a truth telling *tov* culture. There is no room in a church called *tov* for lying, deceit, cover-ups, suppression, gaslighting, or spin. All those things are toxic. **Telling the truth, then, is who we are as Christians.** When we don't tell the truth, we are denying our *identity* and our *calling*.” (*Church Called Tov*, 137)

Now, that's all fine and good, but if we're honest about honesty - if we're telling the truth about the truth - we have a problem. You see, why can't I just end the sermon there? "Tell the truth; see you all next week!" I mean, "that's who we are as Christians", right? But the truth is, the distance between who we are and who we ought to be is, for most of us, vast. We fail. We fall. We give in to temptation. We say things in anger, or in fear, that we later deeply regret. We disappoint those who had faith in us. We betray those who trusted us.

We're all wrestling with guilt and we don't know what to do about it. Sigmund Freud wrote a book that some of you probably had to read in college or something called, *Civilization and its Discontents* - it's actually about conscience. The original title, "Discontents" is translated from the German word, *unbehagen* - and actually from what I can tell our English translation is a little weak. *Unbehagen* means, "a deep unease, a malaise."

And Freud said that's the price we pay for living in a civilization. Freud argues that the human heart is profoundly egocentric. That in our inmost being, we are incredibly self-centered - the Bible says that as well, so point to Freud. So we all of us are pursuing what our heart wants and that's a problem in a collective society.

I suppose in primitive life - in the jungle - that's not so bad because if I want a banana, there's a banana and I take it. But as soon as the resources get limited we have trouble. And eventually we don't want to live in the jungle anymore, so we build a civilization.

But now I want a banana, you want a banana and there's only so many bananas in the city - so we have competition. And so our selfish hearts cause us to fight over that banana and I might even kill you over the banana. You say, "Anthony, I'd never kill anyone over a banana!" Ok, it's a metaphor, but substitute "land" for "banana" and you have the history of civilization. Freud wrote this in Germany in 1929 - think of the historical context. We can build a German nation-state, but at what cost? We need our neighbor's land to be a great civilization, but that involves *taking* it from them by force.

But this is true of any civilization. Every civilization is built on the burial mounds of the one that came before. So according to Freud, you can stay in the jungle and have a simpleton's peace, or you can build a civilization, but the price you pay is *unbehagen* - this deep sense of internal guilt. A guilty conscience is the price we pay for civilization. And he's right about that.

So what do we do about it? Well most people stuff it down into denial. This was Freud's "solution", he said "neurotic denial" is the only thing that can lead to living together in a harmonious conspiracy. You just can't own it. Of course, that's just the thinking that led Germany into World War II. The circle of violence just continues. "Shame on the Germans!" Well hold up, we're experiencing the same thing right now in America.

What's this debate over how we teach history all about? Look, the debate over Critical Race Theory is a red herring – nobody even knows what CRT is. What we don't want is guilt. And when we teach our history *honestly*, we're more aware of our *unbehagen*. The fact of the matter is we built our American civilization on land stolen from Native Peoples and developed it using forced slave labor. Anybody that says otherwise is living in denial.

But Freud says that's exactly what's going on with the whole human race. An historian came out with a book this year about the Alamo. According to some newly translated documents from Santa Anna, he thought he was bringing the Mexican army to Texas to free slaves. After all, Mexico has just fought a war to win their independence from colonial power Spain – inspired by their neighbor to the North's own revolution against England. And now they were a progressive nation that didn't want the barbaric

practice of slavery to exist within their borders – borders which included the land we're all sitting on this morning. It's a compelling argument.

So this historian was scheduled to present a lecture at the Bob Bullock State History museum in July and the Texas Lieutenant Governor stepped in to cancel it at the last minute. In the "land of the free and the home of the brave"! A lot of people – including me - called it government censorship. Freud would say it's just burying a guilty conscience. It's the price of a civilization. James Baldwin called it *The Price of the Ticket* and warned, "Whoever cannot tell himself the truth about his past is trapped in it...unable to assess either his weakness or his strengths, and how frequently indeed he mistakes the one for the other."

And you may think there's nothing wrong with that. After all, isn't that what every civilization does? "I mean, yes Anthony, we Texans took this land from the Comanches, but didn't they take it from another tribe?" Of course they did. And men like Freud and Nietzsche and Darwin would say, "That's life. The strong devour the weak." And business executives that lie to make money would say, "That's life. You've got to protect the shareholders." And churches that falsify narratives to protect the brand would say, "That's life. Look at all the good we're doing."

And I suppose if you want to buy into that secular mindset you can just drown the guilty conscience in denial, and violence, and cheap entertainment and push ahead. Just keep self-medicating until the worms get you and everything goes quite. But what do you do if you believe in God? What do you do if you believe His Son is *the way, the truth and the life*? What do we do if we believe telling the truth is our identify and our calling?

What do you do if you take seriously scriptures like **Romans 1:18**, “*The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness,*” What have we said all through the toxic vs *Tov* series? Suppressing the truth is not an option for those who would follow Christ. So what is the answer to our *unbehagen*? To our guilty unclean conscience.

Well, God has always been honest about the solution. First of all, anyone who has ever read the history of God’s people knows that the Bible is never complicit in concealing sin and failure. Again and again, scripture shows the heroes of our faith for who they are – warts and all. You know why I don’t get upset about an unflattering portrayal of Jim Bowie or Davy Crockett? Because I’ve read the Bible!

Abraham lied about his wife, *twice*, to save his own skin. Jacob lied to his father in order to steal his brother’s birthright. Moses killed an Egyptian and fled into the desert where he hid for 40 years in exile. David was an adulterer who schemed to have the woman’s husband murdered. It would take too long to describe the sexual sins of Solomon. In the New Testament the closest associates of Jesus are presented as absolute rubes, with the most embarrassing revelations reserved for the greatest of them, Peter.

Reading the Bible is not like reading fairy tales that all end happily ever after. It’s messy. It’s heroes are dirty, inside and out. God is willing to tell the truth about our human failing. And God wants us to tell the truth as well. And so early on, God provided a means whereby we could deal with our guilty, unclean conscience. In fact, it’s codified in the Bible right alongside the 10 Commandments. It’s almost like God was saying to Moses, “Ok, here’s my Law. Teach it to the people and don’t blow it. And then, *when* you blow it, here’s a ceremony to clean things up.”

Jews all around the world celebrated that ceremony just this last Thursday. It’s called Yom Kippur. And observant Jews everywhere stopped what they were doing and spent an entire day in repentance. In ancient times the day was celebrated in the form of a massive public ceremony set in the Temple in Jerusalem. This is all spelled out in the first seven chapters of the book of Leviticus. Tens of thousands of people would gather in the city to observe the long and elaborate rituals.

One rabbi summarized Yom Kippur by saying, “On the Holiest day, the Holiest man, entered the Holiest place, and spoke the Holiest word.” He’s talking about the High Priest. Five times on the day itself, the people would watch as the priest immersed himself in a ritual bath to ensure that he was clean as a representative of the people. And then he would put on pure white robes. And once his body and clothing were as clean as could be, he would enter into the center most part of the Temple, the Holy of Holies, to begin to clean everything else.

He would bring the blood of sacrificial animals to be sprinkled on the altar – the Ark of the Covenant. And three times he would make confession; first for himself and his family, second for his fellow priests, and finally for the people as a whole. And each time he did, the high priest called out the Holy Name of God that had been revealed to Moses in the burning bush and to this day is unspoken by observant Jews. The holiest man, in the holiest place, on the holiest day, speaking the holiest name of God.

Now, I happened to be reading about Yom Kippur this week in a book on Jewish celebration by my favorite Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks – he passed away just last November. And he brought out a very interesting point about the role of both prophets and priests in the process of the Day of Atonement – which is what Yom Kippur means if I haven’t said. But you might remember that last week we laid out the difference between a prophet

and a priest in the Old Testament. I wish I had read this before *that* sermon, because Rabbi Sacks had come great insight into this.

But remember we said that it was the prophet’s role to speak *to* the people and the priest’s role to speak on behalf *of* the people? Well, these roles come out in the Biblical literature. Rb. Sacks says, “The language the prophets use is quite different from that of the priests. Time and again they use the word the priest never use, namely ‘return’, *shuv*. from which we get our word to *teshuva* [which is the Hebrew word for repentance]. Return to God, they say, and He will return to you. The priestly word *kaphar*, ‘atone’ [to cover over] plays almost no role whatsoever in the prophetic literature.” (Sacks *Ceremony and Celebration*, 54)

In other words, when you read the priestly literature – the first five books of the Bible – you see the word for *atonement* again and again. The way you get right with God is the priest makes a sacrifice of atonement on your behalf. But when you read the prophets – Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc. – you don’t find the word for atone, but you do find the word for *repentance* over and over again. Two different offices, two different vocabularies. So how do you get right with God? Two separate processes; you have to return to God, you have to repent. And then someone has to make atonement for you – “cover” your butt. Only you can return for yourself, but you can’t atone for yourself. This is the message of these two ancient Jewish offices.

He continues...“**Priest and prophets belong to different worlds.** The only reason we think of them together is because of the history of Yom Kippur. The first Yom Kippur was brought about by Moses, the greatest of the prophets. The second and subsequent Days of Atonement belong to Aaron and his descendants, the high priests.”

What he’s saying is, Moses was a prophet – the Bible says the *greatest* prophet – and God originally gave him the instructions for the first Yom Kippur up on Mt. Sinai. But after that, it was carried out by the priests – Aaron and his future sons and their future sons – the tribe of the Levites. And that makes sense because they both have a distinct message for the people about how to get right with God – how do deal with their deep-seeded guilty conscience – repentance and atonement.

But, Judaism soon ran into a problem. In the year 4 BC, Israel came under direct Roman rule. There was unrest throughout the land. There were Jewish uprisings off and on for decades until finally Rome had had enough and a heavy contingent of Roman troops under Vespasian and Titus was sent to crush the rebellion. In 70 AD, the Temple of Jerusalem was destroyed. Contemporary historians estimate that over a million Jews were killed during this time.

In the year 132 there was another uprising – known as the Bar Kokhba Rebellion – which would be the last straw for the Roman Emperor. This reprisal was merciless. The entire city of Jerusalem was destroyed – not one stone left on top of another. 580,000 Jews was killed. Almost an entire generation of Jewish leaders and teachers and sages and scholars were put to the sword. The city was rebuilt as a Roman stronghold and Jews were forbidden entry upon pain of death. It was the beginning of the longest exile in the history of the world.

Rabbi Sacks explains the significance, “**All the institutions of national Jewish life were now gone. There was no temple, no sacrificial order, no priests, no kings, no prophets, no land, no independence, and no expectation that they they might soon return...In the encompassing turmoil one problem was acute for those whose religious imaginations was most sensitive. What, in the absence of a temple and its sacrifices, would now lift the burden of sin and guilt?...Without some way of resolving the tension between the ideal of perfection and the all-to-imperfect nature of human conduct, the weight of undischarged guilt would be immense.**” (56-57)

God laid out a plan to deal with the guilty conscience that eats at the soul of civilized humanity. It was a beautiful process of repentance and atonement that served as an example to the people of God's heart of forgiveness year after year. But now all that was gone. How would we address the *unbehagen*? Many secular Jews – like Sigmund Freud – said you never would. Many faithful Jews found a new social practice that replaced the original – that's what occurred on Thursday. Rabbi Sacks says every Jew becomes a kind of priest, offering God not an animal but shards of a broken heart.

I think that's very, very close. But there were *some* Jews that believed that God had sent a new way. An individual that uniquely combined the ministry of priest *and* prophet. Someone who came to call us to return to God – to repent of our sins. But someone who *also* made a way of atonement – a covering for our sins.

Here's how his ministry was introduced in **Mark 1:14-15**, "*Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!'*" That word translated "good news" is what we call the gospel. And that right there is the key to everything if you are a Christian. "*The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!*"

That's the heartbeat of the entire Bible; repent and believe. That is the bottom line of what Christians are called to do – repent and believe. And it's not just a one-time thing. Just like the Day of Atonement, it is meant to be a recurring process.

There's a small, but extremely important verse in the New Testament, **Colossians 2:6**, where Paul says, "*So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him*". In other words, the way you received Christ is the way you should continue to live in Christ. Question: How did you receive Christ? What did you *do*? Well, if you really crossed over to a life with God you repented of your sin. You "turned" – *teshuva* - from trying to be your own savior - that's another way to talk about repentance – *and* you believed the gospel.

What's the gospel? Let me show it to you like this. You remember we said how meticulously the High Priest would bath and wash and put on clean clothes before making atonement for the people? You're going into the Holy of Holies before the Angel of the Lord, the very presence of God, you want to be clean. Ritual cleanliness was *very* important in ancient Judaism. And so you will understand the shock and confusion, when the prophet Zechariah has a vision of a High Priest named Joshua. Because it says in **Zechariah 3:3**, "*Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel.*"

This is Yom Kippur, and the priest was smeared in filth. He was smeared with excrement and garbage. It was a stench. It was terrible. And Zechariah looked at him and said, “How could this be? How could the most holy person in the most holy place on the most holy day be found filthy and dirty before the most holy name?” And the answer is that God was showing Zachariah, and He’s showing you and me, that the external is not what He’s about. That even if you externally make yourself as clean as you possibly can, even if you do everything - if you pray, if you come to church, if you follow the rules – God still sees the guilt in your conscience. He still sees how far you fall short. God sees the uncleanness.

So Zechariah is waiting for God to sort of strike Joshua dead, you know? I mean that’s what happens to a dirty priest before a holy God, right? But instead God says three things, first, take those filthy rags off him – I’ll take the sin off him. Second, clean him up and clothe him properly – I’ll put righteousness on him. And then it says something really mysterious.

God says, (**Zechariah 3:8-9**), “*Listen, High Priest Joshua, you and your associates seated before you, who are men symbolic of things to come: I am going to bring my servant, the Branch....says the Lord Almighty, ‘and I will remove the sin of this land in a single day.’*” All of this Yom Kippur ceremony is symbolic. It’s all pointing to a day to come when I will remove the sin once and for all, and I’ll do it in a single day. The *ultimate* Day of Atonement.

And Zechariah realized that this is a prophecy that we are standing before God completely unacceptable. There’s a subjective and objective barrier between us and our holy God. We cannot know God, we cannot cleanse our own consciences, we can’t cleanse ourselves. And yet, someone will come and do it for us. And this is what the gospel is all about. This is the good news of which we must believe.

Because one day there came another Joshua. Did you know that “Jesus” is a kind of latinized derivation of the Aramaic “Yeshua”, which is a derivation of the Hebrew “Joshua”? In other words, centuries later another Joshua showed up. He was a prophet like Moses, but he was *also a priest*. And on the last night of his life, he went into the Garden of Gethsamane and he prayed and prayed and prayed. Why? To prepare himself, because, the next day, he was going to stand as a High Priest. He was going to stand before God and represent us.

But he did not do that in a beautiful earthly building. Oh no! This Joshua, Jesus Christ, he was crucified on a garbage dump. Did you know what Golgotha is? You know what Calvary is? It’s a garbage dump. He was crucified on the garbage, in the midst of excrement, feces and filth. And he wasn’t clothed in beautiful garments. He was stripped naked, which was a sign of great shame. And by the way, was this high priest was bathed with water? Yeah, human spit; they spit on him.

Do you realize that this was the only High Priest who really didn't need to get ready to approach the Holy of Hollies? Why? Because he was already clean. He was already perfect. He was the only human being that was perfect. He was the only person who wasn't defiled. His clothes, spiritually speaking, were already completely spotless.

So, why is Jesus treated as if he's garbage? Because, he was being treated the way we should be treated. He was taking our uncleanness upon himself. He was taking our repulsiveness upon himself. He was paying the penalty for our sins, that objectively have stood between us and God. All the evil that we have inflicted upon one another and upon God's creation as the price of our "civilization."

And you know what that means? Those barriers are gone if you believe in Jesus Christ. This is what we must *believe* when we repent and believe the gospel. If you believe in Jesus Christ, if you believe that He became filthy, so you could become clean, that He was stripped naked so you can be clothed. The Bible's constantly talking about the fact that you're now clothed in the righteousness of God.

The writer of Hebrews puts it so beautifully in the language of Yom Kippur. **Hebrews 9:11-14**, "*But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say,*

*is not a part of this creation. 12 He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place **once for all** by his own blood, thus obtaining **eternal redemption.**"* Jesus' redemption is eternal. He doesn't have to do it year after year, it says he did it "once and for all" to take away sin. He fulfilled Zechariah's prophecy that in "a single day" the atonement would be completed.

*'13 The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. 14 How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, **cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!**"*

Do you hear that? Our guilty conscience – our *unbehagen* – can be cleansed. Not because we didn't do anything wrong! Listen, remember the two parts to the priestly-prophetic call to repentance? There's turning *and* there's atonement. The way you *get* in the Kingdom of God is the way you *grow* in the Kingdom of God – repent *and* believe the good news. The good news part happened *one* time. Jesus' sacrifice was one and done – "once for all". Because he was the perfect sacrifice.

But the repentance part...your repentance is never perfect. You are not perfect. And therefore, as Martin Luther put it at the start of the Reformation, “All of life is repentance.” We have to turn back to God again and again. And that means owning the truth. Walking in the truth. Nurturing truth, not false narratives.

You see, the world only offers two ways to deal with our brokenness and failures – our *sins*, both individual and collective. We either own them and feel like garbage. “Yeah, we did steal this land, and white people are just the worst.” Or, we deny our failures or explain them away as “that’s just life”, and go on living with our deeply repressed guilt that makes us so afraid and so nasty. “America is the land of *freedom*...and that’s *it!* *Just freedom!*”

You know, just a few years after Freud wrote his book, another German, a theologian named Dietrich Bonhoeffer, also wrote a critique of human nature and he talked about the concept of “cheap grace” which he called “the bitterest enemy of true discipleship”. He says, “Cheap grace is preaching forgiveness without repentance; it is baptism without the discipline of community; it is the Lord’s supper without confession of sin; it is absolution without personal confession...grace without the cross, without the living, incarnate Jesus Christ.” (*Discipleship*, 44)

Did you know that same Book of Hebrews says that when we refuse to take our sin seriously, it’s like, (**Hebrews 6:6**), “...*they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.*” Now, you can’t *really* do that - again, “once for all” – no one can put Jesus Christ back on that garbage dump. *But why would you want to?!* No, we take sin very seriously because of what it cost our great high priest.

Bonhoeffer says, “Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which has to be asked for, the door at which one has to knock.” And in Jesus – in our true High Priest – we are free to seek, free to ask, free to knock. We are free to own our brokenness. And let go of our guilt. Not because our guilt doesn’t matter. Not because it wasn’t serious. But because someone else took it in our place. Will we be the kind of people...will we be the kind of church...that lives in the truth? Then we must do what the one who *is* the way, the truth, and the life called us to do. Repent...and believe the gospel.

And we do this again and again. We don’t *wallow* in our sin and we don’t *deny* our sin. We confess it...and we believe...that in our great High Priest it is covered.

I want to close with one of my favorite quotes from retired New York City pastor Tim Keller, “Christians ought to be people who repent the most fully without excuses. Because they know they don’t need any now. They repent the most easily without bitterness. The most publicly and the most joyfully because they know their standing with God is not based on their performance.”

You are free to confess your sins. You are free to be a mess and in process because you know that God is not looking at you based on your performance but on the performance and record and works of Jesus Christ. You’re free to, like the Bible itself, embrace the truth – in all it’s filth and in all it’s glory. Because of your high priest. Repent and believe.

Let’s pray...