

## **“THOU SHALT NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS AGAINST THY NEIGHBOR”**

BY STEPHEN H. SMITH, M.D.

The spirit of the commandment, “Thou shalt not bear false witness,” in the natural sense plainly means that we are not to lie or to deceive in order to conceal our transgressions, to gain what is not rightfully ours, or to willfully harm others out of malice. While this would appear to be a relatively simple and straightforward matter, rather “black and white,” the nature of truth (absolute and relative) is worth at least some reflection for everyone. For philosophers, it is a worthy, lifelong career.

To be able to tell the truth as completely as possible, to be as honest as humanly possible, perhaps ought to be a universal goal, for the pursuit and transmission of truth is more than an academic inquiry. It should to be a lifelong endeavor for each of us.

One of the defining moments of my formal education was in senior math (Algebra II) with Mr. Kenneth Rose. The matter under discussion was the difference between “accuracy” and “precision.” It was a lightning bolt; from that moment forward the world was divided between that which could be pierced with “bulls-eye” accuracy and that which had of necessity to be placed on the continuum of precision; the absolute and the relative.

Thinking in this way can become a habit. Rather than being a collector of butterflies or books or even words, one can become the author of an immense catalog of concepts divided between those that can only be approximated and those that can be fixed with certainty. Over time this catalog will become well thumbed, oft revised, and may cause no little loss of sleep.

An unfortunate complication may arise: “confirmed belief.” I thought this was entirely the province of others, misguided souls who believed in the redistribution of wealth or homeopathy, or

the vicarious atonement, until, one day I looked at a map and saw that my residence in upper Bucks County was directly north of Quakertown, not east as I has always assumed.

I could not believe it. I would not believe it. I still cannot believe it!

In fact, as irrational as it may sound, I despise the compass on the mirror of my car for refuting what I so strongly feel in my heart to be the case. Now, after years of dealing with this geographic dementia, I have acceded to a pitiful compromise (imprecise but at least more comfortable); I live *northeast* of Quakertown (not true!). I am making progress; my self-diagnosis has been changed to cartographic delusion.

Try explaining the fallacy of the vicarious atonement to a lifelong “born again” evangelical Christian. It is like trying to use a compass at the magnetic North Pole. The truth, simply and plainly stated, seems unable to penetrate the armor of confirmed belief. (But on the other hand, I will not lie and say that I am open to discarding the New Church views of salvation either; confirmed belief? Yes, it would appear so!)

Toward the end of his life, Benjamin Franklin made a remarkable confession. He said that in his old age he just wasn’t quite so sure of things anymore. I wince at the things I did with such self-assurance as an intern and resident: pulling the plug on life-support systems of persons in a vegetative state; making absolute judgments of a life and death nature on patients whose state could only be regarded with some precision but never with accuracy. Most decisions in medicine are in the realm of precision rather than accuracy; although our instruments are quite precise, our diagnoses are not always accurate.

Experience also teaches that there is frequently a cost/benefit ratio to increasing the precision of any endeavor, even answering a simple question. Sometimes the simple response, “OK,” may not only be good enough, it may be the wisest investment under

certain circumstances. Do you want your surgeon to be a perfectionist? The simple answer is “yes and no.” How am I doing with my regeneration? Truthfully? Apparently, and mercifully, one cannot know this with anything but the crudest precision.

Do we always speak the absolute truth with bull’s eye accuracy? Is our wording both precise and accurate? Or are our utterances only relatively true and therefore only somewhat precise? Will a simple “yes” or “no” be sufficient? The approach to accuracy or even a high degree of precision in our ideas and consequent statements sometimes requires courage, prayer, practice, and self-examination. We should strive to make our statements as precise as possible (carefully choosing our words) and as accurate as we can (accurately representing reality). This is part of the Refiner’s fire. This is a process by which we gradually come to understand what the Lord intended when He gave us the timeless commandment, “Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.”

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*\*The Bryn Athyn College Lifelong Learning Program includes e-learning, distance learning, correspondence courses, and lecture series. Participants may enroll on a part-time basis for full credit or as auditors. For more information contact:*

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