Het waarheidsbegrip
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SUMMARY.

THE CONCEPT OF TRUTH.

A theological research.

The concept of truth has been made more and more subjective and relative in the Western train of thinking, so that we can speak of a crisis of the idea of truth. On the other hand there are numerous efforts nowadays to understand the meaning of truth in a new way. Theology is interested in these things too. It has always upheld, that God’s salvation of man is truth at the same time. Moreover theology ought to occupy itself with the idea of truth, because it cannot take this fundamental idea as a datum from other sciences, no more than e.g. the ideas „love“, „justice“, „life“, etc. If it did so, it would be uncritical and lose its autonomy. For this reason theology is compelled to account for its idea of truth independently.

In the Netherlands it was J. H. Cunning, who, already in a previous generation, had an open eye for the great importance of understanding the idea of truth from presuppositions of theology itself. Of today’s theologians E. Brunner has devoted a separate study to the christian understanding of truth. His book Wahrheit als Begegnung (1938) has become well known in many countries.

The first chapter of this study offers a historical orientation. It will also give the necessary relief to the then following, more specific theological considerations. We trace here, what in various phases of our Western tradition the idea of truth has been considered to be. For that purpose we have chosen as much as possible some representative thinkers and referred to their most characteristic views in this matter. We have not attempted to be complete here. This historical view shows that the idea of truth is not a formal concept, but is connected with the content of truth, which man lives by.

The christian theologian finds the norm of this truth expressed in Holy Scripture. Therefore in the second chapter the biblical foundation of the concept of truth is sought. We do this by finding out the meaning of the words ’emet and alétheia in the Old- and New Testament. In the Israelitic idea emet we meet, in respect of the Greek-Western tradition, a remarkably different approximation of the idea of truth. The Greek-Western tradition starts from the meaning of aletheia as disclosure, as being open to be known. On the other hand emet has the fundamental meaning of firmness, which primarily is not concerned with the cognitive relation, but with „being
together". Emet had its proper place and function in the community of persons, expressed in the Israelite manner of thinking: in the relation of the covenant (berith). The Old Testament does not contain the abstract truth as objective accordance between „thinking” and „being”. Emet includes much more than only the intellectual relation. It indicates the communal relation in the midst of life. It means the totality of conduct in which people can rely upon each other and in which they act according to what may be expected of them. Emet is more than only truth and veracity, so far as these express inclination, namely also the power to convert this inclination into deeds. Truth without pragmatic effect is no real truth. In religious language emet expresses the firmness of the covenant between Yahweh and his people. This firmness consists in the faith and actualisation, with which the covenant is kept from both sides.

Of matters too it can be said that they are emet. This matter-truth is then understood by the Israelite from the truth of covenant. Behind the matter-reality stands the God of the covenant. Therefore emet is always concerned with the responsibility of the entire person. That is why it can also qualify „knowing” and „speaking”. The emet of the spoken word is the emet of the speaker in his speaking. With this agrees that emet in the Old Testament forms a complete pair with chesed and sedaqah and is often translated in the Septuagint by the words piste and dikaiosune. With the covenant-sense of emet its character of will and action is connected. Time after time „to do the truth” is spoken of. From this expression it is clear, that emet is no timeless quality; it is a historical happening. As maintenance of the community emet has the constant property of realising itself in time. In the religious sphere emet is the victorious, sovereign power of history and so object of supplication and hope, confidence and gladness.

In analysing the word aletheia in the New Testament it appears, that its meaning goes back to two different roots, namely to that of the Greek aletheia as being open to be known and to that of the Hebrew emet as maintenance of the community. These two different meanings do not remain separate from each other in the New Testament aletheia, but form a new unity here. This happens in this sense, that the cognitive being open of the Greek aletheia becomes a subordinate but real moment in the whole dominated by the emet as personal community-relation. Indeed there has taken place a change in the relation between the Old Testament emet and the New Testament aletheia, something new has been added to it. Yet this new element forms a continuity with the old. We have come to an other conclusion here than e.g. Martin Buber, according to whom there yawns a wide insuperable gap between the Old Testament and old Christian conception of religious truth.

The new thing in the meaning of aletheia is the emet as mutual maintenance of which is broken by man’s unfaithful Jesus Christ and is re-established also in the New Testament Jesus Christ is the covenant between God and man as confirmation and existence. The community between man and man is revealed in the actuality of truth, which God maintains in historical manifestation of God’s emet. Emet of the spoken word is now been realized in a much clearer action in Jesus Christ, in his life, death and resurrection. The quality of aletheia as being open to individual persons has been extended in New Testament truth than in Old Testament emet. As maintenance of the covenant between Yahweh and his people. This firmness consists in the faith and actualisation, with which the covenant is kept from both sides.

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The exegesis of the scriptural words emet and aletheia indicates that they express the firmness of the covenant between Yahweh and his people. This firmness consists in the faith and actualisation, with which the covenant is kept from both sides. The new thing in the meaning of aletheia is the emet as mutual maintenance of which is broken by man’s unfaithful Jesus Christ and is re-established also in the New Testament. Jesus Christ is the covenant between God and man as confirmation and existence. The community between man and man is revealed in the actuality of truth, which God maintains in historical manifestation of God’s emet. Emet of the spoken word is now been realized in a much clearer action in Jesus Christ, in his life, death and resurrection. The quality of aletheia as being open to individual persons has been extended in New Testament truth than in Old Testament emet. As maintenance of the covenant between Yahweh and his people. This firmness consists in the faith and actualisation, with which the covenant is kept from both sides.

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The new thing in the meaning of aletheia in the New Testament is, that the emet as mutual maintenance of the covenant between God and man, which is broken by man's unfaithfulness and falsehood, is kept by God in Jesus Christ and is re-established also from the side of man in Him. According to the New Testament Jesus Christ is the truth. He is the „Amen”, in whom the covenant between God and man and between man and God finds its confirmation and existence. The community of truth between man and God and between man and man is revealed in Jesus Christ as resting in the community of truth, which God maintains with man. It is connected with the historical manifestation of God's emet in Jesus Christ, that the New Testament aletheia has a greater margin of objectivity and clearness than the Old Testament emet. God's emet, shown formerly in the escape from Egypt, has now been realized in a much clearer way and has become present in his action in Jesus Christ, in his life, death and resurrection. Equally the Greek quality of aletheia as being open to intellectual knowing has become greater in New Testament truth than in Old Testament emet.

The exegesis of the scriptural words emet and aletheia indicates and founds the idea of truth, it does not yet unfold it. In the third chapter therefore follows a more detailed reflection upon the concept of truth from the viewpoint of systematic theology. We point out the correspondence between the concept of revelation and the concept of truth. Here we are confirmed in the conviction, that the Greek-Thomistic idea of truth does not fully match the christian understanding of revelation. The Greek-Thomistic structure of truth involuntarily changes the biblical revelation-relation of a personal I-You-relation in an impersonal I-it-relation.

E. Brunner has indicated with his characterization of the truth as „meeting”, i.e. as personal community, an important element of the christian idea of truth. The essential trait, however, that the biblical truth is the maintenance of this community, is lacking. We ascribe this to the fact that Brunner omitted the exegetical analysis of the words emet and aletheia. Our second objection to Brunner's book Wahrheit als Begegnung is, that he does not give the historical reality of the truth of Christ that constitutive place, which we think that is due to it. Jesus Christ is not only the way to the truth, He is also its essence. He is the „meeting” of God and man personally. Our third objection to Brunner's explanation is that he does not do sufficient justice to the character of the truth of christian doctrine. According to our view the cognitive element of truth as a matter of knowledge and doctrine is a subordinate, but also a real element in the entire structure of the christian truth as a matter of community.

Premising, that the truth is not absorbed in any understanding or definition
of it, we venture to formulate the essence of truth in this way: truth is God’s self-maintenance in his communication of self and His communication of self in his self-maintenance in Jesus Christ.

After accounting for the essence of truth we distinguish, in accordance with the munus triplex of Christ, three essential modi of truth. The first is the priestly mode of truth. It is truth as communication of self, as love and solidarity, as mutual understanding, in which I become substance in relation to the other and the other in relation to me. The second is the royal mode of truth. Here the stress is laid on the maintaining character of truth in its communication of self, on truth as Christ’s basileia. Truth is what has effect and gives stability to man. Here honour is due to those moments in which pragmatism is right. As the priestly character gives truth the quality of confidence and inner freedom, so its royal character gives the quality of authority and obedience to truth. The third mode of truth we call the prophetic. Acting as priest and king – not apart from it – Christ is the truth too as the witness, the teacher and the Word of God, who discloses the secrecy of the kingdom of God. This cognitive, prophetic side of the truth fulfils an indispensable, medial function in the entirety of truth. Only by way of knowledge, that separates and connects, is spiritual community between persons possible. Otherwise this would get the character of physical, magic confluence and compulsion. Only by the intermediacy of knowing, persons can make decisions with regard to each other in freedom and can converse with each other in the relation of real authority. Truth as personal community-relation implies the cognitive truth as objective accordance with reality. Truth is not only defined existentially and subjectively. This one-sidedness of Kierkegaard and many others to-day cannot be maintained.

Finally among the many truths, which surround us and cause internal dissensions, we try to take seriously the unity of truth, which we believe to be in Jesus Christ. Here we answer the objections Karl Jaspers raises against this catholicity of truth. We think it necessary to-day, that theology should point to the prospect of the reintegration of our divergent truths in that one total truth, of which the heart of the christian religion gives evidence. On the basis of some examples we give an impression of the manner in which in our opinion this reintegration is possible and necessary.