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A Synopsis and Extension of Thayne and Gantt's *Who is Truth? Reframing Our Questions for a Richer Faith*

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Thayne and Gantt's recent book, Who is Truth?: Reframing Our Questions for a Richer Faith, presents an ancient but revolutionary conception of truth. They compare the ancient Greek conception of Idea-truth with the ancient Hebrew conception of Person-truth. They explore the implications of Person-truth for our faith. They use Person-truth to reframe questions. This article presents a synopsis of the book and extends its implications around the issue of suffering and psychotherapy.

Jeffrey L. Thayne and Edwin E. Gantt (2019) recently published *Who is Truth?: Reframing Our Questions for a Richer Faith*, a deep and penetrating book written in a very accessible style that articulates a most ancient, but revolutionary reconceptualization of truth. Thayne and Gantt present a powerful concept and use it to reframe common questions that Latter-day Saints might have vis-a-vis the nature of God, truth, suffering, and the purpose of life. What follows is a synopsis of the book with an extension of the analysis Thayne and Gantt offer in their book, one that I have pondered at some length and have here taken the liberty to draft.

The foundational concept in *Who is Truth* is that “truth is not a set of abstract ideas, but a living, breathing Person who loves us as His children.” Taking their cue from Christ’s own declaration to be “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), as well as similar scriptural statements, Thayne and Gantt argue that

reframing truth as the person of Jesus Christ (capital “T” Truth, as it were) leads to the hope that “readers will center their faith more on the Savior Jesus Christ and the covenants they have made with God and less on abstract lists of doctrines or beliefs” (p. 16). Indeed, reframing truth as the person of Jesus Christ leads to reframing questions about life. Each chapter concludes with important reframings that seek to enhance faith and invite the reader to a deeper and richer spiritual understanding and relationship with Christ.

In Chapter One, the authors juxtapose “Idea-truth” and “Person-truth”. They show that Idea-truth has its roots in the Greek (and subsequent Western) philosophical tradition, whereas Person-truth has its roots in ancient Hebrew scriptural conceptions. They articulate and justify an understanding in which Christ is the very embodiment, the very reality of truth – a perspective announced throughout holy scripture, both ancient and modern. They contrast

and discuss the two conceptions of truth as follows:

<u>Idea-Truth</u>	<u>Person-Truth</u>
Abstract	Concrete and Particular
Universal	Contextual
Unchangeable	Moral Agent
Passive	Active
Discoverable	Must Be Revealed

In Chapter Two, the authors expand on the ancient roots of each of these conceptions of truth. In the Greek conception, things that are unchangeable trump things that change. In the Greek, abstract ideas trump concrete realities. In the Greek, the gods were bound by fate and the dictates of impersonal abstract law. The authors propose that one major consequence of the Apostasy was the replacement of a dynamic, agentic, relational God with an abstract, unembodied, timeless, formless, and unchanging Being. In the Greek, Aesop's fables represent universal maxims. In contrast, the Hebrew conception proposes that what something does defines what it is. In the Hebrew, Truth is experienced as a lived relationship. In the Hebrew, there is no search for Truth that is distinct from the search for communion with a living, loving God. In the Hebrew, God changes the world. In the Hebrew, right behavior is based on covenantal commitments. In the Hebrew, Jesus' parables are narratives to be lived and re-lived within changing contexts that bring forth new and deeper meanings and possibilities.

In Chapter Three, the authors question whether we should place our faith in Ideas or be faithful to a Person. If truth is a set of abstract ideas best captured in logical propositions, then the essence of religion observance becomes a primarily a matter of adherence to a set of doctrines and the animating question becomes "what do I believe?" If Truth is a person, however, religion becomes a way of living in faithfulness to God with whom one makes covenants and to whom one is to be loyal. Religion is a way of life. The focus shifts from a set of doctrines to our relationship with the Truth made flesh. Person-truth leads prophets to sermonize less about orthodoxy and consensus and more about inviting all to a covenant relationship with God.

Pithily put, the deed is always more important than the creed and the aim of worship is the Living Truth rather than the dead law.

In Chapter Four, the authors illustrate that knowing God and believing Him is distinct from believing in ideas about Him. They emphasize that a testimony is about the experiences we have had with God, His hand in our lives, His goodness, His saving grace and His transforming love. They challenge the idea that faith and knowledge are opposites and propose that the true opposite of faith is disloyalty to a Person. They conclude that we justify our faithfulness through our experience with God. We remember our experiences and it is our history with God that grounds our loyalty to Him.

In Chapter Five, the authors challenge our pandemic itch for absolutes and control. They argue that Person-truth does not give us control and is risky. In the Greek worldview, truth is reliable because it is something that never changes. In the Hebrew worldview, Person-truth is reliable because God is good, trustworthy, and faithful to His children. In this way, safety in life is not grounded in reliable expectations of unchanging abstractions, but rather, safety is grounded in the goodness of God. Goodness is crucial. In the Greek perspective, Idea-truth gives us control regardless of our morality because knowledge is distinct from ethics. In other words, what one knows, the knowledge one possesses is separable in important ways from how one conducts oneself and how one is for and with other people. Person-truth, in contrast, relies on a relationship that depends on our moral conduct and requires that we relinquish control and let God prevail in our lives. While Idea-truth promises the power to exert our will on the world for good or bad (recall the Shoah), Person-truth does nothing of the sort. It is only when we strive to enact God's good will in humility that Person-truth shares His power with us and can truly, fruitfully work through us.

In Chapter Six, the authors explore the nature and meaning of "knowing." Most readers will be familiar with the scientific method for discovering presumably self-existent natural law. By contrast, Thayne and Gantt show that knowing Truth in the very person of Christ comes not by replicable method but through

covenant. We come to know Truth in ways that are sacred, personal, and ideographic. Through covenant, we pledge ourselves to God and must do so to know Him intimately.

In Chapter Seven, the authors powerfully challenge the idea that societies inexorably progress to better states. Idea-truth assumes that society is continually progressing from antiquated ideas to newer, better ideas and that knowledge is cumulative. From this sort of thinking comes the scoff that to reject a newer idea is to be on the wrong side of history. Person-truth treats societal progress very differently, however. In Person-truth our relationship with Truth is our relationship with God and that relationship must be nurtured. Indeed, from this perspective it is easy to see that the Book of Mormon is a thousand-year history of the rise and fall of civilizations directly due to their relationship with God. The Nephite nations' on-again/off-again relationship with Person-truth showed that progress is not a cumulative given and that knowledge and goodness can be lost. Rather than be on the wrong side of history, the question is really whether we are on the wrong or right side of God. We progress when we are aligned with Person-truth.

In Chapter Eight, the Thayne and Gantt explore the meaning and nature of the concept of "authority." Idea-truth establishes authority based on degrees granted by accredited institutions based on knowledge obtained through study grounded by a publicly replicable curriculum that depends heavily on converging rational or scientific consensus. Ironically, even as Idea-truth encourages rejecting appeals to authority as a logical fallacy, at the same time it extols the virtues of scholarly dialogues that actually rely on appeals to authority through minimal peer review, especially in the social sciences where replication is sorely lacking. Few scholars replicate the work of others but accept conclusions based on the authority of the peer-review process. In contrast, Person-truth does not depend on public scrutiny, objectivity, or replicability to establish itself, to ensure its validity. Person-truth can authorize and commission spokespersons in a quiet, sacred way – a way that Idea-truth, as an abstraction, or set of rational principles, can never do. Christ's servants can contradict the consensus of the so-called "experts,"

and are often rejected, denigrated, and punished for going against the grain of popular intellectual or social consensus. But the question remains as to how to determine whether someone is (or has) authority. Thayne and Gantt propose that personal revelation confirms the stewardship of the representatives teaching of Person-truth more than whether their abstract ideas or rational theories are accepted as true or have intellectual standing in a community of experts and professionals. Person-truth allows contextual inspired leadership rather than uniform consistency across all contexts.

In Chapter Nine, the authors take on the true enemy of Person-truth. If Truth is a person, then what of Falsehood? In the perspective of Idea-truth, falsehood is a matter of mind, ideation, and bad reasoning. In Person-truth, however, not only is Truth a Person but Falsehood is as well. Our science does not deal with the personhood of Falsehood. Such things are treated as superstition and bugaboo. The book's authors propose that our great task is not to sort between true and false ideas but to learn to discern the voice of Truth and the disguises of Falsehood, the one who is the enemy of Truth. The question is not what to believe, but in whom to trust, whom to follow. The person of Falsehood is an active destroyer. While Falsehood can ensnare us with falsity, escape comes not by thinking our way out of the snare, but rather by divine rescue.

In Chapter Ten, Thayne and Gantt endeavor to examine the concept of sin. According to the Idea-truth perspective, moral truth is grounded in, or perhaps a product of, a set of universal rules, axioms, or principles. Sin is therefore a violation of these abstract principles and laws, moral prescriptions that not only do not depend on context but which also require sophisticated rational capacities to identify and implement correctly. In contrast, the Person-truth perspective suggests that sin has less to do with complying with universal moral principles, and the ethical codes that seek to articulate them, and more to do with our loyalty to our covenants and relational stance toward God and our fellow beings as informed in particular contexts and situations. Everything becomes personal. It is not because we violate impersonal law that we

have been sinful and feel guilt. Rather, it is because we have violated His laws, betrayed our relationship with the Truth, and broken faith with Him. We have wronged a Person who loves us, and in whose very real and very concrete presence we will feel true sorrow for disloyalty.

In Chapter Eleven, following this reconsideration of the meaning of sin, the authors then offer a reconceptualization of the nature of the Atonement of Jesus Christ. Idea-truth leads us to believe that violations of abstract, self-existent moral laws require a penalty for sin. In that view, Christ vicariously suffered the punishments required by impersonal, universal moral law. Such a conception relies on the assumption that the fundamental reality of the universe is found in the existence of certain abstract, unchanging laws that even God must abide and to which He must ultimately be held to account. In the perspective of Person-truth, however, the Atonement of Jesus Christ becomes an effort to reconcile us to God after we have been disloyal to Him. Christ's task is to repair our relationship with God rather than to appease the demands of some unembodied, impersonal and abstract concept of justice. Christ condescends to suffer with us as we mourn and turn again to God. Most notably, the Atonement is seen as an on-going, personal process rather than a single event of the past that occurred in Gethsemane or on Golgotha that infinitely appeased the demands of justice. It is, rather, a patient continual invitation to become at-one with God in the immediate and unfolding context of our lives.

In Chapter Twelve, Thayne and Gantt return again to the world of science and reason. They explain that Person-truth and science are not in fact in conflict. The resolution to the putative conflict between them is to disavow causal statements arising from a form of scientific method rooted (whether explicitly or covertly) in naturalism. Humility is required to move down the hierarchy of explanatory power from claims of causation to hopeful prediction, knowing always that some forms of uncertainty are better than others but never certain. Perhaps scientists could even humbly accept that scientific inquiry can only describe patterns that recur. That is, although we can observe regularities in nature, nothing requires that we believe our descriptions to be descriptions of universal or immutable laws of nature. While God may be a God of

order, nothing demands that His order cannot change. The Person-truth conception then asks us to trust His order, not because He is unchanging or bound by transcendent abstract law, but because whatever order he decrees in context is born of love and His desire for our growth and development.

At the conclusion of their book, Gantt and Thayne provide two very informative appendices; one that more fully examines Greek and Hebrew thought, and one that responds to frequently asked questions, such as: *Isn't God subject to natural Law? What of Justice and Mercy in the Book of Mormon? Doesn't the Book of Mormon describe God as unchangeable? Don't the scriptures describe God's commandments as irrevocable? Don't Modern prophets talk about moral law using Greek ideas? Does the Person-view of truth lead to moral relativism?* Their answers to these and similar questions are both cogent and enlightening.

Reading this book, and considering the analyses in each of its chapters, left me pondering the nature of punishment and suffering. What follows is my attempt to extend the work of Thayne and Gantt by examining the nature of punishment and suffering from the Person-truth view they articulate. I do not know if my extension is accurate and consistent with their conception, but the guiding principle is that whatever God does in our lives, it is personal, motivated by love for us, and individually sculpted to enhance our development. Trusting in the Lord as Truth changes how we interpret our life's experiences. Following Thayne and Gantt's argument, I began to see how scriptural statements of so-called punishment were ideographic, intensely personal, and that God openly accepted personal accountability for his response to our perfidy in our relationship with Him as well as personally supporting us in our trials.

It seems that in the Greek view of Idea-truth, punishment is the result of violating disembodied self-existent laws. Suffering occasioned by sin is, in this view, often characterized as analogous to the law of gravity and sin is said to be akin to jumping out of an airplane without a parachute. There is nothing personal about the suffering occasioned by sinful behavior. Actions simply have consequences, and, thus, under this conception, people simply suffer the impersonal consequences of their choices. But suffering is not necessarily the consequence of sin, although many of

our clients often wonder what in the world that they did wrong to endure the suffering imposed on them. They ask "Haven't I kept the commandments? Why is this happening to me?". This is a variation on the question asked of Jesus "And as Jesus passed by, he saw a man which was blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, saying, Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind? Jesus answered, Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him." (John 9:1-3 King James Version)

Jesus disavowed that suffering was the inescapable, impersonal result of sin. Our clients may have been faithful, and yet their suffering may not be the consequence of sin. Predation, illness, disability, and accidents are not the effects of sin, but they seem to be the conditions of a fallen world in which entropy reigns and Falsehood is allowed to roam the earth. In the case of the man born blind, Jesus then metaphorically showed that he was the Creator of the earth who was sent from God to heal the fallen world. He used his own bodily fluid (spittle) and mixed it with the dust of the earth (clay) and sent the man to the place called Siloam (lit., "sent forth") to be healed.

In a similar way, he dealt with the woman taken in adultery in such a way as to testify that he was the pre-mortal Jehovah now sent to save the fallen. As he waited for her accusers to disperse, he wrote on the ground with his finger. This event happened on the temple grounds and the floor was made of hewn stone. As Jehovah had used his finger to write on the stone tablets that Moses had hewn, again, he wrote with his finger on the stone floor of the temple. I wonder whether what he wrote on the floor of the temple was simply the decalogue. Anyone watching would have recognized the characters. It was a powerful testimony that he is God. Jesus said that he did not condemn her but pled with her to go and sin no more. In her case, he showed that he was the Savior who was sent to make us "at-one" with God as we go and sin no more. He was not helpless in the face of natural law and the consequences of her sin. He actively intervened to restore her relationship with God. And, unfortunately, the man who was certainly caught in the very act of adultery with her was hypocritically not brought before Jesus by the indignant accusers and apparently did not

receive the same merciful reunion with God (John 8: 3-11 King James Version).

As I read the scriptures, I see the concept of Person-truth much more powerfully invoked than the concept of Idea-truth and disembodied natural law. When we read of the Lord executing vengeance, we tend to think of it as metaphor, but in the Person-view of truth, it seems to be more literal. I think that we tend to believe that we have become so sophisticated in our modern world that we no longer believe in such an enchanted view of the universe as the ancients did, a cosmos in which some god renders punishment for sin. If the Lord uses a civil war to scourge the nation for its sins, we tend to ascribe the war to other socio-political forces. But the Lord does not seem to be talking in metaphor. It seems, at least to me, to be quite personal. He renders the punishment himself. He is accountable for rendering judgment and punishment and atonement. Both the punishment and the atonement are personal. And, most importantly, I see God taking personal responsibility for punishment and suffering.

Even Christ described his suffering as a personal experience with his Father rather than a moment in time in which all the impersonal disembodied consequences of our sins were heaped upon him. Rather, as we read in the 76th Section of the Doctrine and Covenants: "When he shall deliver up the kingdom, and present it unto the Father, spotless, saying: I have overcome and have trodden the wine-press alone, even the wine-press of the fierceness of the wrath of Almighty God" (107). And the angels understand this personal process as well. "And again, another angel shall sound his trumpet, which is the seventh angel, saying: It is finished; it is finished! The Lamb of God hath overcome and trodden the wine-press alone, even the wine-press of the fierceness of the wrath of Almighty God" (D&C 88:106).

And Christ avers that our suffering for sin is personally imposed by him.

Therefore I command you to repent—repent, lest I smite you by the rod of my mouth, and by my wrath, and by my anger, and your sufferings be sore—how sore you know not, how exquisite you know not, yea, how hard to bear you know not. For behold, I, God, have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent; but if they would not

repent they must suffer even as I; which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit—and would that I might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink—Nevertheless, glory be to the Father, and I partook and finished my preparations unto the children of men. Wherefore, I command you again to repent, lest I humble you with my almighty power; and that you confess your sins, lest you suffer these punishments of which I have spoken, of which in the smallest, yea, even in the least degree you have tasted at the time I withdrew my Spirit. (D&C 19:15-20)

Nowhere in that statement do we see that the consequences for sin are like jumping out of an airplane without a parachute or the inexorable consequences of the operations of eternally disinterested natural law. To the contrary, Christ is the actor who takes personal responsibility for smiting us and humbling us and saving us.

It can be conceived that there are three basic sources of suffering: consequences of sin (smiting), consequences of the Fall (entropy), or sculpted trials. But, upon reflection, Christ's mercy is the solution to each of these sources of suffering. He atones for sin. He controls the wind and the waves, heals the sick, and even conquers death, the ultimate expression of entropy in a fallen world. And, when our pleas for deliverance from the effects of this fallen world are not met with our desired outcome, he sustains us in our sculpted trials as we let God prevail in our lives.

Elder Richard G. Scott (1995) provided a reframing that dovetails nicely with Thayne and Gantt's chapters. After identifying the need for repentance and trust in Christ's mercy to resolve suffering, he said:

Now may I share some suggestions with you who face the second source of adversity, the testing that a wise Heavenly Father determines is needed even when you are living a worthy, righteous life and are obedient to His commandments.

Just when all seems to be going right, challenges often come in multiple doses applied simultaneously. When those trials are not consequences of your disobedience, they are evidence that the Lord feels you are prepared to grow more (see Proverbs 3:11-12). He therefore gives you experiences that stimulate growth, understanding, and compassion which polish you for your

everlasting benefit. To get you from where you are to where He wants you to be requires a lot of stretching, and that generally entails discomfort and pain.

When you face adversity, you can be led to ask many questions. Some serve a useful purpose; others do not. To ask, Why does this have to happen to me? Why do I have to suffer this, now? What have I done to cause this? will lead you into blind alleys. It really does no good to ask questions that reflect opposition to the will of God. Rather ask, What am I to do? What am I to learn from this experience? What am I to change? Whom am I to help? How can I remember my many blessings in times of trial? Willing sacrifice of deeply held personal desires in favor of the will of God is very hard to do. Yet, when you pray with real conviction, "Please let me know Thy will" and "May Thy will be done," you are in the strongest position to receive the maximum help from your loving Father.

This life is an experience in profound trust—trust in Jesus Christ, trust in His teachings, trust in our capacity as led by the Holy Spirit to obey those teachings for happiness now and for a purposeful, supremely happy eternal existence. To trust means to obey willingly without knowing the end from the beginning (see Proverbs 3: 5-7). To produce fruit, your trust in the Lord must be more powerful and enduring than your confidence in your own personal feelings and experience. (Ensign, November 1995)

Elder Scott's reframing here only makes sense – indeed, it is only really possible – under the rubric of a Person-truth perspective. Each of the sources of suffering are understood and we are sustained in a personal process with He who is Truth.

I teach a course focused on spiritual interventions in psychotherapy in our doctoral program in counseling psychology. As I have pondered and developed this course, I have needed to make it effective for all constituents, believers and non-believers of all traditions. In the end, however, I do share my strong opinion that all development and healing come by power of the Atonement of Jesus Christ, whether we know it or not. The task for believing therapists is to become sensitized to the presence of God in the therapy process. It is not necessary to proselytize or testify, at least in the usual sense of those terms, but rather to be sensitive to the divine presence. As an example, I was working with a family after an ugly trauma, a sister-in-law

made a profoundly supportive statement. I immediately felt the presence of Deity in the room. Without using culturally laden language, I asked the family whether they felt it. As the youngest child nodded in affirmation, I asked, "Do you know what that feeling is?" She did not. I told the family that what they were feeling was truth and love. They all acknowledged the feeling and the content. It was a profoundly tender and healing moment in the session. Those feelings that accompany the presence of love and truth are not the effect of disinterested impersonal natural law. It is far more powerful to conceive of those healing moments as being in the presence of a real, living, loving person who is Truth.

How does one become sensitized to the presence of Person-truth in the therapy room? In the course that I teach we explore five components: *Know Thyself*, *Know Thy God*, *Know Thy Client*, *Know Thy Craft*, and *Think About it Already*. In each domain we write and reflect on and share our reflections. We write our history with God. We try to articulate our conception of God. Some students have very direct contact with the Infinite. Some take great strength through the scriptures. Some are softened by music, and some by trials in which they felt divine support. While hearing our colleagues' histories and conceptions of God, it becomes clear that our clients also have their own histories and conceptions of God. The varieties of our colleagues' religious and spiritual experiences become immediately evident and teach us of the sensitivity needed to understand and accept our clients' experiences.

Although I believe that Christ is the source of all development and healing, I do not have to impose that belief. The five components in the course work as well for believers as they do for atheists. Suspended belief or non-belief is an expression of one's history with the idea of God. That is accepted in students as much as it should be in clients. Given those foundations, we then explore how to respond with open eyes and hearts to the varieties of spiritual experiences or non-experiences. And, finally, the process is never finished. We must think about it for the rest of our careers. In light of Thayne and Gantt's articulation of the Person-truth view, it becomes clearer that there is no technique for spiritual interventions in psychotherapy. Rather, what is required is a particular

mindset. It has seemed to me that Thayne and Gantt's ancient, but revolutionary, conception of truth as a person, is a powerful mindset. Those of us who prefer to think in terms of evidence-based practice, something which harks back to Idea-truth, are also apt to think in terms of effective technique. My own doctoral training emphasized that we were "behavioral scientists" more than psychologists. I have questioned my own conception of truth. Historically, I have wrestled with the tension between modern and post-modern views of truth. In the book *Turning Freud Upside Down* (2005), I tried to dovetail discovered, self-existent truth (modern) and constructed truth (post-modern). I thought that by invoking Georg Cantor's diagonality theorem and model of transfinity, I could make both conceptions work harmoniously in a way that allowed for God to have infinite knowledge at the same time that he had a frontier. I still like the idea of nested ecologies of law. But in neither case, was I considering that truth was a person. Thayne and Gantt's Person-truth is an ancient but revolutionary concept which is neither modern nor post-modern.

What does the world look like if truth is a person? How does the universe function if truth is a person? Thayne and Gantt's book opens up an entirely new way to consider such questions. I can hardly wrap my head around it, but it feels warm, immediate and deeply personal when I do. I see it replete in the scriptures and everything has become personal between me and Truth.

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