

Living the truth, not just believing it

Well-aligned spokes make a bicycle wheel true. Truthful living gives a person credibility.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [May 10, 2017](#) issue



Theologian Karl Barth once suggested that the most pressing question people ask when hearing a sermon is: “Is it true?” Is God really present in our lives and our world in a way that these preached words suggest might be true?

Some years ago I decided there is an antecedent question of equal importance: “Is the preacher true?” For me, this question doesn’t circle around whether the preacher avoids telling lies or making false claims, but whether the preacher’s own life is truth-shaped. Does that life have an inner and outer coherence to it? Like a bicycle wheel that is wonderfully true, spinning straight, has the preacher done

enough truthful living to lend credibility to the words offered from the pulpit?

I thought about this matter of being true after picking up Sara and Jack Gorman's book *Denying to the Grave: Why We Ignore the Facts that Will Save Us*. This father and daughter, a psychiatrist and a public-health specialist, probe why reasonably smart people cling to scientific claims that are demonstrably false. Covering subjects as far-reaching as the antivaccination movement and the purchase of guns for the illusion of safety, the Gormans study why people ignore or deny factually important information. As they dissect why it is that we coddle irrational beliefs, accept only the information that fits our worldview, and dismiss data that doesn't suit our disposition, the authors reveal a side of us that's motivated more by fright and emotion than intelligent reasoning.

If you wonder why conspiracy theories spread like wildfire, for example, don't simply blame the Internet. Fomenters of conspiracies have a knack for giving easily understood explanations to preposterous ideas. They see themselves as beleaguered people, victims of secret and malevolent forces working against them. Inflammatory rhetoric with high emotional content marks their often dangerous agendas. Conspiracy leaders seek to unify us against others, sometimes emboldening themselves by disparaging groups of people. Perhaps you know of some prominent people who behave in this way.

What's evident from the epidemic of misinformation, disdain for thoughtful reasoning, and blurring of lines between fact and fiction is that complex social and psychological factors are involved. One has to be a certain kind of person in order to set aside reason in favor of absurd conspiracies. Critical thinking gets jettisoned when we are uncomfortable with ambiguity. We end up in our own echo chambers.

Living truthful lives involves more than telling the truth. While there are plenty of biblical commands that speak relationally about truth—"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Exod. 20:16); "You shall not lie to one another" (Lev. 19:11, Col. 3:9)—we're also prone to lie to ourselves. There remains a lingering capacity in all of us to live lives that are less than true. The writer of 1 John hints at a self-deception that keeps us not merely from saying but also from doing what is true. He doesn't compare our lives to a bicycle wheel with broken spokes. But one gets the sense that to live lives of truth, our interior and exterior selves must acquire a shape that is deeply in sync with the Lord.

A version of this article appears in the May 10 print edition under the title “Truth-shaped living.”