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## Time for Truth | Os Guinness

March 24, 2018



### The Veritas Forum

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### Transcript

"Here in the Western world, certainly here in the Republic of the United States, there is a profound and deeply consequential crisis of truth. And I'm challenging every one of you tonight to make up your minds where you stand in this. Will you be a truther or a post-truther?" In 2016, Oxford Dictionaries named "post-truth' the international word of the year, leading the Washington Post to declare that "truth is dead.

But, as author and social critic Os Guinness argues, "without truth, there is no freedom. Guinness sees the fallout of the post-truth' era as the consequence of seeking freedom with no strings attached. At a Veritas Forum from UC Berkeley last week, Guinness offers a vision of truth that leads to real freedom.

Thank you, Isabela. Thank you all. It's a tremendous pleasure to be back here.

I first came to Berkeley in 1968 when I was in my mid-20s. I met Mario Savio, who led the free speech movement a few years earlier, listened to Grace Slick and the Jefferson Airplane across the bay, and had a most extraordinary time here in Berkeley. Since then, I've been here many times, so it's a delight to be back here once again.

I'd like to begin, though, with a story that happened at Stanford. Sorry. When I was speaking there one time, a student asked me a question I'd never been asked before.

If you could be a member of any generation except the one you were born in, which would you choose? As Isabela said, I was born in China, and I know many of the great

Chinese dynasties. I love the Athens of Pericles and the Rome of Trajan and Hadrian. And as someone coming from Ireland and England, our 18th century was quite extraordinary, and your own here in America was quite remarkable.

All sorts of fancy answers flashed through my mind in the nanosecond you have before you have to answer. But what I actually said was, I'd like to be a member of your generation. Because those of you tonight who are under 40, you are what are called the crunch generation.

In the sense that in our global era, many of the grand issues of the world are converging globally to create a crunch of challenges and problems which will need to be answered in your adulthood. Answer them well, and humanity will go forward calmly. Answer them badly or not at all because of neglect and drift, and humanity is facing profound challenges.

We are the most extraordinary moment. The American Republic is suffering its gravest crisis since the Civil War. The Western world is visibly in decline.

The search for a new world order is faltering. And the agenda of humanity at the moment is overloaded with giant questions, and these will have to be answered in your lifetime. And one of the issues that underlies a lot of these things is the question of truth.

So I want to pour out my heart to you in the crunch generation to really grapple with this question of truth. First, because you are individual human beings. Secondly, here you are at the university where truth is fundamental.

But thirdly, many of you are citizens of this country or other countries where truth is absolutely crucial to human flourishing in the future. And this is an issue you must not duck and think through for yourselves. The issue came alive for me back in 1989 before many of you were thinking much about the world.

It was called the year of the century when the Soviet Union fell. And many of the older people here tonight will remember their favorite images of that year, the joyous dismantling of the Berlin Wall. Flowers thrust into the barrels of tank guns.

But for me, the memory above all was of the tremendous rallies of the Velvet Revolution in Prague. For a full week, night after night, nearly a third of a million packed the square to listen to the speeches of a short boyish mustachioed figure later to be well known as Vatslav Haveler and President. But he was the dissident leader of that time.

And each speech built up a contrast between the Velvet Revolution and the Soviet tyranny. Much of the contrast was over violence. But much of it was over truth.

The Soviets, he said, were people of lies and propaganda and coercion. And the Velvet Revolution would stand for truth and freedom. And their motto was this, truth prevails for

those who live in truth.

And night after night, the Czech crowd, quick-witted, as always, picked up the cry, "We are not like them." And the great contrast with people of lies, propaganda, and coercion, and people of truth. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, was a one-man-disident movement without the numbers of the Velvet Revolution. But his great cry and his Nobel speech, one word of truth outweighs the entire world.

Now, back in 1989, people all over the world applauded and celebrated their courage and their stand on truth. But as many people pointed out, here in the Western world, we did not have a similar view of truth on which anyone could make a stand like that against the Soviet Union. Now, you can see in the last two years, this has become a discussion across the board.

The Oxford Dictionary in 2016 chose post-truth as their word of the year. And the economist put it on the front cover in the fall of 2016, and the word has gone round virally, post-truth era. Now, of course, it doesn't go back to the Oxford Dictionary or to the economist.

It goes back far further. But you can see that picking up that word has brought the crisis home to many people. Here in the Western world, certainly here in the Republic of the United States, there is a profound and deeply consequential crisis of truth.

And I'm challenging every one of you tonight to make up your minds where you stand in this. Will you be, after having lived an examined life and thought it through, will you be a truther, as it said, or a post-truther? Now let me set out in the short time we have. A whole number of areas, all could be thought through in far greater depth.

And I'm glad there are meetings and lectures and discussions and lunch bars going on all this week. And I hope that you will continue this discussion, this conversation, and enter into them. So I don't in any way pretend to give all the answers or even raise all the questions tonight.

And first, think of the assaults and the sources of the assaults on truth. You can see it, I think, in three main areas. The history of ideas, the social sciences, and in technology.

If we look at the history of ideas, the main architect of so much we're thinking about today is Friedrich Nietzsche. And you can see his great writings above all in the 1880s are an open assault on truth from two angles. On the one hand, he puts forward what he calls "perspectivism." We often call it relativism now, "perspectivism." As he put it, there are many eyes in the plural, so there are many truths in the plural.

And everything depends on where you're coming from. Your race, your class, your gender, your culture, your background, your generation, and so on. "perspectivism." But his deeper assault on truth is his notion that truth is actually a fiction.

What we call truth and what we call knowledge is really the will to power. Truth is dead. Knowledge is power.

And of course, that's what's been picked up by many people like Michel Foucault and comes right down into so much of the campus discussion today, and all the various ways of showing power and privilege in all sorts of angles. The second source of this was the social sciences, and particularly the discipline called the sociology of knowledge. In the history of ideas, as you know, you move from the thinker to their thoughts, writings, and so on, to the streets.

As someone's put it, how ideas wash down in the rain. So many people have never heard of Nietzsche, certainly never read Nietzsche. Actually, they're almost stating what Nietzsche said as his influence has spread.

That's the history of ideas. Sociology of knowledge works the opposite way. From people's life settings, the world in which they live every day, and how those worlds affect and influence their thinking even when there's no thinker involved.

Now, my own mentor, Peter Berger, was one of those who had the most comprehensive and responsible views of the sociology of knowledge. But he always said, "When you've examined what passes for knowledge, what people think is true because of the world in which they live, you then have to take what is apparent to them and pass it to philosophy to ask whether what they think is true actually is or isn't true. In other words, there's the truth outside the world of sociology of knowledge.

But since he wrote much of this, you've got a far more radical view to our end today, which is social constructionism. Everything with no exception is socially constructed and only socially constructed. And there is no truth outside of that, which is a far more radical position.

And you can see it in the sexual revolution and many, many other areas. The third assault on truth comes from technology. When I was a boy, you still had the old idea the camera never lies.

And photographic evidence was final evidence. Now, of course, we know photo shopping changed all that. But you think of how far we've gone beyond that even in the last couple of weeks.

Many of you may have heard the speech that John Kennedy gave in Dallas the day he died. Have you listened to it? Of course, he never gave it. He was dead.

But they took his script and they went back to all his previous speeches, taking the words and reassembling them, giving the correct Boston intonation and all that. So you have a slightly machine like but a remarkable facsimile of John Kennedy's speaking. False.

And of course, you could take a porn video and put anyone, your former girlfriend or boyfriend or a politician, into it easily. It would look very true. You could make anyone say anything with the modern forms of technology.

Put them all together and there's no question. We're in a world of lies, hype, spin and of course, fake news. Now the second thing I'd underscore is that while much of this is truly radical and it goes down to incredibly consequential results in all sorts of areas including democracy, we need to take the long term perspective.

And I'd say two things about those who feel overwhelmed by the skepticism today. First, skepticism breaks out again and again and again in human thinking but it never, ever lasts. You're going to be the sophists.

You're going to be the people like David Hume, the Scottish skeptic, many periods and individuals who are deeply skeptical but it's a simple fact that humans can't live with complete skepticism for long and periods of skepticism always create a return to something that's different. And you can very easily think of all sorts of projects we have as human beings which assume and require truth. Many of you heard tonight of scientists.

You couldn't have any science. The whole notion of science, little-owned things that are practical, I peer review without a solid sense of truth. And all the radical relativism say in humanities and other areas, you couldn't survive in the scientific departments on those same things.

I used to work for the BBC. Journalism today has been profoundly reflected by post-truth but you can see without truth journalism is only a rumor mill and a very dangerous one in democracy. And you can see as people are beginning to realize as fake news has spread, we need truth more than ever.

But the same, of course, is true in business or in families. We talk today of trust as social capital and all sorts of fancy words like that but if you think of a family or a business or even say public service in a republic, it requires trust which requires truth. I don't mean anything very fancy philosophically.

Every day we state intentions and make pronounce a senior at 11. Let's have breakfast and gather tomorrow. We are making statements about the future.

We're making promises about our intentions and the question is do we keep our word? Do we follow through and what we're saying and do what we say when we do that we become predictable to people. We have a character that can be trusted and trust and social character depend on truth. And you can see when that breaks down what happens in public life.

You can see what happens in marriages. You can see what happens in families. A simple

but very profound fact is that much of human life that is deepest assumes and requires truth.

So while there are profound crises today, we can be sure that there will be reactions against this and those who understand truth and stand for truth will never be out of business. But let me move on thirdly to the fact for all of us who are interested in our faith, worldview, philosophy of life, truth matters deeply. I speak as a follower of Jesus.

If there's no truth in the Christian faith, faith will be vulnerable to all the criticisms that is purely bad faith. And you know many of the examples of such critiques today. Marxism, the religion, is an opium.

Freud, that it's all a matter of projection or a wish fulfillment. The notion of bad faith came from Jean-Paul Satra, the French atheist. The only answer to all these criticisms is that one believes in one's faith for one final reason.

One is deeply convinced after looking at it and examining it, it is in fact true. In other words, if it's true, it would be true if nobody in the world believed it. And if it is not true and it's false, it would still be false if everybody believed it.

In other words, it's not a matter of the sociology of knowledge and the shared social conviction that we believe these things because enough people around us form a great consensus and so we believe them too. No. Is it true? Or is it fiction and falseness and so on? And the only answer to all the criticisms of bad faith is that the faith is in fact true.

Now of course those of us who follow Jesus and know God himself, for us it's not just a matter of philosophy. You've got fine philosophers here tonight. Some of my deepest friends are, but that's not why we hold to the truth.

Rather, Jesus himself said he was the truth and he reveals a God who is the true one, whose words are true, whose actions are true and to hold faith in him is actually to respect who he is in himself. And I would say very gently, Veritas does not come from the Roman goddess. It comes from that Latin word for the truth of which Jesus described himself.

Without truth, the Christian faith is nonsense. But only with truth do we take God seriously as who he is. But that's it.

I want to go into a very practical area, fourthly. We need to face up to the consequences of the crisis of truth. And I want to put it in a negative form and a positive form.

Without truth, negatively, there is only power and domineering and manipulation. That of course is the lesson of solzhenitsyn, Vastlav Havel and the Soviet KGB and so on. But think of it for a moment in family relations or personal relations because this isn't true only on the grand political scale, but in the day-to-day relationships we all have.

Pablo Picasso was a genius of an artist but a monster of a man. His own good friend Alberto Giacometti called him the monster. One of his mistresses said he would rape us and then paint.

He had a devouring ego and everyone who came into his orbit was almost eaten up like in a black hole. He himself said that when he died he would go down like the Titanic and many of people around him with him. And when he died, several of those close to him committed suicide.

They were who they were within the orbit of this extraordinary genius with his devouring ego. But if you read the story of Picasso, there was only one of his wives and mistresses who survived him well. It was a mistress who was 40 years younger than him.

But Francois Gillo and her own story said the way she survived Picasso, she became every day, she said, like Joan of Arc wearing the armor of truth. With truth she could not be manipulated. Any more than solids and nitsin could be manipulated by the KGB.

But if everything is only power and there's no truth, we are open to manipulation. Let me say this carefully. Male sexual aggression and harassment is vile.

But if you notice the certain hypocrisy in some of those reacting to it, because in a post-truth world the powerful will always behave as the powerful. Power not only oppresses the weak, that's the obvious problem. Power corrupts the powerful.

And you have more of the domineering and more of the manipulation. And you can see how those who are stronger, richer, older, more senior, in the film industry, were using their positions of power. And yet the people who are now complaining are those who also advanced that same position and they're not realizing the logic of what they were choosing to do so.

One of the mysteries of history. Why didn't more people speak out against the ruthlessness of power down the centuries? And why is it also that so often the poor and the weak acquiesce to the powerful? The simple fact is that power, along with fame and wealth, becomes a spectacle that's almost an idol. And the only way to stand against power is with truth.

And without truth there is only power. Does America realize that today? This country espouse the post-truth world in the intellectual arena. And they're inviting in a world that's only shaped by power.

And that will spell the end of American freedom. That's the negative side. The positive side, not quite so easy to see, is that without truth there is no freedom.

Think of freedom. As Abraham Lincoln said in his own day, everyone uses the word freedom but they all mean different things. And among many of the confusions about

freedom you have in America today, one of them is the failure to understand the two basic sides of freedom.

I was at Oxford and often had dinner with the great Jewish philosopher Isaiah Berlin. Emi Gray from the Soviet Union, famous for his understanding of freedom, and as he put it, freedom has two sides, negative freedom and positive freedom. Negative freedom is freedom from.

Anyone who's under the grip of anything outside themselves is not free. They need to be free from, whether it's colonial power, male aggression, alcohol, drugs, or whatever. Negative freedom is essential and primary.

We all need to be free from anything that is co-estively controlling us. But that's only half a story. The other half of freedom is positive freedom.

Freedom for, freedom to be. Now the trouble comes immediately. To know what you're free for, to know what you should be free to be, you've got to know the truth of who you are.

And freedom assumes and requires truth. Take the very simple illustration of G.K. Chesterton. You're an animal rights liberator.

You want to go to your local zoo and liberate every animal that should be free. You go in in the first two cages, you see a tiger with a great concrete hump strapped to its back so it's painfully lumbering around under this weight. And in the next cage you see a magnificent camel equal in lumbering with great black and orange rubberized stripes so it can barely move its limbs.

You want to free them. Well obviously you free them both from their cages. They are wild animals.

But you free the tiger from the hump, not the camel. And you free the camel from the stripes, not the camel, not the tiger. In other words, to recognize what is the freedom, you have to know the truth of what it is.

And the question for us is, are we just animals? Are we machines? Or are we for example, as Jews and Christians believe made in the image of God? Freedom assumes and requires truth. And again again I heard Isaiah Berlin turn to Americans and most American freedom is libertarian. Liberals want to get the government author back sexually.

Conservatives want to get the government author backs. Financially, that's libertarian freedom, only negative freedom, freedom from. But what's the freedom for? What's the freedom to be? Where's the positive freedom? For that you need truth.



Truth. So without truth, only power and domineering. And without truth, no lasting genuine freedom.

Get that seriously. This country, I'd say this is European, I've read this often in Europe, this country prides itself on being the land of the free. But there's no country in the Western world where there are more people in recovery groups suffering from various addictions.

America is not as free as she thinks on the campuses and in much of ordinary life because the crisis of freedom has bitten deep. One last point. Freedom gives us all a moral challenge.

You would think you're all thinking people in this magnificent university at Cal Berkeley. You would think intellectuals think those are people who admire truth, not necessarily. You can see that many of the great philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, put a high premium on truth.

But if you look at the lives of many intellectuals, they live a very different way. And if you actually look how intellectuals deal with truth practically, you can see that there's a profound moral challenge that each of us, I include myself, have to face. Either we try and conform truth to our desires of reality, or we conform our desires to truth and reality.

Now it's easy to say. Take some examples or one at least, one of our most famous Oxford graduates in the 20th century was all this actually. If you've read his stories about himself and his memoirs, he said when he left Oxford, he espoused a worldview of meaninglessness.

And to quote him more literally, he says, "For me, meaninglessness was an instrument of liberation." He doesn't say I discovered the world was meaningless. He said I decided the world should be meaningless because as he said, if it was meaningless, there was no meaning outside me. I could create my own meaning.

And he's quite open. This is the 1930s. I could live how I like sexually.

And he describes what he did in the Gossington Circle and so on. He's quite open about it. He shapes truth to his desires and lived that way.

Some of you remember President Clinton's impeachment. Explaining what had happened, he said his mother had brought him up with a philosophy of compartmentalism. Now as you want the world to be like this, but there are inconvenient truths, there are embarrassing things here and there.

You put them in a separate compartment and lives of they're not true and the rest of life is fine. And you can see how many people do that and how we're often tempted to do

that. We try and shape reality and try and shape truth to our desires and all that doesn't fit, we compartmentalize.

And there are many people doing that today. The alternative is to have the courage to shape our desires to the truth. There is reality.

There is truth. And we often know well when we've told a little white lie or we've told a huge lie or we've crossed some bounds or whatever we know it, but do we own up to it? I mentioned Michelle Foucault earlier, the great postmodern thinker about power. Sadly died in of AIDS after being in the San Francisco bathhouses.

Michelle Foucault did not like the Christian faith or the Bible at all. But he often said there was one thing about the Christian faith he admired which was voluntary confession. Why? When anyone confessed voluntarily they were doing something he described as a very rare moral act, they were going on the record against themselves.

Whereas normally we're putting our best foot forward, we're showing the dark side, keeping it hidden from everybody. They can only see the sunny side of our lives. But you can see that second way of doing it, conforming our desires to the truth and to reality.

And if the Clinton approach is described as compartmentalism, the second approach is described as confession, facing up to the facts of the situation and who we are and what we've done before God. So I challenge you to think of some of these things. The postmodern discussion is absolutely fascinating.

Someone's put it in the famous story of the three baseball empires. I'm not American so I can't describe it with a good accent. But you probably heard the story.

Three empires are discussing the philosophy of umpiring. One says there are balls and there are strikes and I call them the way they are. The other one says oh come off your high horse.

That's not very realistic. The way I see them is this. There are balls and the strikes and I call them the way I see them.

The third one says actually you're not much better than the first guy. The reality of this situation is this. There are balls and there are strikes and they ain't nothing till I call them.

Now clearly the first one is someone who has that strong view of truth. The second the relatively moderate view of relativism and the third one the social construction is view that everything created by the way we say it and make it stick. But if you follow the discussion through and if you look at the consequences for the world from our families up to our public lives in this country you can see that America will stand and fall and so will many of your families and your lives on this question of truth.

Do you want to be as individuals people of integrity? Do you want to be students who have a strong view of truth? Do you want to be citizens of this country or whatever country you come from and really have the basis for powerful views of human flourishing and freedom? You can't do it without a solid view of truth. But when you look at this whole discussion from beginning to end from Nietzsche right down to the contemporary voices in our time you see the incredible difference far from old-fashioned, far from the end of the tale, far from retrograde and reactionary of the simple teaching of the Jewish and Christian scriptures and above all of Jesus and Nazareth. He tells his followers "I am the way, the truth and the life" and who promises them that if they follow his teaching they will know the truth and the truth would set them free.

What you see in the challenge of the Christian position truth is not just a matter of knowing the truth. This is far more a matter of living in truth and even beyond that truth is a matter of becoming people of truth and that's what our world needs desperately. So I ask you again especially all of you are under 40 the members of the Christ generation.

There are many profound issues today, human dignity, freedom, equality, justice, you're going down the line. But one of those that's absolutely crucial that I hope you will think about this week and settle by the end of this week is truth. Truth.

Vital for humanness, vital for freedom and there's nowhere like you see it in Jesus. Those words of Jesus are actually the motto of more universities than any other motto around the world. But the tragedy today is the words adorn the buildings but for many people they no longer animate the minds and we need people who are people of truth living in truth and who are able to make a difference in our world.

Thank you very much. For more information about the Veritas Forum including additional recordings and a calendar of upcoming events please visit our website at [veritas.org](http://veritas.org).

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