

# On Truthfulness and the Nature of Truth in an Ecclesiological Perspective: In Conversation with David Gushee's *Introducing Christian Ethics*

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## Abstract

This article comprises a sustained critical engagement with David Gushee's *Introducing Christian Ethics: Core Convictions for Christians Today*. In particular, attention is paid to Gushee's treatment of truth and truthfulness as core elements of Christian living. This is brought into connection with Baptist ecclesiology, arguing for a vision of the church as a community of truth.

## Keywords

Protestant theology; Baptist theology; Christian ethics; truth theory; Christology; David Gushee

## Opening Remarks on the Church and the Truth

Reflection on the nature of the church of Christ calls for reflection on the nature of truth. The underlying reason for this is that, as per the words of Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, 'the church is the only community formed around the truth, which is Jesus Christ, who is the way, the truth, and the life'.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, reflecting on the church of Christ implies reflecting on the truth insofar as Christ the Truth dwells at the core of his church.

Such a claim is not meant to underpin any kind of 'ecclesiological Monophysitism',<sup>2</sup> that is, the heretical confusion of the

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), p. 44.

<sup>2</sup> I consciously appropriate this expression from Yves Congar, but without necessarily employing it in accordance with his thought; see Gabriel Flynn, 'The Role of Affectivity in the Theology of Yves Congar', *New Blackfriars*, 83 (2002), 347–64 (p. 352); I would like to point out though,

truth with the community formed around it, where the divine nature of the truth would subsume and virtually cancel the human nature of the church. In other words, just as in the Christological variant of this heresy, the church's humanity would end up being absorbed into God as a 'drop of wine in the ocean of his deity'.<sup>3</sup> This would cause the church to be incorrectly represented as the Truth itself and as being truthful through and through. Such a distorted ecclesiology would imply nothing less than the confusion of the Creator with the creature, robbing God of God's glory and transferring it to the community of believers. Furthermore, an ecclesiology that portrays the church as the Truth would end up distorting the very message of the gospel, turning it from a message of repentance and submission to God to a message of repentance and submission to the church.

Against such a potential misreading of my opening claim, it is important to underline that, in biblical terms, while Christ is connected to the church as a head is to its body, in his divinity he is nonetheless substantially different from the latter. While there are many members in the body and all are useful in their own way (1 Cor 12:21), no other member can play the role of the head, who is Christ himself (Col 1:18) and under whose authority all things in heaven and earth will be eventually united (Eph 1:10). Therefore, while the church's relationship to Christ the Truth is as intimate and exclusive as it can get, the former's humanity is totally other from the latter's divinity (Christ's humanity operating as a bridge between God and his body); because of this, the church is under the constant necessity of maturing to the full measure of the stature of Christ (Eph 3:18).

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that it would be more precise to speak of 'ecclesiological eutychianism', in that among all varieties of monophysitism it was Eutyches who most thoroughly proclaimed the absorption of Jesus's human nature in his divinity. Accordingly, Eutychianism deserved the label of 'real monophysitism', over against the more common varieties of 'verbal monophysitism' that taught a Christology which, as a matter of fact, was compatible with Chalcedonian orthodoxy, except for their refusal to accept that it made sense to speak of one person as having more than one nature. I keep the label 'ecclesiological monophysitism' only in the light of its usage by Congar, and because of the most widespread parlance of the term 'monophysitism' over against that of 'eutychianism'.

<sup>3</sup> Roger Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform* (Westmont, IL: IVP Press, 2009), p. 226.

Since the church always needs to mature in its Christ-likeness, it follows that its formation around the Truth is always both realised and a work in progress; there is always more Truth to be known, and, because the church's formation into and around the Truth is never fully actualised, there is always the chance of lapsing into falsity — of thoughts, words, and deeds. Such a predicament calls for a common commitment on the part of all members of the church to make the continual effort to grow into the Truth and avoid lapsing back into falsity. It must be stressed that the commonality of such a task is essential to its nature. In this regard, as Vittorio Subilia puts it, the community that confesses Christ as Lord is necessarily bound to be a synodal community, where it should be recalled that the ancient Greek underlying the noun synod is *συν-οδος* or together-way. Accordingly, Subilia claims that the church is a synodal community insofar as it is a community of brothers and sisters who, under God's sole authority, walk together on the same way 'striving to apply the evangelical word in the different situations where they are called to put their faith into practice'.<sup>4</sup>

One way of describing this character of synodality is precisely as the church being formed around and always growing into Christ the Truth. For this process to succeed, no member of the body of Christ can dispense with the others, and all members of the body need to grow up into Christ the Head and the Truth. What follows is an attempt to clarify the nature of this synodal 'growing up into', in conversation with the work of one of our foremost contemporary Christian ethicists.

## David Gushee on Truth and Truthfulness

In his recent book *Introducing Christian Ethics: Core Convictions for Christians Today*,<sup>5</sup> David Gushee devotes an entire chapter to the nature of truth and the virtue of truthfulness, while also addressing the preoccupation that the church can fail to live up to the Truth it is formed around. That

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<sup>4</sup> Vittorio Subilia, *Solus Christus: Il messaggio cristiano nella prospettiva protestante* ['Solus Christus': the Christian Message in a Protestant Perspective] (Torino: Claudiana, 2019), p. 112.

<sup>5</sup> David P. Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics: Core Convictions for Christians Today* (Canton, MI: Front Edge, 2022).

the issue is a burning one for Gushee is clear right from the start: according to him, we live in times so dire that it is appropriate to say that ‘truth, truthfulness, and truth-telling need a comeback’. In his own words, ‘systemic lying from elected government leaders, torrents of disinformation and misinformation on social media, ideologically fractured accounts of reality, the loss of a social norm of truth-telling, the abandonment of the virtue of truthfulness; this is where we find ourselves in many nations today [...] truth itself needs a comeback’.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, Gushee points to a chronic deficiency in treatments of truth and truthfulness by Christian ethicists: ‘[...] when Glen Stassen and I published the first edition of *Kingdom Ethics* in 2003, we began with a study of over 50 existing Christian ethics textbooks. Only six contained any discussion of the nature of truth, the virtue of truthfulness, or the extent of the moral obligation to tell the truth.’<sup>7</sup> Hence, through his discussion of truth in *Introducing Christian Ethics* Gushee is laying two tasks ahead of him: that of contributing to correct a long-term lack of scholarly attention to the subject, as well as that of helping to start truth’s much needed comeback. The very placement of truthfulness within *Introducing Christian Ethics* as the first element among five core values that are indispensable in order to articulate a Christian virtue ethics, clearly shows the weight that Gushee gives to the matter.<sup>8</sup>

The first item of discussion that Gushee deals with is an exposition of the nature of truth according to mainstream philosophical theories. This is followed by an engagement with biblical theology that forms a bridge between the previous theoretical approach to truth and an exploration of the virtue of truthfulness and of its integral place within Christian living.<sup>9</sup> In the light of his worries concerning the crisis in truth-telling in contemporary public life, Gushee chooses to focus precisely on this discussion of truthfulness as truth-telling as an essential component of a Christian character. While this choice is in itself unobjectionable and legitimate, Gushee’s spin on the subject of truth and truthfulness leaves open some interesting avenues for development. In particular, I wish to try to expand the scope of Gushee’s reflections

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<sup>6</sup> Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, pp. 94–95.

<sup>7</sup> Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, p. 94.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, p. 93.

<sup>9</sup> Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, pp. 95–96.

on the nature of truth and its relationship to the body of believers by connecting them to what I have been previously discussing. By doing so, I aim to align with Gushee's own intentions: once again, it is truth itself that 'needs a comeback'<sup>10</sup> and not *just* truth-telling. I understand this to mean that for us to see this comeback happen, it is important that we get a better grasp of what the truth is in itself and why it matters so much to us as Christians. As has been argued above, this means nothing short of getting a better grasp of who Christ is, and how the church, as a synodal community, ought to walk together in his way.

Because of its subject matter and its dealing with philosophical theory, this article is bound to contain an unavoidable element of abstractness. Accordingly, in order to keep my argument as close as possible to actual church practice, in a later section I will intertwine it with some materials taken from a contemporary attempt to spell out the fundamentals of the Baptist understanding of the Christian faith: the Confession of Faith of the Italian Baptist Union (UCEBI<sup>11</sup>). This is the family of churches I belong to, and my argumentation is an attempt to ground my exercise in speculative theology in my own personal life of faith.

### **Lengthening Shorter Threads: On the Nature of Truth**

As it has been already stated, right after discussing the role of truthfulness as a foundational and yet semi-forgotten Christian virtue, Gushee engages in a brief discussion of the nature of truth. Specifically, he does so by referring to a number of philosophical approaches to this subject.<sup>12</sup> I shall not rehearse here the whole of Gushee's examination of philosophical theories of truth; rather, I shall make reference to two options which he mentions, and which I shall employ in order to begin my argument.

The first two philosophical theories of truth introduced by Gushee are the so-called 'correspondence theory of truth', and what is

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<sup>10</sup> Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, p. 95.

<sup>11</sup> Unione Cristiana Evangelica Battista d'Italia, <<https://www.ucebi.it>> [accessed 14 October 2022].

<sup>12</sup> Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, pp. 95–96.

in fact a whole set of theories that may be collectively labelled ‘pragmatic theories of truth’.<sup>13</sup> The latter term covers an entire philosophical paradigm, according to which ‘truth is that which is verified when tested and/or put into practice’.<sup>14</sup> Under such a persuasion, ‘Truth is not once and for all established, but instead provisionally verified or disconfirmed by constant examination, trial and error, and self-correction’; the provisional condition of the truth achieved at any moment in time makes it ‘the hard-won achievement of a community of rigorous inquiry’.<sup>15</sup> Because of their character, pragmatic theories of truth are ‘especially relevant in the sciences’.<sup>16</sup> Pragmatic theories of truth are described by Gushee as an alternative to what he claims to be ‘the commonsense understanding that truth is *correspondence with reality*’, or, ‘more formally, [that] truth is the property of being in accord with reality or fact’.<sup>17</sup> This common-sense understanding of truth is at the root of and has been given philosophical form by what has become known as the ‘correspondence theory of truth’. According to this philosophical approach, ‘if I say x, x is only true if x corresponds with the fact of reality to which x refers’.<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, on the one hand, a naive pragmatist theory of the truth claims that truth is a constructed property. As such, the truth does not exist independently of the same process of testing and verifying that brings it together. Moreover, according to such an epistemological paradigm, truth is not anchored in reality in such a way as to make it something stable and independent of our own inquiry into the nature of what exists. On the other hand, a naive correspondence theory of the truth claims that truth is a stable and independent property that can be permanently and absolutely uncovered as we connect with and properly describe reality.

Insofar as he is focusing on the virtue of truthfulness and truth-telling, Gushee does not attempt to solve the tension between these two theories, limiting himself to note that ‘for most everyday purposes, the

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<sup>13</sup> Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, p. 95.

<sup>14</sup> Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, p. 95.

<sup>15</sup> Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, p. 95.

<sup>16</sup> Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, p. 95.

<sup>17</sup> Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, p. 95.

<sup>18</sup> Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, p. 95.

correspondence theory of truth offers what we need [...] when people's statements routinely do not correspond with the facts to which their words refer, they become liars, embracing a vice that violates the truthfulness upon which community depends'.<sup>19</sup> Hence, Gushee's implicit suggestion seems to be that pragmatic and correspondence theories of truth do not need to be in contrast with one another, but rather that the latter is sufficient in order to discuss everyday 'truth-matters'. At the same time, different approaches to the nature of truth such as the pragmatic one may be implemented as more complicated issues arise.

Following this suggestion, I want to posit here that it is possible to develop a view of truth that contains aspects drawn from both the pragmatic and the correspondentist approaches. As we shall see, under the arrangement that I shall propose, the pragmatic and the common-sense/correspondentist approach come to be seen as two aspects of the same dynamic. This is relevant insofar as I hold that there are other ways in which the church can end up as a community of liars than just by speaking things that do not describe reality correctly. Interestingly, Gushee himself seems to adumbrate such a possibility, when he notices that in the New Testament truth is sometimes treated in its '*mystical, participatory, and eschatological* dimension [that is, as] an aspect of God's character revealed at this eschatological moment that wills to enter and transform receptive human beings'.<sup>20</sup> It seems justifiable to deduce that it is possible to lie and to be a liar as the result of one's own un-receptiveness to God's transformative truthfulness. However, in order to see how this can be, there is a need to augment the tools that Gushee is offering us and to point them beyond his specific object of interest in *Introducing Christian Ethics*.

First, I shall attempt to solve the tension previously discussed between the two naive understandings of pragmatic and correspondence theories of truth. I shall focus in particular on dismantling the naive perception of correspondence theory, since, as Gushee has noted, correspondentism is close, if not identical to, our common-sense approach to the truth. In this respect, I want to suggest that the incompatibility that we seem to intuitively perceive between the correspondentist and the

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<sup>19</sup> Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, p. 96.

<sup>20</sup> Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, p. 97.

pragmatic epistemological paradigms often depend on the fact that we implicitly load the notion of correspondence with a number of corollaries which are nonetheless unessential to its nature. Here are some examples of such corollaries: facts are always transparent to description; correspondence to reality is an all-or-nothing affair; any truthful description of a certain state of things necessarily exhausts everything that needs/can be said about those same things.

By grafting these corollaries onto our notion of correspondence, we end up attributing to our descriptions of reality an absolutistic outlook, inasmuch as they permanently oscillate between being totally untruthful or totally truthful. Such an absolutistic correspondentism cannot but sit uncomfortably with a pragmatic approach to truth, with its signature emphasis on provisionality, intersubjectivity, and the increase/decrease of the degree of truthfulness of our understanding of reality. This follows insofar as correct descriptions of reality that totally exhaust what they describe have no need to be tested or confirmed: they are simply correct. Moreover, if facts are transparent to descriptions, there is no need to proceed by trial and error. In other words, this means that quite often our common-sense understandings of correspondence theory do not explicitly account for the fact that reality is opaque, and that there is always more being in things that can be expressed through our descriptions. Because of this, our attempts to correspond with reality can have success only in degrees.

However, none of these corollaries is essential in order to uphold a correspondence theory of truth that takes into account and does justice to the opaqueness of reality. Such a theory would make room for and demands the kind of constant inquiry envisioned by pragmatic theories of truth. At the same time, there is no need for the inquiring community postulated by the pragmatic theories of truth to drop the notion that truthfulness involves corresponding to reality. Indeed, how could we test our hard-won truths if these could not express correctly (if partially) the actual fabric of reality? Furthermore, if truth is simply a useful construct that can be redefined at will and based on our need, what prevents it from degenerating into a concept arbitrarily filled with content defined by whoever at the time has the power to do so? (Gushee speaks of ‘toying with cynicism about truth’s meaning’.) Hence, by



avoiding the opposite extremes of naive correspondence theory and naive pragmatism, it becomes possible to understand qualified correspondence theory and qualified pragmatism as two aspects of the same process. More precisely, the practice of this ‘middle way’ could be understood to describe a process of growing participation into and expression of the truth, where the degree to which this happens is a function of the truthfulness of our correspondence to reality, and where, at the same time, this correspondence is progressively achieved through a persevering, intersubjective and communal praxis of inquiring into the truth.

One way of condensing this dynamic into one expression, could be that of talking of a correspondence *with* the truth. In other words, rather than evoking the idea of a correspondence of the truth-seeker *to* reality, as if somebody had to somehow go out of themselves in order to grasp and adhere to the bare object of their knowledge, we could turn instead to the image of a *co-respondence*. In other words, we could think of an ongoing dialogue or exchange of the truth-seeker with reality, where the former strives to become more real by getting to know more and by becoming more alike to the latter. In this perspective, thinking of truth and truthfulness in terms of a correspondence *with* reality implies understanding the truth-seeker and its correspondents as partners in a living relationship of exchange. As such, this relationship evolves as its life progresses, and can get more or less accurate as the relationship of correspondence grows more or less intimate. Just as in a verbal correspondence, further degrees of understanding the truth can be understood as the result of an exchange between two active poles engaged in a conversation, rather than as the fruit of an active intellect busy grasping an inert objective reality.<sup>21</sup>

### **Developing Shorter Threads: The Covenant of Truth**

As I discussed in the introduction, the church is the only community formed around Christ, and as such is the only community formed around the Truth. Accordingly, it is called to be involved in a

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<sup>21</sup> For a similar point, discussed in connection with the thought of Thomas Aquinas, see Karl Rahner, *Uditori della Parola [Hearers of the Word]* (Roma: Borla, 1977), p. 30.

relationship of ever greater correspondence with Christ. At the same time, the church's nature as a synodal community implies that this work of corresponding with Christ the Truth cannot be accomplished individually: while it is undeniable that there are some aspects of this process that belong to the level of personal existence (for example, personal reflection, personal prayer, and other practices), the job of corresponding with the Truth belongs to the whole community formed around it.

It is possible to shed further light on this point by expanding on yet another element of Gushee's treatment of truthfulness in *Introducing Christian Ethics*. This has to do with his engagement with the broader characterisation of the church as the covenant people of God.<sup>22</sup> Commenting on Ephesians 4:25–32, Gushee writes that 'Ephesians 4 bans lies and commands truthfulness because "we are all members of one another." [...] A different way to say it is that part of the covenant that binds members of the church with Christ and one another is a shared commitment to nurture truthful character and to tell the truth to one another.'<sup>23</sup> Therefore, under the present terms we could say that Christians have the duty of corresponding with the truth, insofar as falsity and lies in particular 'tear down rather than build up [the body of Christ]' and breach the 'covenantal web' that binds Christians together.<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, this is one way of substantiating Gushee's claim that 'truth [...] is a matter of life and death'.<sup>25</sup>

In the light of our previous discussion concerning the nature of the truth, it goes without saying that this covenant of truth is neither automatically enacted nor always respected. If truth is the hard-won achievement of a community that seeks to correspond with it in an ever-increasing measure of intensity and precision, this also implies the

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<sup>22</sup> Arguably, this is the church's most fundamental trait; see, for example, James I. Packer, 'The Nature of the Church', in *Basic Christian Doctrines*, ed. by Carl Henry (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1975), p. 216.

<sup>23</sup> Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, p. 99.

<sup>24</sup> Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, p. 99; notice that Gushee employs the notion of covenantal web to describe our duty of telling the truth well beyond the borders of the church: we are implicated in a covenantal web of truth each time that we are having a 'conversation between free people who live in dignity'.

<sup>25</sup> Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, p. 103.

possibility of backsliding, of failure, and of experiencing a lack of energy towards sustaining such an effort. When this happens, the church fails to be itself, Christians fail to live up to their calling, and collectively they fail to show that truthfulness is ‘an aspect both of God’s character and of the expected character of God’s people’.<sup>26</sup> In other words, when Christians do not correspond with the Truth, they become liars: they may not necessarily be telling verbal lies (of course, that is quite likely), but rather they become living lies, pretences of gospel-living people. In turn, Christians succeed in being themselves when they actively and successfully correspond with the Truth as they properly ‘value truth, seek truth, and love truth as a core aspect of being followers of Jesus Christ who is the truth’.<sup>27</sup> As they do so, they strengthen the covenantal web that holds vertically between God and themselves, and horizontally between the believers of all ages, places, and socio-cultural conditions.

I will now seek to be more specific and discuss a number of articles from the confession of faith of a particular group of churches, specifically the confession produced by the Italian Baptist Union in 1990. As it will become evident in the next few pages, these articles represent the result of an historically situated instance of thinking about the church’s ongoing effort of corresponding with the Truth. By letting this confession of faith interact with the concepts being presently employed I hope to make the latter less abstract, thereby showing with greater clarity their grounding in the actual experience of living faith. The angle I take is that of interrogating this confession of faith by asking two questions. 1) What means are to be employed in order to further the work of corresponding with the Truth? 2) Within the church of God, who is to do the work of corresponding with the Truth? Of course, given this article’s limited scope, I will only be able to discuss what might be the answer to these questions in a very partial way. Accordingly, I shall take a particular focus on the central role of the Bible in our effort of corresponding with the Truth, as well as on the Christians’ collective mandate of engaging with Holy Scripture.

Concerning the first question, it is clear that Baptists and Christians in general do share a number of collective and individual

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<sup>26</sup> Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, p. 103.

<sup>27</sup> Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, p. 103.

practices, tools, and rituals that form part of their process of corresponding with the Truth. Examples that easily come to mind are the two ordinances of Baptism and the Holy Supper, communal worship, evangelisation, and so forth. However, primarily among churches steeped in the Protestant tradition, the importance of communal and personal Bible study stands out among the means of corresponding with the Truth. Such a focus placed on biblical meditation springs from the theological principle of *Sola Scriptura*. Article 3 of the Confession of Faith of the Unione Cristiana Evangelica Battista d'Italia (UCEBI) spells out *Sola Scriptura* in the following way:

*Sola Scriptura*: The Bible is the only authentic and normative witness of the work of God in and through Jesus Christ. Inasmuch as the Holy Spirit makes it the Word of God, the Bible must be studied, honoured, and obeyed.<sup>28</sup>

In the present terms, insofar as the Bible is ‘the only authentic and normative witness of the work of God in and through Jesus Christ’, Holy Scripture is not only one of the means of nurturing the Church’s covenant with God by corresponding with the Truth, but it also stands out as the compass by which Christians can judge the faithfulness of their efforts as they are actualised through other means of correspondence. Hence, in order to grow in their correspondence with Christ the Truth, Christians need to be constantly at work to discern, test and practise the Bible; furthermore, they need to apply Holy Scripture to other means of correspondence with the Truth, asking themselves whether or not these means need to be reformed or even dropped.<sup>29</sup>

The second question is that of who is to do the work of corresponding with the Truth and, specifically, who is to engage with Holy Scripture. While the answer to the first part should be obvious at this point — every Christian is called to correspond with the Truth —

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<sup>28</sup> UCEBI, Art. 3, <<https://www.ucebi.it/chi-siamo/confessione-di-fede.html>> [accessed 14 October 2022].

<sup>29</sup> As a matter of fact, this was already implied by the separatist doctrine of ‘further light’ that influenced Baptists from their very beginnings; N. G. Wright, ‘“Koinonia” and Baptist Ecclesiology: Self-Critical Reflections from Historical and Systematic Perspectives’, *Baptist Quarterly*, 35 (1994), 363–75 (p. 366).

the answer to the second is not necessarily so. This is because Christian traditions with different spiritualities and different ecclesiologies may lay different emphasis on who is to engage actively with Holy Scripture. Churches like those in the Baptist tradition have historically framed their answers to these questions in the light of their congregationalist ecclesiology and their emphasis on discipleship and the universal priesthood of believers. Accordingly, I now quote in full Articles 8, 11, and 12 of the UCEBI's Confession of Faith, all of which concern in some way the nature of the church. Article 8, concerning what the Church is:

The Church: Wherever believers are gathered together by the Word of the Gospel in order to listen always anew to this Word [see article 3], to share the Lord's Supper, to cultivate the bond of love, to make disciples through teaching and baptism, there is the Church of Christ, because He is among them.<sup>30</sup>

Article 11, concerning the universal priesthood of believers:

The task appointed [to the disciples] by the Lord to share with their contemporaries the Gospel, turns them into authoritative messengers of the Word of the Lord, under the sole authority of Christ and by the efficacious work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, Article 12, concerning the ministries of the church:

The Ministries of the Church: In order to equip the Church with the necessary gifts required to be the living body of Christ, the Holy Spirit calls different believers to a variety of ministries. We acknowledge that today these ministries include those necessary to the proclamation of the Gospel, to the impartment of Biblical and theological teachings, to the governance of the Church, to the administration of diaconal service both within and outside the Church. We are open to acknowledge any other gift the Spirit will raise within the church. The different ministries do not stand in a relationship of hierarchical subordination to one another; rather, they exist in an organic bond. All of them, each in its own way, concur to the life of the Church.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> 'Confessione di fede, Art. 8', UCEBI, <<https://www.ucebi.it/chi-siamo/confessione-di-fede.html>> [accessed 14 October 2022].

<sup>31</sup> 'Confessione di fede, Art 11', UCEBI, <<https://www.ucebi.it/chi-siamo/confessione-di-fede.html>> [accessed 14 October 2022].

<sup>32</sup> 'Confessione di fede, Art. 12', UCEBI, <<https://www.ucebi.it/chi-siamo/confessione-di-fede.html>> [accessed 14 October 2022].

From Article 8 we come to understand how discipling through teaching is essential to the nature of the church. This assertion is made with reference to *all* members of the church and, in this sense, Article 8 promotes what has been called an expansionist ecclesiology, as opposed to one that limits teaching and evangelism to ordained ministry.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, just as all believers are called to listen to the Word, they are also called to correspond with the Truth that is this Word, to teach it and to disciple others (and themselves) by doing so. This also means that *all* members of the church are called to nurture truthfulness in obedience to the covenant God has made with them; this is accomplished primarily but not exclusively via scriptural meditation. Article 11 complements this picture by claiming that by Jesus's ordaining intention and by the Holy Spirit's power, believers receive the means to teach the gospel authoritatively. Hence, through the same process by which Christians correspond with the Truth, they become empowered to help others to correspond with the Truth themselves. Finally, Article 12 offers a needed *caveat* to Article 11 by identifying theological and biblical training as just one of the many ministries existing within the Church.

This last detail prevents us from falling into confusing the call to all believers to correspond with the Truth and to teach others do so with a call to all believers to become theologians and academics. As it is expressed by Article 11 of the UCEBI Confession of Faith and is plainly taught by Scriptural *loci* such as 1 Peter 2:9, all Christians are priestly and therefore ministering people, each one of them being equipped and capable of fostering the upbuilding of the body.<sup>34</sup> In this respect, any member of the church, and in particular the vast majority who are not involved in some kind of officially recognised ministry, is responsible to be part of the church's living dynamic of corresponding with the Truth. In other words, each Christian is responsible for nurturing that 'spiritually empowered and deeply felt commitment to Christ' which 'is the foundation of a character that dwells in truth, and a way of life walking in the truth, here at the eschatological moment when the truth Himself has entered human history'.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> See Brian Stanley, 'Planting Self-Governing Churches: British Baptist Ecclesiology in the Missionary Context', *Baptist Quarterly*, 34 (1992), 378–89 (p. 379).

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Packer, 'The Nature of the Church', pp. 219–20.

<sup>35</sup> Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, p. 98.

When the church is actively corresponding with Christ the Truth and, as Gushee puts it in the previous quotation, ‘walks in the Spirit’, the whole life of every disciple speaks of the existential correlation between God and us, thereby standing as a living witness to the gospel.<sup>36</sup> In other words, this means that the life of every single believer establishes an *analogia discipuli*.<sup>37</sup> This expression, borrowed from Raffaele Volpe, means that when the disciples of Christ walk in Christ’s Spirit they become a manifest evidence of their relationship and affinity to the Lord: they walk like Jesus did because they walk (in correspondence with) the Truth. At the same time, the very condition that shows forth the affinity between God and God’s people also manifests the distance between Christ and Christ’s disciples. In this respect, the relationship between Christ and the Truth is a relationship of identity, while that between the disciple and the Truth is one of participation. Subsequently, the dynamic of the *analogia discipuli* respects the infinite difference between Creator and creature, and the disciple never exchanges place and comes to be confused with the Lord.<sup>38</sup> Christians have an affinity to the Truth grounded in their being formed around it in a covenantal relationship, but they themselves are not the Truth. To nurture and show forth this affinity is both the privilege and the duty of every believer.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>Raffaele Volpe, *Lungo la via del Discepolato* [*Along the Way of Discipleship*] (Chieti: GBU Edizioni, 2021). This claim can be seen as a systematic presupposition of James William McClendon’s claim that Christian biographies and their controlling images can be read as sources of theological inspiration; James William McClendon, Jr., ‘Biography as Theology,’ *CrossCurrents*, 4 (1971), 415–31 (p. 418).

<sup>37</sup> Volpe, *Lungo la via del Discepolato*, p. 24.

<sup>38</sup> Volpe, *Lungo la via del Discepolato*, pp. 57–58; when the Church forgets about this distance, it falls into the heresy of ecclesiological monophysitism.

<sup>39</sup> In respect, it should be specified that the universal church is more than just the sum of its parts: rather, as the body of Christ it is the sum of its parts, immersed in the Holy Spirit, who is the Lord and the Giver of Life and who animates and gives organic coherence to the church. Hence, there is a specific quality in the collective and transtemporal life of the church and in its organic and communal effort of corresponding with the Truth that cannot simply be obtained by adding up all the single believers and the local congregations existing through the centuries. Every member of the body has the whole of the body’s DNA in it; because of this, every member of the body has the whole Truth and can communicate the gospel efficiently. However, different members have different purposes; because of this, only the totality of the body can show forth the Truth in the wholeness of its manifestations, meaning that there is a particular way in which the universal church exhibits in its own way the *analogia discipuli*. Paraphrasing together Kavin Rowe and Mark Dever, we could say that there is a specific way in which, by

## Conclusion: Endlessly Spiralling into the Truth

In this final section, I want to draw my argument to a close by proposing a visual image, which I hope will give the reader a better sense of the dynamic of corresponding with the Truth.

This dynamic can be offered up for further meditation, I suggest, by referring to the image of the ‘hermeneutical spiral’. I am taking this concept from Grant Osborne’s manual of biblical interpretation that goes under the same title. There, Osborne argues that ‘biblical interpretation entails a “spiral” from text to context, from its original meaning to its contextualization or significance for the church today’.<sup>40</sup> In this respect, he further characterises a spiral as ‘an open-ended movement from the horizon of the text to the horizon of the reader [...] spiraling nearer and nearer to the text’s intended meaning as [the reader refines their] hypotheses’; this movement is evident in the fact that ‘the spiral is a cone [...] moving ever narrower to the meaning of the text and its significance for today’.<sup>41</sup> Hence, if not in words at least in substance, Osborne’s description of the hermeneutical spiral implies the dynamic of corresponding with the truth. In this context, this dynamic is expressed as the increasing approximation achieved via a sustained hermeneutical effort to the intended meaning of the biblical text *and* to its proper application.

I hold that, in the light of what has been previously discussed, it is possible to repackage the image of the hermeneutical spiral as a proper visual description of the way in which the church as a whole strives to better correspond with the Truth. In other words, I am claiming that the church’s effort to nurture its truthfulness can be depicted as a

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living the life of Truth, the church becomes a revelation of the Lord of All and subsequently ‘the lives of Christians together [become able to] display visibly [as a community] the gospel they proclaim audibly’. Once again, this is not to deny that any single believer or limited group of believers can effectively communicate the gospel and live the life of Truth; rather, my claim is that they cannot do so in the same way and with same completeness of manifestations that is only achievable by the universal church (the full gathering of which shall happen only in glory). See Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2012), p. 60; Kavin Rowe, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 139–41.

<sup>40</sup> Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Westmont, IL: IVP Press, 2006), p. 17.

<sup>41</sup> Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, p. 17.



trajectory endlessly spiralling between the Truth and the community formed around it. An endless process alternating between plunging deeper into the Truth and an application of what is retrieved there, such that this application leads to a strengthening of the *analogia discipuli* displayed by the community of believers. By doing so, by endlessly spiralling into the Truth, the church becomes what it is meant to be, that is, the living ‘proof of the Gospel, the appearance of the Gospel [and] what the Gospel looks like when played out in people’s lives’.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Dever, *The Church*, p. 166.



