

Across the Cosmos February 2026: What is Scientific Truth?

I'm sure Christian clergy, as well as many others on this e-list, are familiar with Pontius Pilate's famous question to Jesus, "What is truth?" (John 18:38), in response to Jesus' claim to bearing witness to the truth. In the spirit of this year's Religion & Science Weekend's theme, *Truth Matters*, I thought it might be useful to briefly explore what we mean when we refer to truth in science.

Science is a journey, a way of investigating how nature works that is rooted neither in absolutes nor relativism. When Matt Damon's character, Mark Watney, used science as a verb in *The Martian*, he emphasized the understanding of science as a process. Scientific theories and conclusions remain open to future revisions based on new information or evidence. Truthfulness in science means being true to this process and reporting one's scientific results without prejudice. Truth and facts are not the same thing, but they are related. Facts are objective and verifiable, although it is not always easy to discern what is factual information in our contemporary world... Truth connects facts and provides context that can modify or deepen interpretation of facts with time.

Of course, truth can be distorted when facts are ignored or altered. Furthermore, what we perceive as true is intimately connected to whom we trust. Truth and trust have more in common than four letters! Several years ago, many of you filled out surveys that Michael distributed for me. One of the questions asked was, "How much confidence do you have that scientists act in the best interests of the public?" Notably, clergy who knew scientists personally were likely to view the motivations of scientists favorably.

Establishing trust requires effective communication. Last October, I presented a sermon at the Lutheran Church of the Resurrection in Marion, IA, using scripture that stressed the power of language.¹ As you explore the theme of *Truth Matters* with your congregations, you might consider how differences in the ways words are often employed in science and religion affect this critical topic, and how CLP clergy might partner with scientific consultants² to advance public understanding of these important discussions.

Until next month,

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¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_vdTBI10gOY

² https://www.theclergyletterproject.org/Resources/sci_expert_data_base.htm