



Language and Culture Archives

When 'true' does not mean 'true'

(Notes on Translation 49: 15)

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WHEN "TRUE" DOES NOT MEAN "TRUE"

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In English and Greek, we sometimes say "true" when we do not mean "true" at all. In John 1:9, for example, John says that Jesus was "the true light." Did John really mean that Jesus was a true light? A genuine light? Not a person compared to a light but a real light? Not a light in some figurative sense but a literal light?

Obviously not. In this case, to call him a "true light" does not mean that he is truly a light but that he shares a meaning component with light, and that he has that meaning component to an even greater degree than the real light does.

In John 6:33 Jesus says he is "the true bread." The word "true" here indicates that he shares a meaning component with bread (sustainer of life), but that he has that component even more than real bread does. Real bread sustains physical life; he sustains spiritual life.

We can see from these examples that "true" does not always mean "true." The two cases cited involve the Greek word alēthinos, and Arndt and Gingrich cite three senses for that word: 1. true, dependable; 2. true, in accordance with truth; 3. genuine, real. They should have listed a fourth sense: true, in a figurative sense, as applied to that which possesses a certain quality to an even greater degree than the genuine article does.

In some translations, "true" in this usage has been translated by a receptor language term meaning "true, genuine, literal, non-figurative"; and the result has been that the very word which was intended to point the reader to a figurative usage has, instead, indicated to him that a literal rather than a figurative meaning was to be understood.

Most cases of this usage of "true" (and "indeed") are found in John's writings, and most involve the Greek word alēthinos, never alēthēs and rarely alēthōs. In one passage ontos is used in this way. This usage does not occur often in the New Testament; all of the cases that I found are included in the following short list:

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|-----------------|--|
| Luke 16:11 | - true riches (The literal meaning of "riches" here is material wealth: the use here is figurative.) |
| John 1:9 | - true light |
| John 1:47 | - an Israelite indeed |
| John 6:32 | - true bread |
| John 6:55 | - meat indeed |
| John 15:1 | - true vine |
| I Jn. 2:8 | - true light |
| I Tim. 5:3,5,16 | - widows indeed |