

# Truth Is More Than Propositional

Navigating a world riddled with attacks on [gender](#), goodness, and morality, I'm always encouraged by people who cling to truth. Still, even as we hold to rightly ordered propositions, we have to recognize exactly what truth encompasses because it has profound impacts on our systems of belief and how we communicate.

## What Is Truth?

Many classic thinkers like Aristotle and Aquinas subscribed to what philosophers call the [correspondence theory of truth](#). This theory says a statement is true when it matches the way things actually are. So if I say, "There are two spiders on my kitchen ceiling, and their names are Louis and Philippe," that statement would be true under this theory if there are actually two spiders on my kitchen ceiling and if they are actually named after dead French kings.

Correspondence theory makes intuitive sense, and most theological conservatives don't have a problem with the correspondence theory. It seems perfectly natural: If your son says, "I didn't take a cookie," and there are still 10 cookies in the cookie jar, his statement is true. The proposition matches the way things *are*.

## Content and Form

This seems straight forward, but in reality, judging truth according to the correspondence theory can be difficult. This is because most statements have both a content and a form. In other words, truth claims usually have two parts: the thing that is being said (content) *and* the way in which it is said

(form).

Imagine two young boys in a middle-school hallway between classes. The first boy, in a sudden desire to aggravate the second, snatches the other boy's pencil pouch, yanks open the zipper, and throws it at the classroom door. The pouch explodes: pencils, pens, highlighters, erasers—they fly everywhere. The second boy clenches his fists. "I appreciate that!" he yells angrily.

In mere propositional terms, the second boy's statement might convey appreciation. If we see the statement in print without knowing *how* it was said, we might believe that the speaker is actually trying to express gratitude: The surface-level, literal meaning of his words would certainly indicate so. It is only with the form, the yelling and the anger, that we know that the statement does not show appreciation. As the form—the method of communication—shifts, the meaning of the statement does, too.

There are plethoric examples of this, from the field of art to work in communication. A love poem in iambic couplets tends toward solemnity while a love poem in limerick form tends toward frivolity. A pointillist painting of a tree communicates one thing, and a modernist depiction of the same tree communicates another.

[Scott Aniol](#), a theology professor and aesthetician, uses the illustration of [Marilyn Monroe's](#) performance of "Happy Birthday" to President Kennedy. Though there was nothing wrong with the song itself, the suggestive way in which Monroe sung it caused a scandal. The content satisfied moral standards of the early '60s; the form did not.

## What Does This Mean?

All this is interesting on an abstract level, but it also has tangible impacts on important aspects of our lives. Perhaps

I've seen the problem most in Protestant circles, the tradition in which I've grown up, but over and over again, churches seem to neglect form in favor of content. They cling to propositions and forsake the form.

But if truth is a reflection of what is actually in the world (the correspondence theory) and if forms greatly alter the expression of truth, ought we not to pay attention to both content *and* form?

It is not truthful to say God is glorious and then pray to Him with an attitude of "Yo, God, whassup?" It is not truthful to say He is worthy of all worship and then insist upon artistically careless songs. It is not truthful to say He is the King of the universe and then fail to change out of sweatpants when we worship him.

In these ways, form means more than content because it can reflect what we truly mean. And the same can be said for any declaration of truth: Whether it's religion, a non-religious strong conviction, artistic expression, or even how we communicate with loved ones, the form matters. "Actions speak louder than words," the expression goes. How we go about something often means more than what we declare about it.

Upholding truth is not merely a matter of creeds, doctrine, or well-ordered propositions. It requires a holistic view of what is honorable: what is said *and* the way we say it, the propositions *and* how they're packaged, content *and* form.

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