

Can Truth Survive in a Postmodern Society?

Jesus answered, "You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice."

Pilate said to Him, "What is truth?"

John 18:37-38

Considering who stood before him and the gravity of the issues he was being asked to decide, Pilate's attitude was astonishingly dismissive. But he did raise a vital question: What is "truth"?

Where, after all, does this concept come from, and why is it so basic to all human thought? Every idea we have, every relationship we cultivate, every belief we hold, every fact we know, every argument we make, every conversation we engage in, and every thought we think presupposes that there is such a thing as "truth." The idea is an essential concept, without which the human mind could not function.

Even if you are one of those trendy thinkers who claims to be skeptical about whether "truth" is really a useful category anymore, in order to express that opinion you must presume that truth is meaningful on some fundamental level. One of the most basic, universal, and undeniable axioms of all human thought is the absolute necessity of truth.

A BIBLICAL DEFINITION

So what is truth?

Here's a simple definition drawn from what the Bible teaches: **Truth is that which is consistent with the mind, will, character, glory, and being of God.** Even more to the point: **truth is the self-expression of God.** That's the biblical meaning of *truth*, and it's the definition we'll employ throughout this book.

The Old Testament refers to the Almighty as the "God of truth" (Deuteronomy 32:4; Psalm 31:5; Isaiah 65:16). When Jesus said of Himself, "I am . . . the truth" (John 14:6), He was thereby making a profound claim about His own deity. He was also making it clear that *all* "truth" must ultimately be defined in terms of God and His eternal glory. After all, Jesus is "the brightness of [God's] glory and the express image of His person" (Hebrews 1:3). He is truth incarnate—the perfect expression of God and therefore the absolute embodiment of all that's true.

Jesus also said that the written Word of God is truth. It doesn't merely contain nuggets of truth; it *is* pure, unchangeable, and inviolable truth which (according to Jesus) "cannot be broken" (John 10:35). Praying to His heavenly Father on behalf of His disciples, He said this: "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth" (John 17:17). Moreover, the Word of God is eternal truth "which lives and abides forever" (1 Peter 1:23).

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Of course there is no discord or difference of opinion between the written Word of God (Scripture) and the incarnate Word of God (Jesus). In the first place, truth by definition cannot contradict itself. In the second place, Scripture is called "the Word of Christ" (Colossians 3:16). It is *His* message; *His* self-expression. In other words, the truth of Christ and the truth of the Bible are the very same truth. Of necessity, then, they are in perfect agreement in every respect. Both are equally true. God has revealed Himself to humanity through Scripture and through His Son. Both perfectly embody the essence of what truth is.

Scripture also says God reveals some basic truth about Himself in nature. The heavens declare His glory (Psalm 19:1). His other invisible attributes (such as His wisdom, power, and beauty) are on constant display in what He has created (Romans 1:20). Some knowledge of Him is inborn in the human heart (Romans 1:19), and a sense of the moral loftiness of His law is implicit in every human conscience (Romans 2:15). Those things are universally self-evident truths. According to Romans 1:20, denial of the spiritual truths we know innately always involves a deliberate and culpable unbelief. And for those who wonder whether basic truths about God and His moral standards really are stamped on the human heart, ample proof can be found in the long history of human law and religion.

Still, the only infallible interpreter of that which we see in nature or know innately in our own consciences is the explicit revelation of Scripture. Since Scripture is also the one place where we are given an infallible account of Christ, the Bible is the touchstone to which all truth-claims should be brought and by which all other truth must finally be measured.

THE INADEQUACY OF ALL OTHER DEFINITIONS

An obvious corollary of what we are saying is that truth means nothing apart from God. Truth cannot be adequately explained, recognized, understood, or defined once you take God out of the equation.

If you don't believe that, try defining "truth" without reference to God, and see how quickly all such definitions fail. The moment you begin to ponder the essence of truth, you are brought face to face with the eternal reality of God. Conversely, the whole concept of "truth" instantly becomes nonsense—and every imagination of the human heart therefore turns to sheer foolishness—as soon as people attempt to remove the thought of God from their minds.

That, of course, is precisely how the apostle Paul traced the relentless decline of human ideas in Romans 1:21-22: "Although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools."

There are serious *moral* implications, too, whenever someone tries to dissociate "truth" from the knowledge of God. Paul went on to write, "Even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting" (v. 28). Abandon a biblical definition of truth, and unrighteousness is the inescapable result. We see it happening before our eyes in every corner of contemporary society.

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If you reflect on the subject with any degree of sobriety, you will soon see that even the most fundamental moral distinctions—good and evil, right and wrong, beauty and ugliness, or honor and dishonor—cannot possibly have any true or constant meaning apart from God. That's because truth and knowledge themselves simply have no coherent significance apart from God. How could they? God embodies the very definition of truth. Everything apart from Him is sheer nonsense.

That reality is finally dawning on the world. Human philosophers have sought for thousands of years to explain truth apart from God—and all who have tried have been ultimately unsuccessful. Elaborate systems of thought have been proposed and methodically debunked one after another. For thousands of years, the very best of human philosophies have all utterly failed to account for truth without God.

In fact, the one most valuable lesson humanity ought to have learned from philosophy is that it is impossible to make sense of truth without acknowledging God as the proper starting point.

THE GREAT "PARADIGM SHIFT"

Lately, many secular intellectuals have begun to realize the absurdity of any quest for "truth" without God. In effect, they have given up that pursuit as something wholly futile. The world of human ideas is therefore currently in a serious state of flux. On almost every level of society, we are witnessing a profoundly radical "paradigm shift"—a wholesale overhaul in the way people think about truth itself.

Unfortunately, instead of acknowledging what truth demands and yielding to the necessity of belief in God, many are now seeking ways to rid human philosophy of any coherent notion of truth. The concept of truth is under heavy attack in the philosophical community, the academic world, and the realm of worldly religion. The way people think about truth is being totally revamped and the vocabulary of human knowledge completely redefined. The goal, clearly, is to usher every notion of truth off into oblivion.

The war against truth is nothing new, of course. It began in the garden when the serpent said to the woman, "Has God indeed said . . . ?" (Genesis 3:1). A relentless battle has raged ever since—between truth and falsehood, good and evil, light and darkness, assurance and doubt, belief and skepticism, righteousness and sin. It is a savage spiritual conflict that literally spans all of human history. But the ferocity and irrationality of this present onslaught seems quite unprecedented.

The far-reaching ramifications of the recent paradigm shift are obvious already. Over the past generation—and especially the past two decades—we have seen convulsive changes in society's moral values, philosophy, religion, and the arts. The upheaval has been so profound that our grandparents' generation (and virtually every prior generation of human history) would have scarcely thought the landscape could possibly change so quickly. Virtually no aspect of human discourse has been left unaffected.

Many believe the paradigm shift has already brought us beyond the age of "modernity" to the next great epoch in the development of human thought: the *postmodern* era.

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MODERNITY

Modernity, in simple terms, was characterized by the belief that the scientific method is the only reliable way to determine truth. In the so-called "modern" era, most academic disciplines (philosophy, science, literature, and education) were driven primarily by rationalistic presuppositions. In other words, modern thought treated human reason as the final arbiter of what is true. The modern mind therefore discounted the idea of the supernatural and looked for scientific and rationalistic explanations for everything.

Those presuppositions gave birth to Darwinism, which in turn spawned a string of humanistic ideas and worldviews. Most prominent among them were several rationalistic utopian philosophies (including Marxism, fascism, socialism, and communism) whose repercussions have been felt worldwide. Various struggles between those ideas and others like them dominated the twentieth century. All failed. After two World Wars, nonstop social revolutions, civil unrest, and a long ideological cold war, modernity was declared dead by most in the academic world. The symbolic death of the modern era was marked by the fall of the Berlin Wall, one of the more apt and imposing monuments to modern ideology. The wall's sudden demolition was also a perfect symbol for the collapse of modernity.

Most if not all the major dogmas and worldviews from the modern era are now deemed completely outmoded and hopelessly discredited in virtually every corner of the intellectual and academic world. The overconfident rationalism and human conceit that characterized the modern era has finally—and fittingly—had most of the wind taken out of its sails.

POSTMODERNISM

Accordingly, the new ways of thinking have been collectively nicknamed *postmodern*.

If you have been paying attention to the world around us, you have probably heard that expression a lot recently. The term *postmodernism* has been used increasingly since the 1980s to describe several popular trends in architecture, art, literature, history, culture, and religion. It's not an easy term to explain, because it describes a way of thinking that defies (and even rejects) any clear definition.

Postmodernism in general is marked by a *tendency to dismiss the possibility of any sure and settled knowledge of the truth*. Postmodernism suggests that if objective truth exists, it cannot be known objectively or with any degree of certainty. That's because (according to postmodernists), the subjectivity of the human mind makes knowledge of objective truth impossible. Objectivity is an illusion. Therefore nothing is certain, and the thoughtful person will never speak with too much conviction about anything. Strong convictions about any point of truth are judged supremely arrogant and hopelessly naive.

Postmodernism therefore has no positive agenda to assert anything as true. Its one goal and singular activity is the systematic deconstruction of every other truth-claim. The chief tools being employed to accomplish this are relativism; subjectivism; the denial of every dogma; the

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dissection and annihilation of every clear definition; the relentless questioning of every axiom; the undue exaltation of mystery and paradox; the deliberate exaggeration of every ambiguity; and above all the cultivation of uncertainty about *everything*.

In fact, if you were to challenge me to boil down postmodern thought into its pure essence and identify the gist of it in one single, simple, central characteristic, I would say it is *the rejection of every expression of certainty*. In the postmodern perspective, certainty is regarded as inherently arrogant, elitist, intolerant, oppressive—and therefore always wrong.

The demise of modernity and the resulting blow to rationalistic human arrogance is certainly something to celebrate. From a spiritual perspective, however, the rise of postmodernism has been anything but a positive development.

Postmodernism has resulted in a widespread rejection of faith and the enshrinement of skepticism. Postmodernists despise truth-claims. They also spurn every attempt to construct a coherent worldview, labeling all comprehensive ideologies and belief systems "metanarratives," or grand stories. Such "stories," they say, can't possibly do justice to everyone's individual perspective, and therefore they are always inadequate.

Postmodernism's preference for subjectivity over objectivity makes it inherently relativistic. Naturally, the postmodernist recoils from absolutes and does not want to concede any truths that might seem axiomatic or self-evident. Instead, "truth," if acknowledged at all, becomes something infinitely pliable and ultimately unknowable in any objective sense.

Postmodernism therefore signals a major triumph for relativism—the view that "truth" is not fixed and objective, but something individually determined by each person's unique, subjective perception.

GETTING PROPOSITIONS OFF THE PREMISES

One other extremely important point has to be mentioned with regard to postmodern notions of truth: *Postmodernists are generally suspicious of rational and logical forms. They especially do not like to discuss truth in plain propositional terms.*

As we are seeing, postmodernism is largely a reaction against the unbridled rationalism of modernity. But many postmodernists' response to rationalism is a serious *overreaction*. Lots of postmodernists seem to entertain the notion that *irrationality* is superior to rationalism.

Actually, both ways of thinking are dead wrong and equally hostile to authentic truth and biblical Christianity. One extreme is as deadly as the other. We need to reject *rationalism*, but we cannot abandon *rationality*.

Rationality (the right use of sanctified reason through sound logic) is never condemned in Scripture. Faith is not irrational. Authentic biblical truth never demands that we abandon logic or clear, sensible thinking. Truth can always be analyzed and examined and compared under the bright light of other truth, and it does not melt into absurdity. Truth by definition is never self-contradictory or nonsensical. And contrary to popular thinking, it is not "rationalism" to insist that coherence is a necessary quality of all truth. Christ is truth incarnate, and He cannot deny

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himself (2 Timothy 2:13). Self-denying truth is an absolute contradiction in terms. "No lie is of the truth" (1 John 2:21).

Nor is logic a uniquely "Greek" category that is somehow hostile to the Hebrew context of Scripture. (That's a common myth and a gross oversimplification that is often set forth in support of postmodernism's flirtation with irrationality.) Scripture frequently employs logical devices such as antithesis, if-then arguments, syllogisms, and propositions. Those are all standard logical forms, and Scripture is full of them. (See for example, Paul's long string of deductive arguments about the importance of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:12-19.)

Yet you will often encounter people enthralled with postmodern ideas who argue vehemently that truth cannot be expressed in bare propositions like mathematical formulae. Even some professing Christians nowadays argue along these lines: "If truth is personal, it cannot be propositional. If truth is embodied in the Person of Christ, then the form of a proposition can't possibly express authentic truth. That's why most of Scripture is told to us in narrative form—as a *story*—not as a set of propositions."

The reason behind postmodernism's contempt for propositional truth is not difficult to understand. A "proposition" is *an idea framed as a logical statement that affirms or denies something, and it is expressed in such a way that it must be either true or false*. There is no third option between true and false. The whole point of a proposition is to boil a point of truth down to such pristine clarity that it must be either affirmed or denied. In other words, propositions are the simplest expressions of truth-value used to express the substance of what we believe. Postmodernism frankly cannot endure that kind of stark clarity.

In reality, however, postmodernism's rejection of the propositional form turns out to be totally untenable. It is impossible to discuss truth at all—or even tell a *story*—without resorting to the use of propositions. Until fairly recently, the validity and necessity of expressing truth in propositional form was deemed self-evident by virtually everyone who ever studied logic, semantics, or philosophy. Ironically, in order to make any cogent argument *against* the use of propositions, a person would have to employ propositional statements to do so! So every argument against propositions is instantly self-defeating.

Let's be clear: truth certainly does entail more than bare propositions. There is without question a *personal* element to the truth. Scripture does indeed make that fact absolutely clear by teaching that Christ is truth incarnate. Scripture also teaches that faith means receiving Christ for all that He is—knowing Him in a real and personal sense—not merely assenting to a short list of disembodied truths *about* Him (Matthew 7:21-23).

So it's quite true that faith cannot be reduced to mere assent to a finite set of propositions (James 2:19). I've made that point repeatedly in previous books. Saving faith is more than a merely intellectual nod of approval to the bare facts of a minimalist gospel outline. Authentic faith in Christ involves love for His Person and surrender to His authority. The human heart, will, and intellect all consent in the act of true faith. In that sense, it is certainly correct, even *necessary*, to acknowledge that mere propositions can't do full justice to all the dimensions of truth.