



WHAT IS TRUTH?

Reflections on the Nature of Truth and Ministry within a Postmodern Culture



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Introduction: The Problem

Western culture is saturated with postmodern faith and practice. As a result, today's ministers face the intense challenge of declaring a worldview of truth to a culture that denies all worldviews. The purpose of this essay is not to determine truth's knowability or construct artificial girders for its interpretation. Although, it is nearly impossible to adequately discuss the nature of truth without considering these aspects of reality and reason, more attention will be given to defining truth as a concept, exploring its biblical usage, and attending the minister's difficult task of proclaiming God's truth in a postmodern era.

What is Truth?

Philosophers and theologians have sought to define truth since Pilate rhetorically asked the question thousands of years ago (John 8:38). Scripture claims itself to be truth (Psalm 119:160), Jesus to be truth (John 14:6), and God to be truth (Isaiah 65:16). Man has his own theories as to the nature of truth. A few of which include definitions of correspondence, cohesion, and pragmatism.

Truth Defined by Correspondence

The correspondence theory for establishing truth is founded on one basic principle: What we say is true so long as it corresponds with the facts of reality. This requires a relationship (or correlation) to occur between internal belief and external fact that will always yield a Boolean result. If I assert that rocks thrown out of a flying airplane will fall, my statement is true because it corresponds with reality. Respectively, all the belief in the world will not influence rocks to fly

circles around the aircraft. Therefore, belief that fails to correspond with reality is inherently false.

Truth Defined by Coherence

The coherence theory for establishing truth considers the correspondence theory inadequate because our judgments are not always like the things to which they refer. Therefore, consistency and cohesion is more important than direct association. In other words, if we cannot know the reality our beliefs correspond to, we must search for a more coherent way of validating truth. The value of this definition is determined negatively as well as positively. When facts that are accepted as anything other than real provide disorder to my world, they are true.

Truth Defined by Pragmatism

The pragmatist would argue the coherence theory is unsatisfactory because humans are unable to determine consistent truth from consistent error. Therefore, the only belief worth establishing contains truth that “works.” William James asserts, “The test of truth is utility, workability, or satisfactory consequences.”¹ This view seeks to replace static or absolute truth for the process of human adjustment.

Truth Defined by Biblical Usage

The Scriptures attest to truth as God’s reality. Man’s conformity or confirmation to accept or reject this reality carries no bearing on the definition whatsoever. In the Old Testament,

¹ William James, “Truth is Established on Pragmatic Grounds” In *Classic Philosophical Questions Ninth Edition* ed. James A. Gould (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1998), 375.

primary usages of truth relate to faithfulness and conformity to fact.² New Testament usages display conformity to fact and completeness. All claims point to a reality that God has established with absolute certainty.

The phrase “God’s reality” is an important one because only God is wholly true. Jesus announced, “I have much to say about you and much to judge, but He who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from Him” (John 8:26). Scripture also claims that God is wholly truthful. Hebrews 6:18 says, “It is impossible for God to lie.” The same word (ἀδύνατος) is used in Hebrews 6:4 to show the impossibility of salvation for those who reject Christ and again in Hebrews 10:4 to close the door for good on animal sacrifices for atonement. It does not mean improbable; but impossible.

Jesus made this startling claim concerning Himself: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). One contemporary author notes, “His claim to be ‘the truth’ grates especially hard on many postmodern ears today.”³ The believer has no issue with this claim. If Jesus is God incarnate, His claim is valid. That stated, it is impossible for the postmodern view of subjective acceptance to accept Christ’s rejection of the possibility of other truths.

But how do we know anything about God’s reality or Christ’s truthfulness? Logically, if God cannot lie and has given us His word, it would stand to reason that His word is truthful. The Holy Spirit testifies to this fact through the Scriptures themselves. The Psalmist prayed, “The sum of your word is truth, and every one of your righteous rules endures forever”

² Roger Nicole, “The Biblical Concept of Truth” In *Scripture and Truth*, Edited by D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, 1992) 287-298.

³ Robert M. Bowman Jr and J. Ed Komoszewski, *Putting Jesus in His Place: The Case for the Deity of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2007), 213.

(Psalm 119:160). Jesus prayed, “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17). God’s word is always truthful, always reliable; because it comes from God Himself. The unbeliever cannot accept this reality, because he has suppressed the truth in unrighteousness (Romans 1:18). This is particularly true in these last days.

The Modern Postmodern Age

The twentieth century gave us Marxism, fascism, existentialism, and the power of positive thinking. These philosophical shifts and more marked the modern age. That was yesterday. What of today? What distinguishes the postmodern age from its predecessors? A graduating student once declared at a Harvard commencement ceremony,

They tell us it’s heresy to suggest the superiority of some value, fantasy to believe in moral argument, slavery to submit to a judgment sounder than your own. The freedom of our day is the freedom to devote yourself to any values we please, on the mere condition that we do not believe them to be true.⁴

Potentially, the greatest distinguishing attribute of postmodern thought is the rejection of absolute truth for subjective inclusivity. The problem this rejection generates is startlingly obvious. Charles Malik recognized the problem over thirty years ago when he asserted,

They tell you, there is no truth; it is all a matter of impression, or at best of probability and statistics... This is all false. If taken absolutely, then there is something absolute, namely, that there is no truth.⁵

⁴ Steven Garber, *The Fabric of Faithfulness* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2007), 222.

⁵ Charles Malik, “Fallacies of the Age” In *Inform* vol 58 no 4 (July 1981), 1.

One cannot make an absolute assertion in a world devoid of absolutes.

The average postmodern man carries dichotomy between faith and practice. His faith declares there is no external truth while his practice proclaims otherwise. To ease the tension, he must redefine truth. It must become more flexibly accommodating to find postmodern acceptance. Therefore, he accepts a blending of philosophical definitions. Truth becomes pragmatic and predictable. Cohesive and corresponding to individual experience and external testimonies, but never absolutely exclusive. Such a hopeless worldview leaves men grasping for truth anywhere it cannot be found.

Approaching the Scriptures

An old adage suggests that a man with one watch knows what time it is. However, a man with two watches is never sure. In a world of pluralistic uncertainty, how can we know the Word of God to be wholly reliable and true? According to John MacArthur, the Christian can argue for the truthfulness of Scripture from personal experience, scientific agreement, archeological discoveries, and fulfilled prophecy.⁶ However, the ultimate proof of truth is brought to bear by the indwelling testimony of the Holy Spirit. Once a man's corpse has been animated to life by the Spirit, he is able to perceive the God's words for what they really are.

1 Thessalonians 2:13 states, "And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers." The postmodern worldview leaves men incapable of accepting the Bible's truth claims with absolute confidence. Thankfully, faulty worldviews can be broken and God's word is powerful enough to do it.

⁶ John MacArthur, *Why Believe the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 2015), 43.

Pastoring the Postmodern

The unbeliever's rejection of gospel truth should not surprise us. Romans 8:7 declares, "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot." The difficulty lies in pastoring a flock of postmodern Christians. According to research conducted by the Barna group of early 1990s, roughly the same number of Americans who claimed to follow Christ rejected the existence of absolute truth.⁷ As the psalmist enquired in Psalm 11:3, "If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?"

Proclaiming the Truth

In the 1940s, Sir Arnold Toynbee was one of the first historians to use the word "postmodernism." His research of twenty-one world civilizations found that societies suffered a "schism of the soul" before disintegrating. This schism was accompanied by a *sense of drift* and helpless abandon.⁸ The postmodern mindset is riddled with cries for help and outcries of rejection. Since the fall of man, this world has always needed a Savior; now, our culture needs Him more than ever before. Romans 10:14 says,

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?

We must proclaim the truth of Christ.

⁷ George Barna, *The Barna Report: What Americans Believe* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1991), 83-85.

⁸ Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 44-45.

Practicing the Truth

Just as we are called to proclaim the truth, is also our responsibility to aggressively exemplify this truth in our daily lives. After all, “Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead” (James 2:17). A true believer cannot talk the talk without walking the walk. May we never forget the call of 1 John 3:18, “Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.”

Praying the Truth

Concerning the power of God’s word, He states in Isaiah 55:11, “So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” When God’s word goes out, it accomplishes one of two objectives. It will either soften or harden the human heart. Salvation belongs to the Lord (Psalm 3:8) and He will have mercy and compassion on whom He wills (Romans 9:15). He created all things, controls all things, determines all things. Why would we not petition Him to shatter the darkness of man with the light of His truth? Shame on us if we fail to do so.

Conclusion: Linking Truth, Theology, and Practice

Romans 13:11 serves as an alarm clock for sleeping Christians. It declares, “Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep.” Christ’s return is eminent and believers cannot afford to slumber through these final days. God’s truth is absolute and knowable despite the fact that it cannot be known absolutely. It exist in the reality of God Himself as well as the reality He has created. The Holy Spirit uses it to transform a man into

something new altogether. As those who can testify to its validity, we have been called to proclaim this truth to all men until He returns. Let's prayerfully answer the call; living our faith and disclosing God's truth to a drifting world of helpless abandon.

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All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version.