

# How Do You Spell Truth?

## What is Truth?

Do you remember the commercial that asked, "How do you spell relief?" To the horror of elementary teachers everywhere, you were supposed to answer "R-O-L-A-I-D-S." In a similar fashion, today, if you ask someone, "How do you spell truth?" you might be surprised by the response. As a young Christian in college, I was greatly influenced by the writings of Francis Schaeffer. I will never forget the impact of his critique of modern culture and his use of the phrase "true truth." True truth might be thought of as truth with a capital "T" because it is based on the existence of a personal God, the creator of all that exists, and a revealer of Himself via the Bible and the Incarnation of His Son, Jesus. Today, if you ask average men and women how to spell truth, their responses will probably indicate a view that is strictly earthbound truth beginning with a small "t." God is not in the picture; in fact, belief in God would be seen as a handicap in discerning truth accurately. The methodology of science provides this type of truth and also sets its limits. However, there is another spelling for truth that is finding more and more adherents. Today, especially on college campuses, the question might be answered with C-O-N-S-T-R-U-C-T, as in social construct. Like the Roloids answer above, this response doesn't seem to fit. In this approach truth is generated by the social group, whether they be white middle-class male Americans or female southeast Asians. What is true for one group may not be true for another, and there is no such thing as universal truth, something that is true for all people, all the time.

These three conceptions of truth describe three comprehensive systems of thought that are active in Western culture and in the U.S. The first (Truth) portrays Christian theism (what some refer to as a pre-modern view). Although this view is still quite popular, many in our churches function as if they were members of the second group which is often classified as a modernist perspective (truth). The third group (truth as social construct) is a fairly recent arrival, but has become highly influential both in academia and in common culture. It has been called postmodernism. People within these three different perspectives see the world quite differently. Until recently, Christians focused their apologetics, or defense of the faith, mainly at modernists and as a result often attempted to justify belief within a modernist framework of truth. Now we are being called upon to respond to a postmodern view that will require a far different approach. Although postmodernism has many aspects that Christians must reject, it has also revealed just how much Christian thinking has been influenced by the modernist challenge.

In this discussion we will look at modernism and postmodernism in light of Christian evangelism and apologetics. We are now fighting a two-front battle, and we need to develop different tools for each. We also are in need of a vaccine against assuming the presuppositions of either modernism or postmodernism as we attempt to live and think within a biblical framework. Much of this debate revolves around the notion of what is true, or perhaps how we as individuals can know what is true. This may sound like an ivory tower discussion, but it is a vital topic as we attempt to share the truth of the Gospel to those we encounter.

## The Modernist View

In their book *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be*<sup>{1}</sup>, Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh use an interesting metaphor to describe the different views of truth and the ways that we perceive it in our culture. Imagine three umpires meeting after a day at the park. As they reflect on the day's activities one ump declares, "There's balls and there's strikes and I call 'em the way they are." Another responds, "There's balls and there's strikes and I call 'em the way I see 'em." The third says,

"There's balls and there's strikes, and they ain't nothin' until I call 'em." Each of the umpires may make the same call, but they will be making it for very different reasons. The position of the first ump is known as naive realism. He believes that his calls correspond to something quite real and substantive called balls and strikes. He is also very confident that he can discern what is a ball or a strike with a high degree of accuracy. This confidence is a trademark of modernism. As we will see later, the other two umpires reflect positions that reject such a confidence in knowing what is true. It doesn't mean that they don't make decisions, they just lack the confidence that their decision conforms exactly to what is really "out there."

Modernism grew out of the Enlightenment and matured in the last century to dominate much of European and American thought. Its greatest American advocate has been John Dewey. Writing around the turn of the century, Dewey's philosophy of pragmatism has dominated American educational theory to this day. In his book *Reconstruction in Philosophy*,<sup>{2}</sup> he highlights the difference between pre-modern and modern thinking. First, modernism rejects the reality of supernatural events or beings. It focuses on this world and the secular. Second, it rejects the authority of the church or religion in general and replaces it with the power of individual minds utilizing the methodology of science. Third, it replaces the static world of the middle ages with a belief in progress towards a future human utopia. Finally, it believes that the patient scientific study of nature will provide the means for this utopia. Humankind is to conquer and control nature for its use.

The implications of modernism were and are profound. Under its umbrella, humans were seen as biological machines just as the universe became understood as an impersonal mechanism needing neither a creator nor a sustainer God. All of human behavior could conceivably be explained biologically, given enough time for science to study the data. As a result, humans are viewed as self-governing beings and free to embrace whatever their rational minds discover. Modernists might be called rationalistic optimists because they are quite confident in their ability to perceive "reality as reality, relatively unaffected by our own bias, distortion, or previous belief system"<sup>{3}</sup>. One's conclusions can reflect reality outside ourselves, not just thoughts within our own minds.

With the advent of modernism Christianity found itself under the cold calculating eye of science. Modernism tells a story of mankind as its own savior that is, with the help of science, modernism has no need for a savior provided by God. Sin is not in its vocabulary, and redemption is not needed; humans lack only education.

Next, we will look at the arrival of postmodernism and its accompanying challenges.

## **The Postmodern Condition**

We have considered the impact of modernism on the question of what is true. Now we will focus on the postmodern view. Where modernism is very confident that it can discover truth via science, postmodernism is defined by its skepticism that truth of any type can be known. Much of postmodernism is negative response to the confidence of modernism. Yet, postmodernism is a strange combination of a vague romantic optimism that mankind can solve its social and economic problems, with a dramatic pessimism of ever knowing truth at a universal level. This reflects the strong influence of atheistic existentialism on postmodern thinking. Individuals are told they must stand up and confront an absurd existence and impose meaning and order on to it, all the while admitting that there is no universal truth guiding what they choose to do.

To a postmodern, modernism ended with atomic bombs being dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Modernism led to imperialism and the colonialization of the third world by the supposedly more modern and advanced industrial nations. It led to the destruction of the environment, and it has led

to a naive confidence that technology can solve any problem in its path.

Often, postmodernism is known more for what it doesn't believe than for what it does. One author writes that we have come to the point where answers to the "questions of ultimate concern about the nature of the good, the meaning of truth and the existence of God are taken to be unanswerable and hence, in some fundamental sense, insignificant." {4}

Let's consider some of the significant themes that postmodernists have written about. The first is the theory that truth is a social construct. This theory would argue, for example, that Western modernity which has come to dominate the globe and define what is rational and normative for human life is not in place because it is any truer than other worldviews. Instead, it is a set of ideas that people have used to manipulate others with in order to gain power over them. Those who are not "scientific" are viewed as primitive and as a result are marginalized and finally oppressed by Western culture. Western culture, then, has not discovered how things really are; instead, it has imposed one view on the world to its advantage. Our basic problem is that all ideas, all concepts, and all truths are communicated via language, and all language is man made. No one can step outside of language to see whether or not it corresponds with reality. In the words of one postmodernist, all principles (or ultimate truths) are really preferences.

As a result of postmodernist thinking, anyone who claims to know something that is universally true, true for everyone, everywhere, anytime, is accused of marginalizing those who disagree. Once a person or group is marginalized, a justification has been established to oppress them. To postmodernists, a totalizing meta-narrative (a story that claims to answer all the big questions about reality) always results in violence towards those outside the accepted paradigm. They point to Western culture's aptitude towards conquering and destroying other cultures in the name of progress and modernization.

One can easily see that a Christian worldview conflicts with much of what postmodernity teaches. Christianity claims to be true for everyone, everywhere. It is not surprising that postmodern feminists and others have pointed their finger at Christianity for oppressing women, gays, and anyone else who holds to a different construct of reality. How do we as Christians respond to this critique? Do we side with the modernists and join the fight against postmodern influences? Or can we find something helpful in the issues raised by postmodernism?

Postmodernist Kenneth Gergen argues that, "When convinced of the truth or right of a given worldview a culture has only two significant options: totalitarian control of the opposition or annihilation of it." Another has written that modernity has given us "as much terror as we can take." {5} Postmodernists argue that by claiming to know the truth we automatically marginalize and oppress others. It encourages the questioning of everything that modernism has come to accept as natural or good. Capitalism, patriarchy, and liberal humanism are just a few ideas that modernity has left us with and that we have to realize are just social constructs. We are free, according to postmoderns, to throw off anything that doesn't work since all institutions and social norms are social constructs created by society itself. However, with this freedom comes disorientation. The current social scene in America is a prime example of this effect. Traditions about family, gender roles, economic responsibility, and social norms are being questioned and abandoned. This has left us with a sense of loss, a horrifying loss that acknowledges that there is nothing solid undergirding why we live the way we do. It has left us with an amazing amount of pluralism and a radical multiculturalism that some feel has removed essential buffers to chaos.

The confidence of modern man in rugged individualism has been deconstructed by postmodernism to reveal the inevitability of violence and subjugation. What is left? Many postmodernists argue that not only is the self a construct, that the autonomous self is a myth, but that the self is actually a servant

of language. Most people see language as a tool to be used by individuals to express ideas to another person. Many postmodernists see things quite differently. They would argue that our language uses us instead. Another way of thinking of this is that we don't have a language, a language has us. All that we know of reality is given to us by the symbols present in our language. This has created a self-identity problem of dramatic proportions for postmoderns. Many have responded by embracing this lack of rootedness by seeing that life is being in a "state of continuous construction and reconstruction."

Now that we have briefly surveyed both the modern and postmodern positions, let's begin to think about them from a biblical standpoint. We should first acknowledge that when doing apologetics, or defending the faith, we are not merely attempting to win arguments or make others look foolish. Apologetics should always be done in the context of evangelism, the goal of which is to share the gospel in a meaningful way, to convey the truth of special revelation concerning God's plan for salvation with humility and compassion.

Christians should probably reject both the confidence of modernism and the pessimism of postmodernism regarding our ability to know and understand truth. Modernity's dependence on science as the only valid source for truth is too limited and fails to consider the effects of the fall on our ability to know something without bias. We are often sinfully rational, willfully rejecting what is true. On the other hand, the postmodern view leaves us without hope that we can know anything about what is really real. It holds that we are literally a prisoner of the language game played by our culture group, regardless of its social class or race.

Next, we will consider how postmodern thinking should affect evangelism.

## **A Christian View of Truth**

We have been considering the challenges of modern and postmodern thinking to the notion of truth and the communication of the Gospel. Earlier we used the metaphor of umpires who call strikes and balls within different frameworks for knowing. The ump who "calls 'em the way they are" is a naive realist; the second ump who "calls 'em like he sees 'em" represents the critical realist view, and the ump who says "they ain't nothin' until I call 'em" portrays a radical perspectivist view. The questions before us are, What view should a Christian take? and How does this choice affect the way in which we do apologetics and evangelism?

If we accept the view of the first ump who "calls 'em the way they are," we have adopted a modernist perspective. Unfortunately, experience tells us that the assumptions that come with this view don't seem to hold up. It assumes that common sense and logic will always lead people to the Truth of the Gospel we just need to give people enough evidence. While this approach does work with some, it works mainly because they already agree with us on a theistic, Western view of reality. However, modernism has also led many to see the universe as a godless machine run by the logical laws of nature as discovered by science. For example, New Agers or Hindus have a common understanding that leads them elsewhere. Their basic assumptions about reality are quite different from ours, and it is much more difficult to find common ground with them. In fact, they have consciously rejected the Western view of reality.

The third ump who says "they ain't nothin' until I call 'em" sees truth as entirely personal. Although we admit that people do create personal frameworks for interpreting life and reality, there is ultimately only one true reality, one true God. However, we might learn from the perspectivist in order to find common ground when witnessing. One commonality is the notion of an acute consciousness of suffering by marginalized people. Christianity shares this concern yet offers a radically different solution.

The second umpire states that there are balls and strikes, and "I call 'em as I see 'em." This view of truth, called critical realism, recognizes that there is one true reality, but that our ability to perceive it is limited. The Bible teaches that sin has distorted our view. Even as believers we must admit that we don't always understand why God does what He does. This is partially because truth is personal in the sense that it is rooted in a personal God, and we can never know all that there is to know about Him. Even Peter, who walked with Christ, didn't understand God's plans. He rebuked Jesus when Jesus told His disciples that He would go to Jerusalem, be crucified, and resurrected.

The best evangelistic approach attempts to find common ground with an unbeliever while never relinquishing all that is true of the Christian worldview. If rational, logical arguments are persuasive, use them. If storytelling works, as in the more narratively oriented societies of the Middle East, use it. We should not be limited to either a modernist or postmodernist view of truth, but work from a distinctively Christian perspective that holds that the God who created the universe wants us to gently instruct others in the hope that He will grant them repentance and lead them to a knowledge of the truth.

## Notes

1. Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), p. 31.
2. John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920), pp. 47-49.
3. Dennis McCallum, ed. *The Death of Truth* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House, 1996), pp. 23-26.
4. Timothy Phillips and Dennis Okholm, *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), p. 31.
5. Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be*, p. 35.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., p. 52.

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