Heresy: Nothing New Under the Sun

Kerby Anderson provides an overview of some ancient Christian heresies that are still being embraced today: legalism, gnosticism, mysticism, and marcionism.

In this article we address ancient heresies that still exist in only a slightly different form today. Jesus warned us in Matthew 13:24-25 that the "kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field." But then there is a twist in the story.

> "But while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went away. But when the wheat sprouted and bore grain, then the tares became evident also."



Later Jesus explained the parable. The wheat is the "people of the kingdom." The tares are the "people of the evil one." The illustration would make sense to people living in the first century. There was even a Roman law against sowing tares in another person's field. Some have called it a "primitive form of bioterrorism."

Jesus is teaching that both true Christians and false Christians will live together. They both may even go to church and seem like Christians. But the false Christians believe and spread heresy within the church and into society.

Paul also warned about false teaching and heresy. In what might have been his last epistle, he warned Timothy that: "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn

aside to myths." (2 Timothy 4:3)

Peter also gave a warning that these false teachers will come from inside the church. "But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned; and in their greed they will exploit you with false words." (2 Peter 2:1)

Notice that these heresies and false teachers will arise from among you. They will secretly introduce these heresies. And they will use greed and sensuality to seduce Christians. Jude (1:4) also adds that these false teachers "have crept in unnoticed" and "turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ."

In this article we look at heresies in the past that can be found in a slightly altered form today. Just as believers in the first century were warned about false teachers and destructive heresies, so we need to warn each other today about these heresies in the 21st century.

Ecclesiastes 1:9 reminds us that there is "nothing new under the sun." As we will see below, that is true of these ancient heresies.

Legalism

Legalism is an ancient heresy going all the way back to the first century. Paul in his letter to the Colossians (2:16-17) said, "Therefore, no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath-day things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ." He warned them about those in their midst who were taking them captive through the

subtle lies of legalism.

You might notice that what is listed in these verses are not instructions on purity or righteousness. Rather they are specific Old Testament practices that were given to Israel before the coming of Christ. The Passover is a foreshadowing of Christ's sacrifice as the Lamb of God. While the deliverance of Israel is significant, consider how much more significant is Christ's death which provides us with deliverance from the slavery of sin and separation from God. The previous feasts and festivals are no longer necessary now that we have Christ in our lives.

Jesus addressed legalism among the Pharisees and scribes. They established all sorts of rules and regulations that were binding on all Jews. Starting with the law, they set out to compile the various oral traditions and even began to develop interpretations of these laws. In the end, they even had interpretations of the interpretations that were collected in numerous volumes.

By the time of Christ, the Pharisees and the scribes were actually following the traditions of men rather than the law of God. Jesus pointedly asked them, "Why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?" (Matthew 15:3) Jesus also condemned the Pharisees by saying, "You also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Matthew 23:28). Jesus therefore accused them, on numerous occasions, of being hypocrites.

Legalism is our attempt to produce righteousness apart from God. We are challenged to follow additional rules and regulations that we believe will merit favor before God. But in the end, these unbiblical rules bind us and drain the joy from our lives.

When we give people an ever expanding "to-do list" that is uncoupled from God's power, we wear people down and ultimately

drive people away from the gospel. Paul warned Timothy that in the last days there would be people “having a form of godliness but denying its power” (2 Timothy 3:5). He counsels him to avoid such people.

Gnosticism

Gnosticism is an ancient heresy that surfaced in the last century, partially because of the discovery of the Gnostic Gospels. The Gnostics were prevalent in the first few centuries after the time of Christ. The word *gnosis* means “knowledge.” The focus was on hidden knowledge that contradicted biblical revelation.

For example, the Gnostics denied the existence of sin. Instead, they proposed that the world was corrupted by the demiurge who created it and rules over it. If they believed in sin, they would say that the only sin is ignorance.

The Gnostics taught that Jesus came not to save the world but to impart special knowledge that would lead us to what they called a “divine pleroma.” If you were fortunately to find this knowledge, then you would achieve salvation.

In the first centuries, the Gnostics presented themselves as Christians and worked to popularize their ideas among the growing church of believers. They also produced their own texts (Gospel of Mary, Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Judas).

Iraenaeus was a church father who wrote a critique of Gnosticism in AD 180. He explained that the Gnostics used the Bible alongside their own texts to demonstrate their “perverse interpretations” and “deceitful expositions.” They also reinterpreted parables and allegories from the Old Testament in a fraudulent manner.

Nevertheless, Gnosticism appealed to many Christians in the first centuries because it had many elements that were very similar to Christianity. They believed in Father, Son, and

Holy Spirit. They quoted from the Bible. They practiced some of the sacraments.

Many of these same heretical ideas appeal to Christians today. Leaders of progressive Christianity argue that they have a more mature view of God and the Bible. These leaders believe they have special knowledge that allows them to set aside the standard interpretations of biblical passages. One evangelical pastor said: "The church will continue to be even more irrelevant when it quotes letters from 2,000 years ago as their best defense."{1}

The Gnostics and modern heretics claim sources of knowledge outside the Bible. They say we know so much more now that the early Christians. C.S. Lewis refers to this as "chronological snobbery." They assume they know better than any believer in the past.

Today, we have people claiming to know what the Bible really means and invite you to join them as they impart their "special knowledge" to you. More than ever we should be alert to such leaders who will ultimately lead us away from the true Gospel.

Mysticism

Mysticism is another ancient heresy that we still see today. When Paul wrote to the Colossians (2:18-19), he warned them about false teachers who would attempt to seduce them into mystical ideas: "Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God."

The word mysticism comes from the Greek word (*mystes*) for the

mystery religions that existed at the time Paul was writing to these Christians. He is describing someone who is “taking his stand on visions he has seen.” In other words, this is a person who has had some vision and is mixing that vision with the revelation of Scripture.

At the time Paul was writing to a church that was a mixture of Jews and Gentiles. Many were young Christians and may have brought their pagan ideas into the church. This would include the idea that you receive spiritual revelations by entering into an ecstatic state. These Christians also lived in a culture where many claimed they were receiving visions from the gods. If these young Christians did not have discernment, they might actually believe that someone who has these visions was spiritually superior to them.

Mysticism has been a major area of cultural captivity both in church history and even in our present day. We see in Paul’s letter to the church in Corinth, that believers were confused about speaking in tongues and other spiritual manifestations. Some of the believers were essentially “babes in Christ” who could not handle the solid food of God’s word. He reminded them that when they were pagans, they had been led astray (1 Corinthians 12:1-3). Because of their previous exposure to paganism, they were vulnerable to false doctrine.

Throughout church history, certain churches and denominations have brought mystical rituals and practices into their worship experience. They may take the form of chants, icons, or prescribed practices not found in Scripture but part of a tradition that borrows heavily from mystical ideas. And many of these practices are found today not only in North American churches but in churches in other parts of the world.

Mysticism is quite prevalent outside of the church and can have a strong cultural influence on Christians. Many of the books on the best-seller lists over the last few decades dealing with spirituality are not books that promote biblical

Christianity but rather books that promote an Eastern philosophy of religion or the New Age Movement.

Marcionism

Marcionism was taught by a theologian named Marcion in the second century. Although some of his ideas parallel Gnosticism, he made a distinction between the God of the Old Testament and the teachings of Jesus in the New Testament. He taught that the benevolent God of the gospels who sent Jesus was inconsistent with the mean, vindictive, malevolent God of the Old Testament. Hence, he concluded they were two different deities.

He also considered himself a follower of Paul, who he preached was the only true apostle of Jesus Christ. In fact, he even created his own "Scriptures" that included ten of Paul's epistles and the Gospel of Marcion (which was a shorter version and highly edited version of the Gospel of Luke). He emphasized Paul because he felt he freed Christianity from the Jewish Scriptures.

He also rejected most of the orthodox teachings of Christianity. For example, he rejected the ideas of God's wrath and rejected the ideas of hell and judgment. Those ideas, according to him, were tied to the God of the Old Testament, whom he called the Demiurge. That God was merely a jealous tribal deity of the Jews and represented a legalistic view of justice.

A similar idea exists even today. For example, one evangelical theologian said this: "The Bible is an ancient book and we shouldn't be surprised to see it act like one. So seeing God portrayed as a violent, tribal warrior is not how God is but how he was understood to be by the ancient Israelites community with god in their time and place."{2}

We might add that an increasing number of pastors and

Christians no longer want to talk about God's wrath and refuse to teach what the Bible does say about hell and judgment. Books and articles are being written denying the existence of hell. Instead, they teach universal salvation for all.

Jesus talked more about hell than he talked about heaven. In Luke 16 he describes it as a great chasm that does not allow people to cross to the other side. In Matthew 25 he predicts a future in which people will be separated into two groups. One will enter heaven. The others will be banished to "eternal fire."

We live in a world where heresy, false teaching, and a false gospel are proliferating. That is why we need to develop biblical discernment. Paul said he was amazed that some of the early Christians adopted "a different gospel" which he said was a distorted gospel of Christ. He added, "If we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed" (Galatians 1:6-8).

These ancient heresies are being preached today. We need to return to the essential gospel and sound biblical teaching.

Notes

1. "Rob Bell Suggests Bible Not Relevant to Today's Culture | CBN News," www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/us/2015/February/Rob-Bell-Suggests-Bible-Not-Relevant-to-Todays-Culture accessed 2/5/2023.
2. Peter Enns, *The Bible Tells Me So: Why Defending Scripture Has Made Us Unable to Read It* (NY: Harper One, 2014).

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The Pope Got It Wrong. Breathtakingly Wrong.

Sue Bohlin reacts to Pope Francis's recent statement that all religions are roads to God, providing a biblical answer to this false teaching.

Recently (9/13/2024) Pope Francis told a Singapore audience of youth from different faiths that all religions are equal, all different paths to God.

Through an interpreter, he said,

> *"If we start to fight among yourselves and say my religion is more important than yours, my religion is true and yours is not, where would that lead us. It is okay to discuss, because every religion is a way to arrive at God. Analogously speaking, religion is like different languages to arrive at God. But God is God for all. And if God is God for all, we are all sons and daughters of God. 'But my God is more important than your God.' Is that true? There is only one God, and each of us is a language, so to speak, to arrive at God. Muslim, Hindu, they are different paths. Understood?"*[1]

As the spiritual leader of the Catholic Church's 1.3 billion adherents, the pope is responsible for speaking truth to his flock. Not only is this statement heretical, it is a slap in the face of the Lord Jesus Christ—Whom the pope presumably worships and serves. If all religions lead to God, why did Jesus leave heaven to become a human being? Why did He submit Himself to the excruciating suffering of His passion and crucifixion? Why did the sinless, perfect God-man die? What's the point of His resurrection?

No. Different religious paths do not all lead to God. The pope is wrong wrong wrong. Those who believe what he's saying, trusting in their false religions, will remain enemies of God; their sin will forever separate them from God. This breaks my heart. Even as I type this, I pray for God to open the eyes of those embracing this Satanic lie so that they will turn in faith to the one true God.

Those who believe the "all religions lead to God" deception often invoke the story of the six blind Hindus who encountered an elephant. One felt its side and said, "An elephant is a wall." Another felt its leg and said, "An elephant is a tree trunk." A third felt its tusk and said, "An elephant is a spear." The fourth felt its trunk and said, "An elephant is a hose." The fifth felt its tail and said, "An elephant is a rope." The last one felt its ear and said, "An elephant is a fan."

The point of this allegorical story is that each person's encounter and description of the elephant in radically different ways is like the various world religions. None of them should claim to have the corner on truth because they all have different perspectives.

But this view leaves out the larger picture: an elephant is an elephant—not a wall or tree or spear or hose or rope or fan. And the Creator of the elephant has communicated with us the very nature of the "elephant." He has revealed capital-T Truth about reality, and He has been clear in how mankind is to relate rightly to Himself. This blind Hindu story leaves out the very important aspect of revelation, when Someone outside the limitations of our "blindness" as finite creatures, tells us things we cannot know on our own.

Which leads us to the ultimate reason why the Pope is so very wrong. The "Creator of the elephant," Jesus the Son of God, came to earth as a man and made astonishing truth claims about Himself: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes

to the Father except through Me." (John 14:6)

If all religions led to God, why would Jesus say He is the ONLY way?

He also claimed to be Yahweh, the covenant God of the Old Testament. "Before Abraham was, I AM." (John 8:58).

He claimed for Himself attributes that are only true of God Himself:

Eternal "Now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was." (John 17:5)

Omnipresent "For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst." (Matthew 18:20)

"Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20)

Sinless "Which one of you convicts Me of sin? If I speak truth, why do you not believe Me?" (John 8:46)

Accepted worship "And those who were in the boat worshiped Him, saying, 'You are certainly God's Son!' (Matthew 14:33)

Then He said to Thomas, "Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing." Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:27-28)

Able to Forgive Sins And Jesus seeing their faith said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." (Mark 2:5)

"For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little." Then He said to her, "Your sins have been forgiven." Those who were reclining at the table with Him began to say to themselves, "Who is this man who even forgives

sins?" (Luke 7:48-50)

Judge of All Men "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life. Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself; and He gave Him authority to execute judgment, because He is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice…" (John 5:24-28)

Jesus claimed to be God; He claimed to be the only way to the Father. He backed up these claims by fulfilling prophecy about the promised Messiah. And most phenomenal of all, He said He would die and rise from the dead three days later—and He did it.

We can believe Him when He says He is the only way. We *should* believe Him.

The Pope is massively, terrifyingly wrong. All religions do not lead to God. Jesus is the ONLY way.

1. https://ethosinstitute.sg/every-religion-is-a-way-to-god/ Accessed 9/17/2024 ?

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/the-pope-got-it-wrong-breathtakingly-wrong/ on September 17, 2024.

“Is the United Pentecostal Church a Cult?”

Is the United Pentacostal Church a cult, theologically speaking? And if so, why? What do they believe?

The doctrine of the UPC is definitely heretical; they deny the Trinity in favor of what is called the “oneness” doctrine. Heresy makes groups a cult. Here’s a good article on that from Watchman Fellowship: www.watchman.org/cults/upc.htm

Happy reading!

Sue Bohlin
Probe Ministries

“Is A Course in Miracles Heretical? How Do I Talk to My Friend Who Believes It?”

My friend says he believes in “A Course in Miracles.” I’ve been trying to help him to start to read the Bible instead so he sees the truth about Jesus. I’ve read your article that says the Course is anti-biblical and the work of an evil spirit.

I wonder now if this text is heretical also—not only anti-biblical? Also I’d be happy if you would describe more what heretical really mean according to the Bible. Because I think that I’ve read in the Bible that we shouldn’t associate with people who are heretics.

I really would be glad if my friend would become a christian who believes in Jesus Christ described in the Bible. So I'm wondering what attitude I should have towards him. I've read about Paul who in his apologetical work in Athens speaks about the unknown God worshipped in Athens. Is a similar approach good in this case? To speak about that all the love he wants is in fact in the Biblical Jesus?

Or is it better to simply declare that I believe ACIM is the work of evil? But if it's heretical—can I associate with him more than to just state my faith in order to help come to believe in the Biblical Jesus Christ?

Thank you for your inquiry regarding *A Course in Miracles* as it relates to heresy. Allow me to give you a definition of heresy from which I tend to operate. I trust you will find it adequate! A heresy is a crime of perception—an act of seeing something that, according to some custodian of reality, is not truly there. Heresy, therefore, is always relative to an orthodoxy.

In the case of ACIM it is a heresy of orthodox Christianity. That is to say that the teachings of The Course are opposed to biblical orthodoxy. An example would be that The Course teaches that "no one is punished for their sins, and the Sons of God are not sinners" (p. 88). The Bible teaches a different understanding of man and his relationship to sin. Romans 3:10 tells us that no one is righteous. Romans 3:23 tells us that all have sinned. The word all is all inclusive—it means everyone, no one is exempt. We have all sinned. Our sin has separated us from God (Isaiah 59:2).

Another example that clearly shows us how different or unorthodox The Course is related to the Bible is the idea that "the separation is a faulty formulation of reality, with no effect at all" (p. 241). Ephesians 2: 1-3 tells us that we were dead in our transgressions and sins. Spiritual death is to be separated from God. Without God's intervention those of

us who are without God are destined to eternal death. The Course erroneously teaches that we are not really separated from God, but that our perceived separation is a faulty understanding of who we really are—we are One! There is no separation. The Bible, on the other hand, is quite clear—we are self-deceiving if we do not recognize our sin and its result, our separation from a holy Creator God.

There are numerous other examples that could be pointed out as opposing teachings between the two texts (The Course and the Bible); some are included in my article. According to Helen Schucman The Course was given to her by Jesus. She sat in a trance state and auto-wrote what he dictated. However, the teachings of Ms. Schucman's "Jesus" are diametrically opposed to the teachings of Jesus in the Bible. Therefore, if we view the Bible as being orthodox (Truth), then we would by definition consider the teachings of The Course as heresy. In other words we have two Jesuses at play. One as represented by Ms. Schucman in The Course and another as revealed in the scriptures—the Bible: an authentic Jesus as the Bible reveals and a false "Jesus" found in the pages of ACIM.

The Law of Non-contradiction comes into play at this point. The Law of Non-contradiction simply states that two opposing statements cannot be true at the same time. They can be true at one point in history, but not concurrently. It also says that two opposing views can both be in error or that one of the two may be correct, but once again they both cannot be true at the same time. In our case we believe the Bible to be True and since the Bible teaches doctrine that opposes the teachings found in ACIM then The Course must be in error and exemplifies false teaching. The "Jesus" of ACIM is a false Christ (see Matthew 24: 20-24).

In regards to your concern whether you should continue your relationship or friendship with a friend who accepts ACIM as a legitimate teaching of Jesus, allow me to make a brief comment. I would continue to interact with them and allow them

to share their thoughts. If they showed a desire to continue seeking God's Truth I would lovingly point out to them the discrepancies between the two texts. Once I had established the inconsistencies between the two I would then attempt to help my friend come to an awareness of the Law of Non-contradiction. Once I have had success regarding the above I would, then, begin a discussion concerning the trustworthiness of the scriptures. I would recommend Josh McDowell's text *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict*. It can be found at your local Christian bookstore or on Amazon.com. It is well worth the read and it will be a tremendous resource for you in sharing with your friend. [Ed. note: Also check out the "Reasons to Believe" section of the Probe website.]

If your friend, on the other hand, is not open to dialoguing and openly sharing his or her thoughts and beliefs about The Course and God's revealed Word then I would reconsider another course of action. I would remain open to them and offer my friendship, but they would not be my confidant or my closest of friends. I would be cordial and agreeable as long as they continued to show an openness concerning their knowing God's Truth. I believe Paul's example on Mars Hill is highly instructive for us and how we might proceed in sharing our faith with someone who stands outside orthodoxy.

I pray that you would have God's favor as you share your faith with your friend. May the Holy Spirit guide and direct your ways as you make Him known to those whom you come into contact.

Blessings,

Russ Wise
Christian Information Ministries
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“What Makes You Better Than Others to Critique ‘Embraced by the Light’?”

What makes Russ Wise or Probe Ministries greater than anybody else to say this is heresy or false teachings of God in his analysis of *Embraced by the Light*? What makes you better than anybody else?

If you are really intelligent then you can analyze everything down to the “perfection of God.” There is no way man can really understand the “Divinity of God.” Our mere words cannot even explain or at least understand it. I think Russ Wise should keep his opinions to himself and not say his words are better than any other. I wonder what kind of belief or religion Russ has? He must be in a perfect religion.

I noticed that something seems to be missing from your complaint about Russ Wise and Probe Ministries: God’s perspective. It seems that you are unhappy with Russ’ analysis of *Embraced by the Light* as if it were nothing but human opinion. But both Russ and Probe Ministries analyze ideas from a perspective based on what God has told us in His word. In the same way that we can tell how crooked a stick is by placing it next to one that is absolutely straight, we can tell how incorrect the ideas in a book are by comparing them to the straight truth of God’s word.

It has nothing to do with believing that we are better than anyone else. We know better. We know it’s not about us at all. It’s about having confidence that God really has revealed His truth to us in the Bible, so we can confidently analyze anything that contradicts His word. This confidence can be

erroneously confused with arrogance, but it's not arrogance because we are simply agreeing with what God has said. Like I said before, we know it's not about us.

I respectfully must disagree with you that "There is no way man can really understand the 'Divinity of God.' Our mere words cannot even explain or at least understand it." If mankind had no choice but to try and figure out God on our own, you would be absolutely right. But the message of the Bible and the even more stunning message of Jesus Christ, the God-man who left heaven to come to earth, is that we don't have to speculate about God. He has reached out to us. He has spoken truth to us. He has revealed Himself to us. He passionately wants to be known and loved (even if we can't fully understand Him because He is so *other*, so much more than us), and He has made Himself knowable by speaking to us in His word and in His Son. And it is on the basis of that revelation that we can compare works like *Embraced by the Light* to what God has said, and identify where they are wrong because they contradict God. Not our mere human understanding of Godthey contradict what God Himself said.

Thanks for writing.

Sue Bohlin

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"How Do You Treat Those in Heretical Churches?"

Define what it is to be a Christian? More importantly, how do you treat those in heretical churches? As brothers? With

careful separation? Confrontationally?

Let me give some context for the questions; I come out of a cult or heretical church and am now in a mainline evangelical church after a conversion and great spiritual awakening.

The importance of these questions was demonstrated very clearly to me this last weekend as I spoke with a neighbor about some job difficulties that have been going on in his life for some time. I've always considered him a Christian because of his participation in church activities and the many conversations we've had on faith issues. Later, after reflecting on our conversation, I began to understand that what he calls "his faith" really means his religious culture. He does not believe/is NOT a believer/is NOT saved—in the sense that he is not willing to stake any risk on his beliefs. His belief is barely an intellectual one but by his actions and upon close examination even by his assertions he rejects a saving faith and relationship in a loving God in whom he can put his trust in the form of action.

I assume the reasonable and Christian response would be through a relationship based on grace and love—that those two will have the greatest impact. Where I run into difficulty is that having believed the lie, I never want anything to do with it again no matter what the form. So, to be able to defend the faith and more importantly to take ground, there has to be a point at which a separation occurs between Truth and what is not true. I think that is why Truth is often so offensive and why 1 Peter 3:16 is so important. With that said—any help?

Dear _____,

Your passion for truth and for souls to know the Lord Jesus in true relationship is a marvelous blessing! You honor God so greatly with your heart of understanding.

I think the simplest answer is to look to the Lord for how He handled those in the religious system of His day. He didn't paint whole groups of people with a single wide brush; He dealt with people individually. So He made a great separation between Himself and the Pharisees and leaders who were so addicted to their power and their system that they missed the Lord of Glory standing in front of them. Yet, He made Himself available to Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, because they were genuine seekers after God and truth.

Since the Lord warned us to discern between sheep and wolves, we know there are people calling themselves Christians who are merely religious (or not Jewish or Muslim!). So I think you are right to look for someone who has trusted in Christ and has spiritual fruit to indicate new life within as the definition of a biblical Christian.

I think we need to show grace and truth and love to those in heretical churches so that those with eyes to see and ears to hear can have a chance to respond to truth. Jesus said, "If I be lifted up, I will lift all men to myself." So we need to lift Him up, with the unhappy understanding that some people won't care when they are shown Life and Truth.

I don't think a confrontational approach is wise because most often, being in a heretical church is a matter of spiritual deception rather than deliberate evasion or avoidance of the truth. So the wise thing to do is to pray that they will see where they're being deceived as a result of being exposed to the truth. The enemy of our souls is very crafty and he uses religions and systems as well as individuals.

Hope this helps.

Sue Bohlin
Probe Ministries

The Breakdown of Religious Knowledge

What constitutes truth? The way we answer that question has greatly changed since the Middle Ages. Todd Kappelman provides an overview of three areas in philosophical thought, with their impact on Western culture: premodernism (the belief that truth corresponds to reality), modernism (the belief that human reason is the only way to obtain truth), and postmodernism (the belief that there is no such thing as objective truth).

The Postmodernism Revolution

There is a sense among many people today that the modern era, both in terms of technical and financial prosperity, as well as personal spiritual well-being, is over. There appears to be a general malaise among many people today, and a certain uneasy feeling that the twentieth-century has entered a new phase. Additionally, most believe that this new phase is not a very good one. Many diverse new "communities" such as feminists, gays, pro-choice advocates, pro-life advocates, conservatives, liberals, and various other groups, both religious and non-religious, make up the global village we now live in. These various groups are frequently at odds with one another and more often than not there is a breakdown in communication. This breakdown can be attributed to the lack of a common frame of reference in vocabulary and, more importantly, in views about what constitutes truth.

Most Christians suspect that something is wrong, and though they know that they should continue to engage the culture, they are often at a loss when they try to confront people from

different philosophical worldviews because truth itself has come under question. The late Francis Schaeffer wrote a small but extremely important book titled *Escape From Reason* in which he outlined the progression of thought from the late middle ages through the 1960s where the progression culminated in the movement known as existentialism. In this work Schaeffer noted that the criteria for truth had changed over the years until man found himself living in an age of *non-reason*. This was an age that had actually become hostile to the very idea of truth and to the concept that truths are timeless and not subject to change with the latest fashions of culture.

For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Darwinian naturalism has been one of the chief philosophical revolutions that has gripped the world. And, although few at the time had any idea how much Darwin's ideas would permeate the culture, no one today doubts the far reaching results of that revolution. The Christian church was not ready for the Darwinian revolution, and thus this philosophy was able to gain a foothold (and later a death grip) on every aspect of modern life, both in academic and popular circles. For decades after the revolution, many church leaders thought it unimportant to answer Darwin and said little or nothing about the new philosophy. Most Christians were, therefore, not equipped to provide coherent answers and were too late in entering the debate. The result is that most of our public schools and universities, and even our political lives, are dominated by the erroneous assumption that Darwinian naturalism is scientifically true and that creationism is fictitious.

Now, in the late twentieth century, we are in the middle of a revolution that will likely dwarf Darwinism in its impact on every aspect of thought and culture: the revolution is *postmodernism*, and the danger it holds in its most serious form is that truth, meaning, and objective reality do not

exist, and that all religious beliefs and moral codes are subjective. In every generation the church has had its particular heresies to deal with, and postmodern relativism is ours. Christ has called us to proclaim truth to a dying generation, and if we fail at this task, the twenty-first century may be overshadowed by relativism and a contempt for reason as much as the twentieth century was overshadowed by Darwinian naturalism.

From the Premodern to the Modern

Historians, philosophers, theologians, sociologists, and many others use the terms *modern*, *premodern*, and *postmodern* to help them navigate through large pieces of time and thought. In order to understand what these very helpful terms are used for, we will try to understand the premodern period first. The term *premodern* is used to describe the period before the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The premodern period is often referred to as the precritical period—a time before the criteria of truth became so stringent. The premodern period ends somewhere between the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century and the high part of the Renaissance in the sixteenth century. The major thing one should remember is that, with the advent of new scientific discoveries, the Western world was changing forever, and this would have far reaching impact on every aspect of life, especially religion.

Life in the premodern period was dominated by a belief in the supernatural realm, by a belief in God or gods, and His or their activity in human and cosmic affairs. The printing press had not been invented and the truth or falsity of these gods was largely communicated through oral tradition and hand-written texts which were extremely rare and precious. One can imagine daily or weekly events at which the elders of a tribe or village would gather and share stories with the younger members of the tribe. Typically, these stories contained

important matters of faith and history that provided a structure, or worldview, to help the people make sense of their world. These tales also included instructions or moral codes concerning the behavior that was expected for the community to live in peace.

One of the most interesting features about the premodern period is the way in which people decided if the stories that were shared among them were true or false. Imagine that someone had just told you that the world was created by a being that you could not detect with your five senses and that He had left a written communication about His will for your life. You would look around at the world that you lived in, and you would decide if the stories that were told to you explained the world and were reasonably believable. This method for determining truth is called the *correspondence method of truth*. If the story being told corresponds to the observable phenomenon in the world, then the story is accepted as truth. There is also a *coherence method of truth* in operation during this period. The coherence theory would add to the correspondence theory the idea that all of the individual stories told over a period of time should not contradict one another. These two forms of determining whether something is true or not were the primary means of evaluation for many centuries.

We may look at the premodern period of human history also as the precritical period, a time before the criteria of truth was based on the scientific method. The premodern period is often characterized as backward and somewhat inferior to modern society. And, although the premodern period is not a time period that most of us would want to live in, there is a certain advantage to having the test for truth based on oral and written tradition which corresponds to physical reality. For example, it is easy to see how something such as the creation stories and the gospel would fare much better in the premodern period than the modern period.

The Advent of the Modern

We must now leave our discussion of the premodern period and turn our attention to the beginning of the modern period. Some see the modern era as beginning in the Renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; others, however, believe it began with the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

A main tenet of *modernism* is that human reason, armed with the scientific method, is the only reliable means of attaining knowledge about the universe. During the Renaissance men began to discover the means to harness the powers and resources of the earth in ever increasing ways. It was a time marked by invention and discovery that led to what may be termed an optimistic humanism, or a high confidence in mankind. The Renaissance was followed by the Enlightenment where better telescopes and microscopes allowed men to unlock the secrets of the universe. The unlocking of these secrets led to the initial impression that the universe, and the human body, resembled machines and could be understood in mechanistic terms.

In the eighteenth century the progress of science accelerated so rapidly that it appeared as if science would soon be able to explain everything. Many believed that there were no limits to the power of human reason operating with the data from sense perception. In contrast to the truth of the oral tradition in the premodern era, the modern period accepted as truth only that which could be proven to be true. Many of the philosophers and theologians of the modern period sought to devise a rational religion, a faith that could incorporate all of the considerations and discoveries of the new science.

The effort of the Enlightenment rationalists to synthesize the new scientific method with the premodern religious beliefs soon resulted in a suspicion about the oral and written truth claims of the Christian religion. It is easy to see how

doctrines such as the virgin birth, the deity of Christ, and the resurrection could not be proved using scientific methods. There is no way to repeat such historical events in a laboratory environment, and, therefore, the credibility of such events began to become suspect.

The modern industrial revolution yielded new labor-saving inventions on a regular basis. These new discoveries substantiated the optimism of the modernists and gave credence to the belief that science and the scientific method would one day yield a utopian society. It is easy to see how the optimism of this period became almost intoxicating to many. The so-called-truths of religion were quickly being cast aside in favor of the new, and better, truths found by science. Examples found in advertising may be helpful. A company that wished to sell a car or a pair of tennis shoes would appeal to the scientific truths of their product. That is, a company would attempt to persuade a potential buyer into purchasing its product based on the fact that it was the best item obtainable. Add to this scientific furor, the advancement of Darwinian naturalism, and it is easy to see how religious claims seemed like quaint, antiquated beliefs for many people. The modern period culminated in arrogance concerning human abilities and human reason. It proposed a world created without any assistance from God. The modern period differs from the premodern in its rejection of the supernatural or the transcendent which is based largely on the belief that religious truth claims are different than scientific truth claims. According to many, truth itself had changed.

The End of the Modern and the Advent of the Postmodern

We have been discussing the changing beliefs about the nature of truth. There are many things that contributed to the end of the modern period and the demise of the Enlightenment confidence that had driven Western development for over three

centuries. The major driving tenet behind the advance of modernism was the belief that reality was objective and that all men could discover the principles of nature and unlock her secrets.

The failure of the modern project according to many postmodernists was due to the erroneous assumption that there is such a thing as "objective truth." Following the Romantic and Existentialist movements, the postmodernists would build their theories of reality on the latest discoveries in language, culture, psychotherapy, and even cutting-edge science. Theories in quantum physics, radically different views about cultural norms, and ethnic differences all contributed to the belief that truth claims are much more relative than the Enlightenment thinkers had believed. Many believed that science had substantiated relativity.

Modernity may be understood as a time when our best philosophers, theologians, and scientists attempted to make sense out of the world based on the belief in objective reality. One of the central tenets of the era we live in (the postmodern period) is that there is no such thing as objective truth. In fact, the new trend in postmodern thought is to embrace, affirm, and live with philosophical, theological, and even scientific chaos. Earlier we used an example from advertising; suggesting that products were marketed based on their claims to be superior to what a competitor might offer. If we use this example again, postmodern methodology appeals more to a person's feelings than to his or her sense of factual truth. Cars, tennis shoes, and other products are marketed based on image. The best car is not necessarily the one that has been made to the highest standard; rather the best car is the one that can bolster the image of the driver.

The effects of this type of thinking may be seen in our contemporary ethical dilemma. While it is true that people from various ethnic, geographic, and other time periods place different values on certain behaviors, it cannot be true that

any behavior is acceptable dependent only upon the individual's outlook. The effect of postmodern theories on Christian truth claims is that the creation accounts found in Genesis, and the stories about Christ in the gospels have been reduced to one cultural group's account of reality. Christians, argue many postmodernists, are free to believe that Christ is God if they like. But their claims cannot not be exclusive of other people's beliefs. Truth may be true for one person and false for another.

Furthermore, Christians are expected to tolerate contradicting truth claims and to look the other way if certain ethical behaviors (abortion, homosexuality, etc.) do not suit their tastes. The current postmodern condition is only in the early stages of development, not even a half a century old, and yet its devastating effects have penetrated every aspect of our lives. Christians largely responded too late to the threats of Darwinism, and now the destructive effects of that movement are evident to anyone in the Christian community. Postmodernism, and its companion rampant philosophical relativism, should be among the foremost concerns of any Christian who wishes to engage his or her culture and ensure that the gospel of Christ has a fertile context in which it can take root and grow in the future.

Responding to the Current Crises in Knowledge

We have been discussing changing views of truth and the problems these changes pose for Christians as we approach the twenty-first century. Recently a young woman at the University of Bucknell in Pennsylvania provided a perfect example of how modern men are different from their predecessors. This young woman believed that truth was a matter of how one looked at things. She, like so many others believed that two people could look at a given situation or object and arrive at different conclusions. While this is true to some degree, it

is not true to the degree that the two truth claims can logically be contradictions of one another.

When she was pressed on her beliefs concerning reality, the inconsistencies of her philosophy were evident. She stated that everything was a matter of opinion or one's personal perspective. When asked if this belief extended to physical reality, she said it did. She said that a person could look at something in such a way as to alter reality.

The example of the existence or nonexistence of her car was raised. She said that if she believed that her car was not in the parking lot and if another person believed that it was, it could be possible that it actually existed for one person and not for the other. When one first hears something like this, it sounds as if the person who maintains this position is joking, and could not possibly mean for us to take him or her seriously. However, the sad and frightening truth is that this individual is very serious.

This young woman is representative of a large part of our Western culture, men and women who tend to think unsystematically. The result of this way of thinking is that people often hold ideas that are logically inconsistent and contradict each other. The result is that persons professing to be Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jews, or even atheists are given equal degrees of credibility. Truth has become a function of personal preference, not correspondence to objective reality.

The effects of this new way of thinking are evident everywhere. When we attempt to speak to people on any controversial issue, whether it is political, ethical, or religious, we invariably are confronted with different approaches to truth. Some people accept divine revelation, some accept science, and others accept no final authority. We have moved from a fact-based criteria to a feeling-based criteria for truth. The final appeal in many disagreements is

often a statement such as: “That may be true for you, but it is not true for me.” This is an implicit denial of a common reality.

Psalm 11:3 asks what the righteous can do if the foundations have been destroyed. While the threat of postmodern relativism may be something new, it is not the first time that Christians have seen a concentrated effort to destroy the foundations of truth. The New Testament is replete with admonitions for Christians to allow their behavior to speak for them. In John 13:35 we are told that people will know that we belong to Christ, and that our testimony is true, by the way we love one another. The premodern, modern, and postmodern tests for truth all have strengths and weaknesses, but the Scriptures seem to indicate that it is our behavior towards one another and our devotion to God, not our ability to prove God’s existence, that will convince a skeptical postmodern world that hungers for truth.

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