

Will Winter Ever End? Groundhog Day and Modern Thought

Rick Wade takes us on a journey through the movie Groundhog Day to see what light it sheds on a modernist worldview. The protagonist's self-centered, materialistic, career-driven view of life exemplifies the modernist thinking applies to actual life. As Christians, Rick points out a number of good examples from the movie that will help us better understand this view of the world.

Its All About Me

Did you see the 1993 movie *Groundhog Day*? In this film, we meet Phil Connors, an arrogant and self-obsessed weatherman on a local TV station who is sent to Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, to report on the events surrounding Groundhog Day. Phil, played by Bill Murray, is rude to his co-workers, Rita the producer (played by Andie MacDowell) and Larry the cameraman (played by Chris Elliott). He has a condescending attitude toward the people of Punxsutawney who he calls hicks. Phil is very taken with himself. He tells his coworkers that a major network is interested in him, and at one point calls himself the talent. But now Phil is stuck in this awful assignment (too insignificant for someone of his stature) and only wants to finish up and get back to Pittsburgh. Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately as things turn out), the team is trapped by a blizzard and forced to stay in Punxsutawney. The next day, however, something bizarre happens: Phil awakens to the same music on the radio and the DJs saying the same things as the morning before. Its February 2nd, Groundhog Day, all over again.

And thus begins Phil Connors nightmare. Every morning Phil awakens to February the second again . . . and again and again. We aren't told how many times this happens, but it happens often enough that he is able to go from not being able to play the piano at all to being an excellent jazz pianist. What does Phil do with this strange situation?

Phil's responses to his circumstances illustrate some modern ways of thinking and one distinctly *unmodern* way. I'd like to use this film to focus on these philosophies. This won't be a film review or an exercise in film criticism. *Groundhog Day* will simply serve as a mirror to hold up to modern thought.

In Phil Connors we see what Michael Foley, professor of early Christian thought at Baylor, calls a typical modern.^{1} He is self-centered, materialistic, egotistical, and career-driven. He exemplifies what sociologist Craig Gay calls modern man's desire for *autonomy* and . . . what might be called the *will-to-self-definition*.^{2} Gay quotes Daniel Bell who says that self-realization and even self-gratification have become the master principles of modern culture.^{3}

This describes Phil, but not only Phil. What is more obviously true to moderns than the idea that one must look out for number one? Modernists want to define themselves. Were the captains of our own lives, and were our own number one concern.

But with this strange turn of events, Phil, the one who likes to think of himself as on the rise, finds himself stuck in one place. Every day he faces the same routine. Nothing he does seems to matter, for time is no longer progressing. The past doesn't matter, for yesterday was like today. And as far as he knows, tomorrow will be the same.

What Goes Around . . . Goes Around

When Phil finally accepts his predicament, he asks his new drinking pals, Gus and Ralph, a question: What would *you* do, he asks, if you were stuck in one place, and every day was exactly the same, and nothing that you did mattered? This question sets the stage for what follows in the film as Phil discovers over and over that nothing he did yesterday matters; nothing carries over.

But one can see something deeper going on here than simply an illustration of a boring, repetitive life. Perhaps not incidentally it also serves on the larger scale to describe the situation many people face. The situation of Phil going nowhere is a subtle illustration of a major philosophical shift in modern times, namely, the abandonment of a *teleological* view of the world.

What do I mean by that? *Teleology* is the theory of purpose, ends, goals, final causes. [{4}](#) Before Christ, Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle taught that there was design behind the universe; its forming wasn't just an accidental occurrence. In the West, with the rise of Christian theology, there came the understanding of the universe as made by God for a purpose. That is what *teleology* is: the idea of design with a goal in mind.

In modern times, however, that understanding is gone. We are taught that the universe is an accident of nature, and hence that we are, too. We weren't put here for a purpose; there is no goal to life beyond what we choose. Any meaning we have in life is meaning we supply ourselves. When this idea really sinks in, the ramifications are truly alarming. We want to have purpose; people with no sense of purpose have nothing to move toward. This idea was the root of the despair of existential philosophy. It drove thinkers such as Jean Paul Sartre to teach that the burden is on us to form our own lives, that to *not* do so is to live inauthentic lives.

Although the existentialists tried to transcend this sense of meaninglessness, they weren't successful. The sense of loss that comes with thinking we have no purpose reflects what we know deep down because of being made in God's image: we were made by Someone for some purpose. To not have purpose necessarily diminishes our lives.

Phil Connors' life no longer has purpose. He is stuck in one place going nowhere, and it isn't a happy situation.

So what does he do? He looks to Rita for help. You're a producer, he says. Think of something. Rita advises him to see a doctor. In modern times we typically look to science for the answer, in this case medical science. First, a medical doctor is unable to find anything wrong with Phil. Then a psychiatrist finds Phil's problem to be beyond his abilities. Science is supposed to be modern man's savior, but here medical science fails. Technology fails Phil, too. The highways are closed because Phil's own weather forecast is wrong; he predicted the blizzard wouldn't hit Punxsutawney, so he can't drive back to Pittsburgh. Long distance phone service is down so he is unable to call home. So Phil is stuck. This modern man cannot be rescued by modern means.

What is Phil's next move? He simply takes his hedonistic self-preoccupation to new levels. It's Feb. 2nd yet again, and Phil is out drinking with Gus and Ralph and reflecting on his predicament. After imbibing quite a bit, they get in a car to leave. As they drive away, Phil asks Gus and Ralph, What if there were no tomorrow? Gus responds that there would be no consequences, no hangovers! They could do anything they wanted! Phil's eyes brighten. He can do whatever he wants! It's the same thing your whole life, he says. Clean up your room. Stand up straight. Pick up your feet. Take it like a man. Be nice to your sister. . . . I'm not going to live by their rules anymore!

And thus begins Phil's hedonistic binge.

Its All About Me . . . With a Vengeance

What does he do with this newfound freedom? When Phil realizes that there are no consequences to his actions since there is no tomorrow he indulges his every whim in a sort of hedonistic binge. He eats like a glutton, seduces a woman, robs an armored car and buys a fancy car with the money.

Then he sets his eyes on the real prize: Rita, the producer. Day after day (or Feb. 2nd after Feb. 2nd!) he collects tidbits of information from Rita about herself and about what her ideal man would be like. He then tries to fit the image himself in order to ingratiate himself to her with the hope of seducing her.

Michael Foley says that in this Phil becomes Machiavelli's prince.[\[5\]](#) In his book on political philosophy called *The Prince*, Machiavelli said a prince should always *appear* to be virtuous because that is what people expect. However, he said, the prince shouldn't actually concern himself with *being* virtuous, for that would often work against his own interests.

A prince should not necessarily avoid vices such as cruelty or dishonesty if employing them will benefit the state. Cruelty and other vices should not be pursued for their own sake, just as virtue should not be pursued for its own sake: virtues and vices should be conceived as means to an end. Every action the prince takes must be considered in light of its effect on the state, not in terms of its intrinsic moral value.[\[6\]](#)

This is Phil's attitude. He wants Rita, so he pretends to be the good man she desires. The end justifies the means, right?

As a society we have lost any sense of going somewhere. In the West, we've been taught to live for the moment, to savor the experiences of today. Yesterday is gone, and there is no ultimate tomorrow before us which will draw together the pieces of our lives into a meaningful conclusion. The world came about by accident and is going nowhere. In fact, we're told it's winding down to some cosmic death. The utopian vision of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was crushed by World War I. Following the devastation of the next World War, existentialist philosophers said we should create our own sets of values. Increasing or at least maintaining our personal peace and prosperity now seems to be our highest ambition because, quite frankly, we have nothing else to hope for. What is left to do but enjoy ourselves as much as we can while here? Our national moral consensus goes little further than don't hurt other people unnecessarily, and we are left to our own ideas about what constitutes necessity. If there is nothing to hope for, today is all we have, so we pad our own nest and enjoy what we can out of life. I am the center of my universe, and it's your duty to not interfere.

To be honest, there is nothing wrong with enjoying the experiences life offers (given the limits of biblical morality and wisdom, of course). I recently read Francis Meyer's book *Under the Tuscan Sun* made into a movie starring Diane Lane. The movie barely scratches the surface of the pleasures of life in Tuscany described in the book: preparing and enjoying wonderful food; preparing the olive trees for next year's harvest, and at harvest time discerning when and how quickly to pick to avoid mildew; picking herbs like sage and rosemary from plants growing in front of the house for seasoning the evening's dinner; choosing the best local wine for the main course at dinner; taking in the smells and sights of a small Italian town; discovering a portion of an ancient Roman road or a wall built by the Etruscans; enjoying the company of friends and loved ones outdoors in warm weather, or gathered around the hearth in winter. The riches of such experiences have

been lost to many in modern times.

Problems come, however, when *I* become the center of my ultimately purposeless world, when other people become objects to enjoy or reject as I might a certain food. Its bad enough when we become the centers of our own worlds. We go further than that and expect to be the centers of *others* worlds as well! For some reason, we expect the lives of others to revolve around ours. But while we are crafting our own worlds, others are crafting theirs. What if my plans dont fit theirs or vice versa?

Phil tried repeatedly to win Ritas affection to satisfy his own desires. Night after night Phil tries to woo her, and night after night she slaps him in the face when she realizes what hes up to. Phil cant manipulate Rita the way he wants to.

Phil is so much the center of his world that, at one point in the film, Phil the weatherman said he creates the weather! But of course he doesnt. He cant even predict it perfectly. If Phil cant control the weather which has no will of its own, how can he possibly control Rita who does? He could have learned something from Jim Careys character, Bruce Arnold, in *Bruce Almighty* who could not manipulate the free will of his girlfriend Grace to regain her love.

It Has to Stop

So Phil cannot have what he really wants. What happens when one realizes that there is nothing lasting to hold onto? That is, if one can get hold of it at all? In the mid-twentieth century, beginning with the despair that comes from believing that there are no fixed and eternal values, existentialists tried to infuse individual lives with value by saying we create values ourselves. Other people, however, simply fell into despair and stayed there. Thats what happened to Phil Connors. First he tried to solve his problem through medical

science. Then he accepted the situation and tried to find fulfillment in the pursuit of pleasure. When that failed, he was lost.

A life with no tomorrow, and where yesterday and today don't matter, has no meaning because it has no explanation. But an explanation is what we crave. The discovery that there is no explanation is at the heart of what the existentialists called the *absurd*. Albert Camus said that a world that has no reason leaves a person feeling like a stranger. His exile is without remedy, wrote Camus, since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity.^{7} As a result, for some people or perhaps for many the question that arises is, Why live at all? There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, said Camus, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.^{8}

Even before Feb. 2nd, Phil's life was absurd; he just didn't know it. His past wasn't forming his future, and he had no sure promised land before him anyway. He would be what he made of himself (a very modern idea), but he didn't seem to be doing a very good job. One of the key characteristics of the modern mind is the idea that the past is to be discarded in favor of the future because things just have to get better over time. There were such high hopes in modernity! But while Phil had hopes for tomorrow, he really was going nowhere. The repetition of Feb. 2nd only mirrored his real life.

The absurdity of Phil's situation descended upon him on one of his many Feb. 2nds. Having tried to enjoy a life of no consequences, and having been rejected by Rita, Phil falls into despair. In his umpteenth report on Groundhog Day festivities he expresses his despair clearly. You want a prediction about the weather, you're asking the wrong Phil, he says referring to the groundhog. I'll give you a winter

prediction: It's gonna be cold, it's gonna be grey, and it's gonna last you for the rest of your life.

Phil could only think of one thing to do. Remember that if the groundhog, Punxsutawney Phil, sees its shadow, winter will last another forty days. Phil reasons that, if winter is to end, the groundhog can't be allowed see its shadow again. So Phil the weatherman decides that Phil the groundhog must die. There is no way this winter is ever going to end, Phil tells Rita, as long as that groundhog keeps seeing his shadow. I don't see any way out of it. He's got to be stopped. And I have to stop him. Here the parallel between the two Phils is made clear. To bring an end to winter, both the season and his own personal winter, Phil kidnaps the groundhog and drives off a cliff, killing them both. Neither Phil will now awaken to see his shadow again.

Or so he thought. The next morning, promptly at 6 AM, Phil awakens yet again to another Groundhog Day. A look of despair crosses his face. He gets out of bed, climbs into the bathtub with an electric toaster and electrocutes himself. But Feb. 2nd comes yet again. Phil tries many different ways to end it all. Later he tells Rita I've been stabbed, shocked, poisoned, frozen, hung, electrocuted, and burned. He keep trying to end his winter but he can't.

Although Camus raised the question of suicide, he didn't argue for it. He tried to persuade readers that there can be good reasons for living even though life as a whole has no meaning. But Phil, and many people in real life, have decided there is no reason to go on. Some don't go as far as suicide, but their nihilistic lives reflect the same idea: there is no meaning, nothing matters, nothing is of any value.

Is there any way out of this mess?

Phil's Redemption

Phil Connors first two responses to his predicament hedonism and despair were failures. Once more he turns to Rita for help. He tries to prove to her he really is repeating the same day over and over. After seeing several convincing evidences that something strange really is going on, she offers to spend a day with him just to observe. Near the end of an enjoyable day, Rita takes a positive view and tells Phil that maybe what hes experiencing isnt a curse at all. It depends on how you look at it, she says.

With that little bit of encouragement, Phils whole attitude changes. He now sees Rita not as an object to possess, but as a person of intrinsic value. Before, he wanted to use her; now he appreciates her. As she sleeps he whispers to her that he doesnt deserve someone like her. Now Phil has a purpose. Before he bettered himself to fool Rita; now his ambition is to be worthy of her.

So Phil sets about improving himself. He betters himself morally; Michael Foley sees here a turn toward an ethics of virtue. Phil begins doing good things for other people such as giving money and food to an old man who lives on the streets, changing a tire for a woman, saving a mans life, giving tickets to *Wrestlemania* to a pair of young newlyweds, catching a boy who falls out of the tree (who never thanks him, Phil notes!). Because he keeps repeating Feb. 2nd, Phil performs these good acts again and again. He also betters himself intellectually and artistically. And in the end, Phil wins Ritas affections.

Conclusion

In this simple film about a weatherman from Pittsburgh, we can see illustrated a few modernistic approaches to life. Having found himself in a purposeless existence, Phil looked for his salvation in science and in hedonistic pleasure seeking. Not

finding it there, he fell into despair. With the encouragement of an upbeat lady as he called Rita, Phil decided to make himself a better man.

Several different religions have tried to claim the message of *Groundhog Day* as their own. Buddhists see Phil as the bodhisattva who must return to help others better themselves so they may all escape the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Jews see Phil as being returned to earth to do good works to help bring the world to perfection.

For evangelical Protestants this might sound suspiciously like works salvation. But *Groundhog Day* isn't a Christian film; we shouldn't look for more in it than it offers. As I said at the beginning, it holds up a mirror to modern thought, and shows the failure of some contemporary beliefs.

Nonetheless, the film still offers us a reminder. In our zeal to proclaim salvation by faith alone, it's possible that we relegate the biblical admonitions to live good lives to too low a level. Our tickets are punched; we have our seats in heaven. As for now . . . well, you know how some say It's easier to receive forgiveness than permission. Maybe we just don't concern ourselves enough with living virtuous lives.

Groundhog Day illustrates the vacuousness of some modern ideas. But it also reminds us that living a good life *does* have its rewards: we are better people for the effort, and we become more attractive to people around us.

Notes

1. Michael P. Foley, "Phil's Shadow," *Touchstone* 17, no. 2 (April, 2004): 12.
2. Craig M. Gay, *The Way of the (Modern) World: Or, Why It's Tempting to Live As If God Doesn't Exist* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 184.
3. Daniel Bell "The Return of the Sacred: The Argument on

- the Future of Religion," in *British Journal of Sociology* 28, no. 4 (1977): 424, quoted in Gay, 192.
4. Dagobert D. Runes, ed., *Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1983), s.v. "Teleology," by Wilbur Long.
 5. Foley, 13.
 6. Sparknotes, "The Prince," www.sparknotes.com/philosophy/prince/themes.html.
 7. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 5.
 8. *Ibid.*, 3.

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Confident Belief

Introduction

It's hard to imagine how any Christian at any time in history could live life completely free from any doubts about the truth of the faith. Suffering, inconsistent behavior among Christians, the lure of the world, intellectual misgivings—these things and others can lead us to question whether it's all true.

Since the days of the early church there have been objections to the gospel which have given pause to Christians. Can I really believe this? *Should* I believe this? Doubt is part of human experience, and Christians experience it no less than non-Christians. Doubts about our faith are more momentous than many we deal with, however, because of their implications. I have my doubts about whether my favorite football team will be in the Super Bowl, but I can still hang in there with them as

a fan. The claims of Christ are much more momentous, however. Our individual destinies and more are at stake.

We find ourselves today in the West beset by two different schools of thought which can cause us to doubt. On the one hand are the modernists, heirs of the Enlightenment, who believe that reason is sufficient for true knowledge and that Christianity just doesn't measure up to sound reason. On the other hand are postmodernists who don't believe anyone can know what is true, and are astonished that we dare lay claim to having *the* truth about ultimate reality.

I'd like to look at these two mindsets to see if they have legitimate claims. The goal is to see if either should be allowed to rob us of our confidence.

Modernism and Certain Knowledge

Modernists believe that our reason is sufficient to know truth, in fact the *only* reliable means of attaining knowledge. Only that which can be scientifically measured and quantified and reasoned through logically can constitute true knowledge.

What does this say, however, about things that *can't* be so measured, things such as beauty, morals, and matters of the spirit? Can we not have knowledge of such things? We have inherited the belief that such things are at best matters of opinion; they are subjective matters having to do only with the individual's experiences and tastes.

This way of thinking is disastrous for religious beliefs of almost any kind. Christianity in particular makes claims that can't be weighed or counted or measured (although there *are* elements which *can* be empirically tested): the nature of God, justification by faith, the deity of Christ, and the reality of the Holy Spirit are a few examples. Since these elements are central but don't fit within our logical, scientific mindset, they are said to be matters of personal opinion at best, or figments of our imagination at worst.

The matter of the “knowability” of the faith is a problem for nonbelievers, but it can be a worse problem for believers. Those whom Daniel Taylor calls “reflective Christians” often find themselves betrayed by their own doubts; they feel the weight of providing for themselves the kind of evidences a nonbeliever might demand and feel guilty when they cannot produce in their own minds a logical certainty for their beliefs.[\[1\]](#) What such a believer typically does is continue to mount up evidence and arguments and think and talk and think some more and hope that one day either the missing link will come clear or he will be able to “call off thoughts awhile,” in the words of poet Gerard Manley Hopkins.[\[2\]](#)

Postmodern Skepticism

Times are changing, though, and the problem Christians face more and more is the challenge coming from the other end of the spectrum. If modernists demand indubitable knowledge, postmodernists deny the very possibility of true knowledge at all. While on the one hand modernists say there is not enough evidence to trust our beliefs, on the other hand postmodernists tell us our evidences mean nothing regarding the truth value of our faith.

Postmodernists believe that truth is a construct of our own imagination and desires. They believe there is no single, unifying account of reality that covers everything, one *metanarrative* as they call it. They believe one must leave everything an open question, that one shouldn't settle anywhere since there is no way to know ultimate truths at all. Our own realities are created for us partly by our society and partly by our own exercise of power, often by the very words we use.

Is the Christian, then, now to think of her faith as just that? *Her* faith? Something that has validity for *her* and her *group* but not necessarily for everyone? This kind of thinking fosters religious pluralism, the belief that truth is found in

many different religions. This is disastrous for Christianity for it leaves us wondering why we should hold to these beliefs when others might be more attractive.

Thus, there is on the one hand the modernist who thinks we can know everything we need to know using our reason, and on the other the postmodernist who thinks the search for knowledge is a waste of time. In the face of these mindsets, what should we do? Should we resign ourselves to feeling guilty and maybe a little intellectually perverse because we can't assign mathematical certainty to our beliefs? Or do we swallow the skepticism of postmodernists and just hold our beliefs as the creations of our own minds and wills? It is my contention that we needn't be bound by either position on truth and knowledge, but that we can have knowledgeable confidence in the truth of the faith.

Modernism: The Enlightenment Search for Knowledge

Modernity was the era which had its roots in the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries, and which continued until recent years. Although postmodernism seems to be the order of the day, one worldview doesn't come to a screeching halt one day and another pick up the next. Thus, there are still many people who view life in modernist terms.

Modernists believe that reason is the only truly reliable source of knowledge. Revelation is set aside. Since reason is the authority, only that which has logical or mathematical certainty can be accepted as true knowledge. Anything less can only have some level of probability. The attacks of empiricists such as David Hume apparently rendered Christianity highly *improbable*.

Lesslie Newbigin argues that this demand for indubitable knowledge gave rise to the skepticism of our day. In fact, postmodern skepticism is a sharp rejection of Enlightenment

thought.

Let's look briefly at the Enlightenment ideal of knowledge.

René Descartes and the Search for Certainty

In response to the skepticism of the 17th century, mathematician/philosopher René Descartes accepted the challenge of providing an argument for the existence of God which would be beyond doubt.[\[3\]](#) Descartes's approach was to use the tool of the skeptics—which is *doubt*—as his starting point. He threw out everything that couldn't be known indubitably, and was left with one idea which he couldn't doubt: I think, therefore I am. He developed his philosophy from this starting point.

Two important points are to be made about Descartes's method. First, he made the break from starting with God as the measure of all things to starting with the individual person. Human reason was now the supreme arbiter of truth.[\[4\]](#) Second, Descartes established doubt as a principle of knowledge.[\[5\]](#) In modern times, critical thinking doubts everything until it is proved true.

On this basis, Western man devoted himself to knowing as much as he could about his world without any reference to God, and with the idea that knowledge had to be logically or mathematically certain. Knowledge is quantifiable; one must strip away anything other than brute, objective facts which can be weighed, counted, or measured or deduced from facts which can be so quantified. Knowledge was to be objective, certain, and dispassionate—not subject to personal feelings or values or faith commitments. As theologian Stanley Grenz says, "The new tools of research included precise methods of measurement and a dependence on mathematical logic. In turning to this method, Enlightenment investigators narrowed their focus of interest—and hence began to treat as real only those aspects of the universe that are measurable."[\[6\]](#)

On the heels of Descartes came Isaac Newton who gave us a vision of the cosmos as being an orderly machine, an idea in keeping with the rationalism of Descartes. The universe could be understood once its laws were understood. Although Descartes and Newton believed their ideas gave support to their Christian beliefs, they were subsequently used for just the opposite. "The modern world turned out to be Newton's mechanistic universe populated by Descartes's autonomous, rational substance," says Grenz. "In such a world, theology was forced to give place to the natural sciences, and the central role formerly enjoyed by the theologian became the prerogative of the natural scientist."[\[7\]](#)

Was Descartes's method significant in Western History? Grenz notes that "Descartes set the agenda for philosophy for the next three hundred years" by making human reason central.[\[8\]](#) In time, this approach was applied to other disciplines as well, from politics to ethics to theology. "In this way," says Grenz, "all fields of the human endeavor became, in effect, branches of natural science."[\[9\]](#)

Time has proved the value of scientific and mathematical reasoning. We all enjoy the benefits of technology. This being the case, however, why is it that we at the turn of the century find ourselves so skeptical? What has happened to the confidence modern man had in his ability to know?

Postmodernism: The Rejection of the Enlightenment Idea

With the acceptance of René Descartes's idea that truth was to be found ultimately in reason, and that the starting point for knowledge was doubt, the die was cast for the period of history we call modernity. Using just his reason, and denying anything which wasn't certain, the individual could come to true knowledge with no reference to God.

But skeptical attacks continued through such philosophers as

David Hume. In response, Immanuel Kant formulated a new understanding of knowledge. He believed that knowledge came from data received by the senses which was then formed into understandable ideas by the workings of our own minds. Thus, the structure of our own minds became a crucial component of the known world. With Kant, the thinking individual was now firmly established as the final authority for truth. Even with this, however, Kant still believed there *is* a reality external to us, and that all our minds work the same way to understand it.

Although Kant believed that we could truly know the world around us, his ideas pushed us a significant step away from that reality. He believed that we are thus incapable of knowing things as they are *in themselves*; we only know things as they *appear* to us. Thus, since God doesn't appear to us empirically, we do not have real knowledge of Him. Philosophers following him began to pick away at his ideas. Johann Fichte, for example, accepted Kant's ideas for the most part, but denied the idea that there *are* things-in-themselves; in other words, that there is something to reality apart from our perceptions of it. What we perceive is what is there. Now the way was made clear to think in terms of "alternative conceptual frameworks." There could now be multiple ways of understanding and interpreting the world.

Nietzsche

Other philosophers picked away at Kant as well, but we'll only consider one more, the man who has been called the "patron saint of postmodern philosophy,"[\[10\]](#) Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche was a true foe of modernism. He believed the whole project of building up these "great edifices of ideas"[\[11\]](#) was fundamentally flawed. Our attempts to abstract general knowledge from the particulars around us only results in distortion, he thought. He argued that "what we commonly accept as human knowledge is in fact merely a self-contained set of illusions. He essentially viewed 'truth' as a function

of the language we employ and hence believed that truth 'exists' only within specific linguistic contexts."[{12}](#) Our world is only a construction of our own perspective, an aesthetic creation. And it has its roots in the will to power, "the desire to perfect and transcend the self through the exercise of personal creative power rather than dependence on anything external." Thus, "Motivated by the will to power," he thought, "we devise metaphysical concepts—conceptions of 'truth'—that advance the cause of a certain species or people."[{13}](#)

This is the heart of postmodern thought, and it surrounds us today. We cannot know the truth about reality; we only know our own constructions of it. We can hope to convince others to join us in our beliefs, but there is no room for rational argumentation, because one's views about the world are no better or worse than any others. As Stanley Grenz says, "all human interpretations—including the Christian worldview—are equally valid because all are equally invalid."[{14}](#) No one can really know, so believe what you want. But in attacking the possibility of knowing truth, postmodernism has cut off the limb upon which it sits. One writer has noted that postmodernism has destroyed itself. "It has deconstructed its entire universe. So all that are left are pieces. All that remains to be done is to play with the pieces. Playing with the pieces—that is postmodern."[{15}](#)

These, then, are the primary choices our society offers for considering the truth value of Christianity. Either we can affirm the modernist attitude and be satisfied only with scientific or mathematical certainty, or with the postmodernist we can throw the whole truth thing out the window.

Impossible Demands, Groundless

Limitations: A Critique

When challenged directly or indirectly by the world about the validity of our faith, what do we do? Do we continue to use modernistic ways of thinking to make a case for the faith, believing that we must provide logically certain proof? Or do we offer a postmodern, “true for me” argument relying on subjective matters which we use to persuade people to believe?[{16}](#) The answer lies in rejecting both the demands of modernism and the limitations of postmodernism.

Neither Mathematical Certainty . . .

In his book *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship*, Lesslie Newbigin argues that the modern approach was essentially wrong-headed, that it called for something which was unattainable.

With respect to the insistence on mathematical certainty, Newbigin notes first that this way of thinking takes us away from the real world rather than moving us closer to it. He says, “The certainty of mathematical propositions, as Einstein often observed, is strictly proportionate to their remoteness from reality.”[{17}](#) For example, there is no such thing as a point as understood mathematically. Certainty belongs to the world of pure forms, not that of material things. “Only statements that can be doubted make contact with reality,” he says.[{18}](#)

Second, thinkers in the Romantic period argued that “mathematical reason could not do justice to the fullness of human experience.” Such things as art and music and cultural traditions can’t be mapped out mathematically.[{19}](#)

Third, the ambition of dealing with facts apart from values or other non-factual biases is an impossible dream. We are never value-free in our thinking, even in the laboratory. As writers such as Thomas Kuhn and Michael Polanyi have shown (both of

whom were scientists turned philosophers), what one studies and for what purpose, how one acts ethically in the lab and in the reporting of studies, what ones overall goals are for particular scientific work—all these reflect unproved value commitments; no one gives indubitable evidence for their validity. For all practical purposes it is impossible to remove such values held by faith.

In addition, I suggest that it isn't merely practically impossible to remove these faith/value commitments: it would be *wrong* to attempt to do so. One must always situate one's work in a framework of values to give it any significant meaning at all. Otherwise we are just acting, just doing things with no purpose to give coherence and direction.

Someone might object here that ones value commitments *can* be verified so as to render them no longer just faith commitments. To this Newbigin responds that faith is fundamental, even to doubt! For even doubt must rest on beliefs which are not themselves doubted. This is because one doubts something because it conflicts with something else one already believes. If that prior belief is also subjected to the test of doubt, it, too, can only be doubted because of something else one believes, and so on. Further, if one's doubt itself is based upon certain criteria of truth, then those criteria themselves must be believed. If they, too, are subjected to doubt, then the criteria for evaluating *them* must be believed to be true criteria, and so on again. Of course, one could simply doubt everything—in other words, become a skeptic. But no one can live consistently as a skeptic. To get in a car and drive on the highway indicates that one believes the brakes will work. And we expect people to have a basic understanding of some normative moral values. Newbigin sums up: "One does not learn anything except by believing something, and—conversely—if one doubts everything one learns nothing. . . . Rational doubt always rests on faith and not vice versa." [\[20\]](#)

It's important to realize, too, that the mathematical model simply doesn't apply across the board. Few areas of our lives are governed by such a high standard. Christianity isn't just a set of ideas to be logically constructed and evaluated. It is a Person relating to persons in particular historical contexts. We can place no stricter demands on this relationship regarding the certainty of knowledge than we do on the relationships we experience with people on earth in particular historical contexts.

On the plus side, we *do* have a significant body of evidence supporting our belief including historical evidences, rational arguments, and matters of the human experience such as the question of meaning—things which can't be quantified and thus find no place in modernistic thought. We also have no reason to adopt the reductionistic naturalism of modernism just on modernists' say so, but rather recognize the reality of and intrusion of the supernatural into our world.

In addition, it must also be kept in mind that the truth of Christianity doesn't rest on the fragility of human reason, although it is through our minds that we recognize its truth. It rests on the faithfulness of God who has made Himself known to us.[{21}](#) Our assurance comes from the combination of knowing, believing, and following the One who is true, not just from working out logical arguments.

Thus, we conclude that beliefs do *not* have to be indubitable to be held as true—in fact, very little of what we know has indubitable certainty—and unproved values form a necessary part of our knowledge. Modernists are not justified in requiring us to conform to their narrow standards for rationality.

. . . Nor Postmodern Skepticism

Although modernism was naïve in its expectations of reason, the reaction of postmodernism has been too severe.

In its reaction against modernism, postmodernism threw off the classical understanding of truth—namely, correspondence with reality. Having rejected the possibility of knowing what is real external to us, postmodernists have left us with only our own minds, wills, and words. Truth is the product of the creative activity of the individual.

But this clearly isn't the way we live. We assume that whenever we say something like, "It's raining outside," or even, "It's wrong to wantonly destroy the earth," we intend our words to reflect what really is the case.[{22}](#) Even the postmodernist will believe that injustice and oppression are wrong and shouldn't be tolerated. Otherwise, how would we know that one act is morally acceptable and another unacceptable, even across cultures?[{23}](#) Thus, we reveal that we believe truth is there and accessible. Is there any reason to think that spiritual beliefs can't also correspond with reality? I can't think of any, *unless* one simply presupposes that spiritual realities can't be known.

What's more, we typically act as if we believe truth is *objective*, by which we mean that something really is the case apart from whether we believe it or not.[{24}](#) How can we meaningfully interact with the world around us if we don't think we can truly know it and not simply our individual or group construction of it?

Postmoderns' belief that there can be multiple and conflicting truths must be rejected also, for if truth is that which conforms to reality and reality itself cannot be contradictory, truth cannot be either. Either it is raining outside my window or it's not. It can't be doing both at the same time in the same location. Likewise, for example, either God exists or He doesn't. It can't be both.

Against postmodernism, we hold that there is no reason to think there *can't* be one explanation for all of reality *unless* one accepts a radical perspectivalism; i.e., that our beliefs

are *only* our own perspectives and not reflections of reality itself. For the postmodernist to say this is to reveal that he assumes he has the inside scoop on ultimate reality which he claims no one has. This is therefore a faith commitment. Furthermore, there's no reason to think we can't know what the true explanation *is*, especially if the One who knows about it perfectly tells us.

Postmoderns also believe that truth is a construct of language. Because the meanings of words can vary, each linguistic group has its own truth. However, the fact that there are different words for the same thing doesn't change the fact that the referent is the same. We don't change the nature of something simply by changing the words we use for it. This is the weakness of what has been called "political correctness." It is thought, it seems, that by using different words for something we thereby change the thing itself. While a change of terminology might change our *attitude* about something, it doesn't change that something itself.

Thus, we reject the skepticism of postmodernity and confidently rest on the faith we hold as describing the way things really are.

We believe that there is no reason to accept postmodern skepticism. Skepticism is ultimately unlivable, and we needn't spend our lives "playing with the pieces." There is no reason in principle to assume we *can't* know ultimate realities just because of our human limitations. It is arbitrary to simply decide God cannot reveal truth to us because of our limitations.

Further, there is no reason why there can't be one explanation of reality. The good news for postmodernists is that we *have* been met by the One who created the "story" of the world and is able to put the pieces together into a coherent whole. His is the one true explanation of reality. We deny that we are trapped behind our own perspectives, cut off from direct

contact with reality,{25} and thus not able to “impose” truth on others. Truth is knowable and sharable.

Postmodernists believe that each person can only have his or her own “story” or life’s situation, that each of us can only have his or her own little piece. We respond that we have a story that puts all the pieces together, a story which is coherent and consistent and which matches the nature of the needs of humanity. As we look around the world we see that we all are very much alike in our basic needs and aspirations. If there is such a thing as human nature and a human condition, it isn’t unreasonable to think there could be one explanation of it.

Summary

Modernism served to produce doubts through its insistence upon certain knowledge, and postmodernism produces doubt through its insistence that no one can really know ultimate truths. Can we have confidence in the trustworthiness of our beliefs in the face of modernist and postmodernist ideas?

In response to doubts produced by modernism we look to Jesus, a historical Person who has revealed to us more than our reason is capable of discovering on its own. In response to doubts engendered by postmodernism, we look to Jesus the Creator of all and the final Word who has revealed to us ultimate truth. In him we find truth in its fullest sense, as the one who is real and trustworthy and who speaks. We can have confidence in our beliefs.

Notes

1. Daniel Taylor, *The Myth of Certainty: The Reflective Christian and the Risk of Commitment* (Waco: Word Books, 1986), 18-19.

2. Ibid., 19.

3. Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 20.

4. Carl F.H. Henry, *Remaking the Modern Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 22-23, 227-28.

5. For this reason Descartes has been called the father of modern philosophy. Dagobert D. Runes, ed., *Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1983), s.v. "Descartes, Ren," by St. Elmo Nauman, Jr.

6. Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 66.

7. Ibid., 67. Grenz notes that "Descartes set the agenda for philosophy for the next three hundred years" by making human reason central.

8. Ibid., 64.

9. Ibid., 67.

10. Ibid., 88.

11. Ibid., 89.

12. Ibid., 90.

13. Ibid., 92.

14. Ibid., 164,

15. Jean Baudrillard, quoted in Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, Ill.: 2000), 169.

16. There are some who believe we can put to use some of the perspectives of postmodernism, but it would take us too far afield of our subject to develop that now. For our purposes, I'm only concerned with the central skepticism of

postmodernism.

17. Newbigin, 51.

18. Ibid., 52.

19. Ibid., 31.

20. Ibid., 24, 25.

21. Ibid., 67.

22. For a recent study on truth in relation to postmodernism, see Groothuis, *Truth Decay*.

23. Alister McGrath, *A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 197-199.

24. Against modernism, however, we can affirm that believing in objective truth doesn't require that there be no non-provable elements involved in coming to know truth.

25. Trevor Hart, *Faith Thinking: The Dynamics of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 63.

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Culture Wars

America at (Culture) War

Americans are highly polarized when it comes to issues of morality and social norms. We feel our collective blood pressure rise as we read the daily paper or watch the news on television. We all feel the tension caused by problems like

teen pregnancies, abortion, crime, poverty, and political corruption. Factions from across the political spectrum respond with social programs and ideals that, if instituted, they are sure would make America a better place for all to live. However, the problem is that these programs or ideals are often in direct conflict with each other, presupposing very different assumptions about human nature. To highlight these differences, consider the following events.

In the early '90s the American Civil Liberty Union informed members of the California State Assembly's Education Committee that they were opposed to a bill the committee was considering. The bill, which called for traditional values in school curricula, was offensive to the ACLU because it would mandate that students be taught that monogamous, heterosexual relations solely within marriage is a traditional American value. The ACLU argued that this would be an "unconstitutional establishment of a religious doctrine in public schools."^{1} They went on to contend that the bill was an obvious violation of the First Amendment.

More recently, a private school in Georgia asked a student to either change his behavior or leave the school. This, in itself, is not a rare event. However, the student wasn't a discipline problem and he wasn't failing academically. In fact, he was popular and liked by many on campus. The problem was that he was cross-dressing. He dressed and behaved as a woman and was accepted by many students as a female. When the student chose to leave the school instead of changing his attire, the school's drama teacher remarked, "I really think that we all lost something precious that night."^{2}

To many Americans, the ACLU's action in the first incident is incomprehensible. It seems reasonable, healthy, and obvious for schools to implement a "traditional values" model for sex education. Those on the side of the ACLU find it just as incomprehensible that anyone would see their position as unreasonable or unusual. Some might find the expulsion of the

cross-dressing student to be grossly unfair, while most parents would wonder why the school took so long to act.

Regardless of your perspective, everyone agrees that Americans find themselves with deep differences on a number of fundamental issues that govern our daily affairs. Unfortunately, these deep differences have led some Americans to bomb a government building, shoot abortion doctors, or burn down a mountain top ski resort in order to further their cause.

This article will spotlight the culture war we find ourselves in and consider what a biblical response might be. Although few Christians fail to see the conflict in our society, particularly in our schools, they are far from united as to what our response should be. However, from a historical perspective, times of cultural disruption are often a great opportunity for the church, if it is being all that God desires it to be.

Orthodox vs. Progressive

Leaders of all political persuasions have taken note of the culture war that is engulfing our nation. To begin clarifying the issue, we will consider the contribution of two books that have helped to define the conflict for many religious and cultural conservatives: James Hunter's *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* and William Bennett's *The De-Valuing of America*. Bennett argues that the battle over our culture is being fought between what he calls the liberal elite and the rest of society. The elite are "found among academics and intellectuals, in the literary world, in journals of political opinion, in Hollywood, in the artistic community, in mainline religious institutions, and in some quarters of the media."³ He feels that they are more powerful than their numbers would normally allow because they are looked upon as trend setters and opinion makers. Differing from traditional elite groups in American history, Bennett

argues that these people reject the traditional bourgeois emphasis on work, frugality, sexual restraint, and self-control.”{4} As evidence for the existence of this elite, he refers to studies done by Stanley Rothman with Robert and Linda Richter. Their work portrays a media aristocracy that votes as a block for liberal candidates and on issues like abortion, gay rights, and the environment.{5}

Bennett adds that this elite is marked by a wholesale rejection of American ideals, a calling into question of what has been known as the American dream.{6} Evidence is not as significant as ideology for the elite. Their approach is “one of vindication, not investigation.”{7} If the middle class and the Republicans are for something, this group will instinctively be against it.

Hunter’s approach to defining the warring camps is subtler and, I feel, more accurate. He would argue that there is an elite on both sides of the culture war. On the one hand is what he calls the “orthodox” group. They have a commitment to an external, definable, and transcendent authority. From an evangelical perspective this is the God of the Bible. He is a consistent and unchangeable measure of value, purpose, goodness, and identity. Hunter would also include Jews and others who hold to a definable, unchanging, absolute authority.

Opposing this group are the “progressives.” Progressives are defined by the ideals of modernism, rationalism, and subjectivism. To these people truth is more a process than a constant authority. It is an unfolding reality rather than an unchanging revelation. What is interesting about the progressives is that they often hold on to the religious heritage of the orthodox, but reinterpret its meaning for modern consumption. For instance, to a gay progressive, Christ came not to free us from the penalty of sin, but to free gays from the constraints of society. Although many progressives discard religion altogether, those who claim the Christian

tradition have usually adopted a liberation theology, liberating the individual from any obligation other than to love each other in a very vague sense. To love each other seems to mean allowing people do whatever is expedient in their lives.

The real difference between the “orthodox” and the “progressives” is at the faith level. Whether a person calls himself or herself a Christian or not is not nearly as important as what kind of reality they place their faith in. Hunter believes that the culture war is a war of worldviews, and that these worldviews cause us to see the world differently. How then should a Christian, one who places his faith in the sacrificial death of Christ as an atoning payment for his sins, respond to this culture war?

The Angry Christian

Unfortunately, in the eyes of the secular world Christians are often seen as angry, intolerant people. At school board meetings, outside abortion clinics, even at the funeral of a homosexual who was murdered because of his lifestyle, Christians are there to angrily condemn sin and its perpetrators. It is almost as if Christians are surprised by sin and feel that their only response is to point people to the law of God. As a result, many outside the church see Christianity as a religion of law, similar to most other world religions. This is a tragedy.

Although understandable, I don't believe that we are called as Christians to respond to the culture war in anger, especially anger directed at people. Although the wrath of God is evident in both the Old and New Testaments, condemnation of human anger is also present in each. Near the very beginning of human culture, God warns Cain about his anger and downcast face. Instead of seeking to do what was right, Cain was angry with God and his situation (Gen. 4:6-7). The wisdom literature of Proverbs teaches us, “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but

a harsh word stirs up anger,” and “A quick-tempered man does foolish things, and a crafty man is hated” (Prov. 14:17, 15:1).

In the New Testament, Paul condemns “hatred” and “fits of rage” immediately before listing the spiritual fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. James 1:19-20 is fairly straightforward in arguing that, “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.” Jesus set an extraordinarily high standard against anger and hatred in His Sermon on the Mount. He taught, “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment” (Matt. 5:21-22). Jesus is speaking to the root cause of much evil in any society: an angry, unforgiving heart.

Some may respond that righteous indignation, or anger against sin is merely emulating Christ. After all, Jesus cleared the Temple with a whip and violently overturned the moneylender’s tables. Are we not allowed the same righteous indignation? I think not, especially if we take seriously God’s admonition to let Him be in charge of judgment and vengeance (Rom. 12:19). In fact, Paul tells us to feed our enemy if he is hungry, give him drink if he is thirsty, and to overcome evil by doing good (Rom. 12:20-21). The difference between Jesus’ righteous indignation and our anger is that Jesus, being God, has the right to judge, and being perfectly righteous His judgment is perfect. He knows the hearts of men and has no bias other than holiness itself. On the other hand, we are often most angry when our personal comfort is disturbed. To the watching world, Christians become the most interested in politics when their personal wealth or comfort is at stake.

I don’t believe that God is calling His people to anger in

America. We bring a message of grace to the lost, not a message of law.

Apathy

Many Christians have been active in the culture war since the early '80s. With the rise of conservative politics and the family values movement, Christians joined the Republican party in droves and joined numerous organizations in order to help fight against the moral decline of the nation. Given the popularity of the current Democratic President and what appears, in many ways, to be a rejection of the conservative moral agenda, it is tempting for many to simply retreat from activism all together.

Some Christians never did get engaged in a counter-cultural sense. In fact, an early evangelical leader in culture war activity, Francis Schaeffer, warned that most Christians were more concerned with personal peace and affluence than about having an impact in their society.^{8} He was concerned that as the Christian- dominated consensus weakened, these two values would grow in their place. The picture of society we are left with is one in which people's lives are consumed by things, buying two SUV's and a nice big house in the suburbs, with a nice tall fence, color TV (a big color TV), and remote. These people do not want to know about the suffering in our urban ghettos or about the plight of Christians in other countries. They want their lives to be unimpeded by the turmoil experienced by less affluent people.

Is it wrong to have a nice house and cars? No, it isn't. But neither is it the ultimate purpose to which our Lord has called us. Gathering nice things should not be motivating our daily activities. When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandments were, He responded that we are to first, love God with all our heart, soul, and mind (Matt. 22:37), and second, love our neighbor as ourselves. For Christians, success in this life should be measured against these two goals. The rest

of revelation, both the written Word and the life of Christ, gives us a picture of what this means in both the general culture and within the church. Christ gave us the Great Commission, to go into all nations making disciples and teaching what He taught (Matt. 28:19-20). Paul talks about us being living sacrifices and the renewing of our minds so that we will know the will of God (Rom. 12:1-2).

To be indifferent about sin is to not love God; this form of apathy is incompatible with true Christian faith. However, to be indifferent about suffering in the world is equally incompatible with our faith. To ignore oppression and hatred reveals a lack of love for our neighbors. Too often Christians only seem to get excited when their rights, whether property or religious, are threatened. This makes a mockery of our Lord's words when He said, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34-35). In Romans 12 Paul talks about blessing those who persecute you, and if it is possible, to be at peace with everyone around you.

Hebrews 12 tells us to throw off everything that entangles us, everything that keeps us from running the race marked out for us by Jesus. We are to fix our eyes on Him, who endured the cross because its joyous result would be a redeemed people of God.

Ambassadors For Christ

When thinking about how to respond to the culture war in America, or in any culture, we must ask ourselves, What is it that we are trying to accomplish? In the language of real war, What are our tactical and strategic goals? Some might respond that we are here to fight sin, to rid our society of the evils of abortion, homosexuality, adultery, drug abuse, political corruption, etc. There are Christians who claim that our primary cultural objective is to reinstate the law of Moses by

taking control of the government and using its legal authority to impose a moral society on the population. However, this does not appear to be the plan revealed to us in the New Testament.

In 2 Corinthians chapter five, Paul details the role we are to play in America or in any country we might live in. We are to be Christ's ambassadors, and our message is one of reconciliation with God. There are many religions pushing a message of law; Islam, Judaism, and most Eastern religions all focus on the works people must do in order to please God or the gods. They focus on how humanity must reform itself to gain God's favor. Christianity's message is grace, and as Christ's ambassadors we proclaim that God has reconciled us to Himself in Christ by making "Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." God is making the righteousness of Christ available to sinners; salvation is the crediting of Christ's righteousness to our personal account, thus satisfying the judgment of a holy God against our personal sins.

What about social activism, what about politics? Do we just share the gospel and ignore the problems facing our nation? No, we are to be salt and light in a decaying world. However, our trust is not in politics, which can only change a nation's laws and to a lesser degree its people's behavior. Even if abortion ended tomorrow, if every homosexual became heterosexual, and if drugs and pornography were things of the past, people without Christ would still be lost in their sins.

The role of an ambassador is a complex one. He or she must be intimately familiar with the nature of their sovereign's kingdom. Christians must seek to know God and His message in a way that can be communicated to the culture they live in. Unfortunately, Christians often know the message, but have a difficult time communicating it in a way that the surrounding culture understands, and in a way that answers the questions being asked by that society. Stating the gospel accurately and

in a meaningful manner is central to being an effective ambassador for Christ.

If we are to respond to the culture war by being ambassadors for Christ, then the vitality of the church becomes far more important than controlling the White House or Congress. Understanding how to communicate the gospel of Christ becomes infinitely more valuable than having the most potent political strategy. Being faithful to Christ in this way builds Gods kingdom on earth and results in common grace as more and more believers participate in every aspect of our culture.

Notes

1. James D. Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 310.
2. *Dallas Morning News*, 30 October 1998, 7A.
3. William J. Bennett, *The De-Valuing of America* (Colorado Springs, CO: Focus on the Family Publishing, 1994).
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Bennett, 12.
7. Ibid.
8. Francis A. Schaeffer, *How then Shall We Live* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1976), 205.

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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*^{[\[1\]](#)}, 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 umpire 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*, [\[2\]](#) 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”[\[3\]](#). 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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