

# **“How Should I Respond to ‘It’s All Right to Do Anything as Long as It Doesn’t Hurt Anybody’?”**

I have a question about some of the new age mentality that I have encountered in the more recent months. As apologetics is a bit of a hobby for me, I love learning what other people think and believe. It seems that as I ask around more and more, people are always saying the same thing. In more words they always seem to say “I can do whatever I want as long as it doesn’t hurt anybody.” I know that this is by no means a new or uncommon answer, but it seems to be growing to me. Usually I address this with a series of questions which will cause them to backtrack and correct themselves, something like this: It is not all right to hurt people? Do you count as a person? Are you allowed to hurt yourself? Is emotional harm all right? How did you determine that it was not all right to hurt people? Who enforces this rule? Are you making a connection between church and state? How did the world come into existence? And so on. My philosophy is that sooner or later they will be forced to acknowledge that their view is full of holes, yet it appears to me that this way doesn’t work. I actually should have realized this sooner, because I now realize that those people really do not know what they believe, and that their choices are based on emotions. Thus, I am asking you how you would suggest responding to the view that “It is all right to do anything as long as it doesn’t hurt anybody”?

I’m afraid you’ve hit the wall of the skeptical postmodern mentality. When a person doesn’t believe anyone can know what is true about anything, and adopts the “true for me” mentality, the results are an amazing batch of contradictory

ideas and no reason to try to make them consistent. People toss together beliefs according to what seems right at the moment, changing beliefs like changing outfits; ideas are subject to fashion just as clothes are. After trying to reason with people who think as you have described, you want to bang someone's head against the wall – theirs or your own (I don't suggest either!).

Because on the level of ideas contradictory beliefs can be held with such amazing ease, one typically cannot convince a person on that level. I say "typically" because some can be convinced at least that their ideas are inconsistent and that that is a problem. You just have to try drawing the person into a conversation and see what happens. For many it takes real life situations to drive home the point.

I recommend you find a copy of Francis Schaeffer's *The God Who Is There* and focus especially on the last section: "Speaking Historic Christianity Into the Twentieth-Century Climate." He deals with this issue there. One of his main points is that any religion or philosophy which isn't Christian must result in some kind of inconsistency in a person's life because we were made by God to live in God's universe. False beliefs put us at odds with the universe and with ourselves. So, for instance, a person who says there is no difference between good and evil will be quite upset if you pour boiling water on him. He might even say you were wrong! Of course, I don't recommend actually pulling off such stunts to prove a point! What one can do, however, is gently (I Pe. 3:15) question a person about an inconsistency between what the person says she believes and how she acts. It's like turning a light on and letting the other person see the problem for herself.

One thing we apologists easily forget is tact. One person defined it as "the ability to make a point without sticking someone with it." Work toward encouragement and very subtle enlightenment rather than conquering in your manner. Be committed to truth, but also be committed to people and to

showing the attractiveness of truth to them rather than whipping them with it.

If you have any questions after reading Schaeffer's book (or at least the above-mentioned segment of it) write to me directly.

Rick Wade

**See Also:**

[As Long As It Doesn't Hurt Anyone Else](#) by Rick Wade

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## **In Defense of History**

*Don Closson critiques the postmodern notion that we have limited or no access to history, except through biased lenses. He vies for a humble, but confident view of history as a scholarly pursuit, while writing in defense of history as a bedrock of Christian truth claims.*

A convenient claim of our postmodern times is that historical truth does not exist, or, at the very least, is not accessible to us. It is fashionable to believe that all historical writing is fiction in the sense that it is one person's subjective opinion. History as an enterprise is more like the creation of literature, say some, than a scientific investigation. Because we cannot be certain about the events of history, all perspectives must be treated as equally valid. One historian has written, "The Postmodern view that language could not relate to anything but itself must . . . entail the dissolution of history . . . and necessarily jeopardizes historical study as normally understood."[\[1\]](#)

If history is something that we create rather than uncover via the rules of scientific historical research, why do history at all? The postmodern response is that all history is politically motivated. French philosopher Michel Foucault became famous for insisting that power creates knowledge rather than the traditional assumption that knowledge is power. He wrote that since there is no access to value-free historical information, the need to write about history must come from the desire to control the past for political purposes. In effect, all historical writing is a form of propaganda.



This popular way of viewing history has dramatic implications for Christians who share their faith. One of the first objections that a Christian is likely to encounter when sharing the Gospel is the denial of any confident access to what has happened in the past. Since Christianity is a faith that is tied to history, this creates an immediate impasse. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 that if Christ has not been raised from the dead in a real historical sense, then our preaching is useless, our faith is futile, we are still in our sins, and we are to be pitied more than all men. Christian evangelists and apologists often point to the existence of archeological remains, ancient manuscripts, and written accounts of historical events in arguing that Christianity is a reasonable faith and that the Bible is a trustworthy and accurate account of the life of Christ. The Judeo/Christian tradition stands on the belief that God acts in history and that history reflects this divine incursion.

## **The Argument Against History**

Until recently, students of history had two competing approaches to their craft to consider. One approach, represented by Sir Geoffrey Elton, argued that historians should focus on the documentary record left by the past in

order to find the objective truth about what actually happened. These pieces of data are then used to construct a narrative of political events which, in turn, becomes the core of any serious historical writing. Put another way, it's the facts that count, and the facts should be used to understand the actions and motivations of political leaders who determine the paths taken by nations or kingdoms. All of this assumes our ability to discover objective truth about history.

The other approach represented by E. H. Carr and his book *What is History?* argues that history books and the people who write them are products of a given time and place. Therefore, history is seen and written through the lens of the historians' prejudices. This is often called the *sociological view of history* where a study of the historian is just as important as the comprehension of his writings.

Over the last three or four decades, Elton's emphasis on facts has been slowly losing ground. As one writer put it, "Few historians would now defend the hard-line concept of historical objectivity espoused by Elton."[\[2\]](#) Even worse, Carr's sociological view is being replaced by one that is even further removed from seeing history as objective truth. The arrival of postmodern theory in the 1980s eradicated the search for historical truth and diminished the voice of professional historians to be just one discourse among many.

Historian David Harlan commented that by the end of the 1980s most historians—even most working historians—had all but given up on the possibility of acquiring reliable, objective knowledge about the past.[\[3\]](#) By the mid-1990s some historians were saying that "History has been shaken right down to its scientific and cultural foundations."[\[4\]](#) An Australian academic went so far as to declare the killing of history.[\[5\]](#)

The denial of objective historical knowledge is impacting our culture and the church. Individuals involved with a movement called [the Emergent Church](#) generally agree with

postmodernity's denial of our ability to know objective historical truth. They also claim that those who believe they can be certain about the past are dangerous. But it is the culture at large, and especially the unsaved that makes this issue so important.

## **A Double Standard**

A close look at this issue reveals a growing tendency to utilize a double standard when it comes to determining what happened in the past.

It seems that the only historical record that Western culture is certain of is that the Nazis committed mass genocide against six million European Jews. The rest of history is relegated to the uncertainties of our postmodern suspicions. This loss of confidence has become so extreme that some nations, especially in Europe, have resorted to the force of law to regulate what can and what cannot be said regarding some historical events.

Let's look at one example. France has made it a crime to deny the Holocaust and has successfully prosecuted a number of authors who have questioned the particulars of the event. Once a nation goes down this path of legislated historical truth, it's difficult to turn back. French lawmakers recently attempted to legislate away denials of the Armenian genocide in 1915 by the Turkish Ottomans. The problem with these actions is not the historical accuracy of the position taken by the French government (the historical evidence supports the French view), but rather that history is being decided by legislative acts rather than by a consensus of historians who hold academic standards in high regard.

The temptation to legislate historical truth lures the other side to legislate its own version. Turkey has now prosecuted authors for admitting the possibility that the Armenian

holocaust actually happened in 1915. It was decided that such a view was un-Turkish.

If objective historical truth cannot be discerned, it doesn't make much sense to legislate one version of it. This Orwellian response to a loss of academic confidence only creates mistrust and a greater opportunity for the abuse or propagandistic use of history.

How should Christians respond to this battle over the past?

History is important to the Christian faith. We need to encourage high standards of academic scholarship, even when the outcome doesn't immediately support our biblical views. We also need to humbly concede that the process will be inexact, and that absolute certainty regarding any single event will always escape our grasp. Our goal should be to find a middle position between absolute certainty about what happened and the complete despair that some postmodernists advocate.

## **Converging Lines of Evidence**

Can we really know anything about history? Thus far we have considered some of the arguments against what is called objective historical knowledge or historical certainty. Let's look now at three ways of thinking about doing history that might help restore confidence in the process.

The first method is called the *converging lines of evidence* approach. How would this technique apply to the subject of the Holocaust? The first sources of evidence would include written documents and photographs from the period, including personal letters, official papers, and business forms. German administrators were highly efficient record keepers, thus making significant amounts of data available. Another source of evidence would be eyewitness accounts from survivors. These have been carefully collected and recorded over the years. Evidence from the physical remains of the concentration camps

themselves and inferential evidence from comparing European population counts before and after the war provide more resources. None of this information is taken at face value, and no one line of evidence is conclusive. But as the evidence accumulates our confidence in understanding the event rises with it.

The second model for acquiring historical knowledge is called the *hermeneutical spiral*. This method argues that every time we ask a question regarding a topic, the research gives us answers that bring us a little closer to understanding the event. It also gives us new questions to research. Each pass we make at understanding brings us a little closer to the event itself. If applied to understanding Paul's letter to the church in Corinth, one might begin by reading the letter in English and attempting to understand its purpose or message. This would raise questions about Paul's audience, prompting research into the culture of the first century. Eventually one might learn biblical Greek to better understand exactly what Paul was trying to communicate. As D. A. Carson writes, "I hold that it is possible and reasonable to speak of finite human beings knowing some things truly, even if nothing exhaustively or omnisciently." [\[6\]](#)

The third approach is known as the *fusion of horizons* model. Just as no two people have an identical view of the horizon, no two people will have an identical perspective on a historical event. They will interpret the event differently because of their cultural backgrounds. To overcome this, the learner must try to step out of his or her current cultural setting, with its beliefs and presuppositions, and then become immersed in the language, ideas, and beliefs of the past, attempting to step into the shoes of those participating in the event itself.



# History and Christianity

Bernard Lewis, perhaps America's foremost scholar on the Middle East, writes that great efforts have been made, and continue to be made, to falsify the record of the past and to make history a tool of propaganda.[\[7\]](#) How does this falsifying of history impact Christians and the church?

First, the Christian faith stands on a historical foundation. Unlike other religious systems, a real person, not just teachings or a life example, is at the center of Christianity. Jesus provided a once-for-all payment for sin, and it is our faith in that provision that makes salvation possible. Christians also believe that God has revealed himself through the inspired writings of the Old and New Testaments. Since their influence depends on both their antiquity and authenticity, archeological remains and ancient manuscripts are vital for making a defense for the authority of the Bible.

Second, historical knowledge is important when we answer critics of the Christian faith. A current example is the comparison of Islam and Christianity regarding tolerance and civil rights. The myth of Islamic tolerance was created in the seventeenth century when French Protestants used Islam to shame the Catholic Church.[\[8\]](#) Unfortunately, they had little or no firsthand experience with the brutality of Islam towards those under its rule. This tolerance myth has been utilized in recent decades by Muslim writers in the West to continue the misinformation. Only recently have scholars begun to speak out and refute the tolerance myth and uncover the brutality of worldwide jihad over the centuries. It is ironic that as this program is being written, the president of Iran has convened a conference to promote the idea that the Jewish Holocaust is a myth created by the west to impose a homeland for the Jews in the Middle East.

Whether it's the Crusades, the Inquisition, or the slave trade in the west, we need to be able to trust the consensus of

historians who are committed to high academic standards to get an accurate picture of what actually happened so that we can give a wise response to our critics. In some cases, we may need to apologize for those who acted in the name of Christ yet whose actions violated the teaching of Scripture. In other cases, we may have to gently correct misconceptions about an historical event in the media or in our schools that are the result of inaccurate or incomplete information.

If we give up on the possibility of acquiring historical knowledge, we also give up an important tool for showing that our faith is reasonable.

## Notes

1. Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 3.
2. *Ibid.*, 2.
3. *Ibid.*, 4
4. *Ibid.*, 3
5. *Ibid.*, 4.
6. D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Zondervan, 2006), 116.
7. Serge Trifkovic, *Defeating Jihad* (Regina Orthodox Press, 2006), 265.
8. Robert Spencer, ed., *The Myth of Islamic Tolerance: How Islamic Law Treats Non-Muslims* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2005), 17.

# Is the Church Ready to Engage the World for Christ?

*This article is also available in [Spanish](#).*



## The Mission of the Church

The church is called to engage the world for Christ. Jesus commanded us to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you . . .”

Many churches and Christian organizations are doing a wonderful job in fulfilling this call. However, it appears that the majority of the church has responded in one of two ways. Some churches have chosen to retreat and protect themselves from the world by secluding themselves in their own isolated communities. We see huddles of Christian communities with their own sports leagues, schools, clubs, etc. There is nothing wrong with Christian programs, but if it is created with an isolationist mentality, we create a church that is withdrawn from the world, irrelevant, and unable to relate to the unbelieving world.

I saw a display of this at a funeral once. As an invited guest not knowing anyone, I sat with the non-believers in the audience and observed how the Christians at the funeral interacted with the non-believers. The pastor preached a message using terminology foreign to the non-Christian. After the funeral, at the lunch reception, I saw the Christians huddled together speaking “Christianese”—a language that sounded totally foreign. What a wasted opportunity! This moment was a small display of the danger that isolating ourselves from the world creates: Christians unable to relate with the lost world.

Another response has been that, instead of transforming the world, many churches have been transformed by the world. The popular thinking of the culture has dismantled the foundational truths upon which the church once stood. Major denominations are now in a battle or have given up their position on key tenets regarding truth, moral absolutes, and religious truth.

The result of these two responses has been devastating. George Barna writes, “[A]s we prepare to enter into a new century of ministry, we must address one inescapable conclusion: despite the activity and chutzpah emanating from thousands of congregations, the Church in America is losing influence and adherents faster than any other major institution in the nation.”<sup>{1}</sup>

Charles Colson writes, “We live in a culture that is at best morally indifferent. A culture in which Judeo-Christian values are mocked and where immorality in high places is not only ignored but even rewarded in the voting booth. A culture in which violence, banality, meanness, and disintegrating personal behavior are destroying civility and endangering the very life of our communities. . . . Small wonder that many people have concluded that the ‘Culture war’ is over and we (the church) have lost.”<sup>{2}</sup>

Let us study some of the key issues facing the church in the 21st century and see how they have affected our witness. And let’s see if we are indeed ready to engage our world.

## **The Church and Truth**

Our current, postmodern culture adheres to the position that universal objective truth does not exist. Truth is relative to each individual and to each culture. Jim Leffel summarizes postmodern relativism this way,

*Relativism says the truth isn’t fixed by outside reality, but*

*is decided by a group or individual for themselves. Truth isn't discovered but manufactured. Truth is ever changing not only in insignificant matters of taste or fashion, but in crucial matters of spirituality, morality and reality itself.*[{3}](#)

Leading postmodern thinker John Caputo writes, "The cold, hermeneutic truth, is that there is no truth, no master name which holds things captive."[{4}](#) Both men summarize the postmodern belief that objective truth does not exist and therefore, we conclude that all truth claims are equal even if they are contradictory.

This understanding of truth permeates every area of our culture. Public schools, government, and the media all promote the view that 'since there are multiple descriptions of reality, no one view can be true in an ultimate sense.

A survey of the American public revealed that 66 percent agreed with the statement, "There is no such thing as absolute truth."[{5}](#) Among the youth, 70 percent believe that there is no such thing as absolute truth; two people could define "truth" in conflicting ways and both be correct."[{6}](#)

This popular notion stands in opposition to biblical teaching. Truth is rooted in God. It corresponds to the facts of reality. It is embodied in Christ and revealed in God's revelation, the Bible. Jesus states in John 14:6, "I am the way the truth and the life. . . ." God, who is truth, has revealed to us His word of the truth, the Bible. In John 17:17 Jesus prays for His disciples saying, "Sanctify them in truth; your word is truth." Absolute truth is knowable because God has revealed it to us in the Bible. Truth is not a social construct created by a culture, nor is it relative as some postmodernists claim. It is transmitted to us by the God of truth to His creatures who are expected to conform themselves to this truth.

For two millennia the church has been the guardian of truth. However, unbridled postmodern philosophy appears to have influenced the church in a frightful way. According to the latest studies the church could be in danger of surrendering her position. According to the latest research, 53 percent of adults in church believe there is no absolute truth. Among the youth in church, research shows that 57 percent do not believe an objective standard of truth exists{7}

Ephesians 6 exhorts us to engage in spiritual battle with the spiritual armor God provides. An essential component is the “belt of truth.” Without a clear understanding of truth, we cannot hope to successfully engage our culture for Christ. God’s truth is the foundation on which the church’s message stands.

## The Church and Ethics

Most Americans reject the idea of absolute truth, so they naturally reject the idea of absolute moral truth. George Barna writes, “This transformation has done more to undermine the health and stability of American Society—and perhaps, of the world. . . .”{8}

The late Dr. Francis Schaeffer wrote,

*If there is no absolute moral standard, then one cannot say in a final sense that anything is right or wrong. By absolute we mean that which always applies (to all people), that which provides a final or ultimate standard. There must be an absolute if there are to be morals, and there must be an absolute if there are to be real values. If there is no absolute beyond man’s ideas, then there is no final appeal to judge between individuals and groups whose moral judgments conflict. We are merely left with conflicting opinions.*{9}

Dr. Schaeffer’s conclusion is what we must inevitably come to if we hold to the belief that truth is relative. The danger of

rejecting moral absolutes is that we surrender our right to judge anyone's beliefs or behaviors as right or wrong. We then arrive at the unbiblical position of tolerating all beliefs and lifestyles, whether those involve homosexuality, abortion, misogyny, or other behaviors. The Bible, then, becomes a book of suggestions on how to live and is no longer God's universal law for mankind.

Barna's survey shows that most people in our country have come to this conclusion. He records that only 25 percent of adults and 10 percent of teens believe there is absolute moral truth.[{10}](#)

The biblical position is that there are revealed moral absolutes. God, who is truth, has revealed His truth through His word, the Bible. The moral law revealed in God's word is universal. In Romans 2, God is just to judge every person according to His law. His law is given in His word and also He has placed a witness to His law in the moral conscience of men (Romans 2:14-16).

According to Barna's survey, only 49 percent of born again Christians agreed with the proposition that moral truth is absolute and 51 percent either disagreed or did not know what to think about moral truth.[{11}](#) 57 percent of Christian teens believe that when it comes to morals and ethics, truth means different things to different people; no one can be absolutely positive they have the truth.[{12}](#)

If there are no moral absolutes, we cannot clearly define sin. Teaching on holy living is lost in the absence of clear standards of morality. Without a moral foundation, churches and their members are *influenced by* the culture more than they are *influencing* the culture for Christ. That is what we are seeing in churches today. Mainline denominations are adopting the values of the culture and abandoning the biblical stand on several moral issues. Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard warns, "Once the church comes to terms with the world,

Christianity is abolished.”[{13}](#)

## The Church and Spiritual Truth

If absolute truth does not exist, then moral absolutes do not exist. The same then applies to religious truth. The religion of our culture would be syncretism. Syncretism combines complementary and often contradictory teachings from different religions to form a new system tailored to each individual's preferences. Indeed, Barna's research reveals that 62 percent of Americans agree that “it doesn't matter what religious faith you follow because all faiths teach similar lessons about life.”[{14}](#)

Syncretism contradicts biblical teaching. The Bible teaches that the truth is found in Jesus Christ and in Him alone. In John 14:6 Jesus states, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me.” The Apostles repeat this claim. In Acts 4:12 Peter states, “And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.”

The Bible teaches that the Bible itself is the source of spiritual truth and that salvation is found exclusively in Jesus. Not only does the biblical evidence argue against syncretism, logic does as well.

A brief study of the world's religions reveals that they are contradictory on their basic truth claims, and therefore, mutually exclusive. Ravi Zacharias writes, “Most people think all religions are essentially the same and only superficially different. Just the opposite is true.”

However, if all religions are true, all religious practices are valid and cannot be judged good or evil. Then are we to tolerate cultures that burn living widows alive at their husband's funerals because of their religious convictions? How



about religions that teach young men to execute acts of terrorism on innocent victims in the name of God? We would have to conclude that we couldn't say such practices are right or wrong.

Postmodern ideas have made their impact on the church regarding the belief of absolutes, regarding spiritual truth, and the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ. Jesus made it clear in John 14:6 that He is the source of spiritual truth and the only way to eternal life. However, among born again Christians, 31 percent believe that if a person is good enough they can earn a place in heaven. 26 percent believe it doesn't matter what faith you follow, because they all teach the same lessons. 24 percent believe that while He lived on earth, Jesus committed sins like other people.[{15}](#) 30 percent believe Jesus died, but never had a physical resurrection.[{16}](#)

These surveys reveal that a growing number of Christians do not understand the basic teachings regarding the unique nature of Christ and His message. If Christianity is not true in its unique claims, the church is preaching a message of religious preference and not one of eternal truth. The power of the gospel is that spiritual truth and salvation is found in no one else but Jesus Christ.

## **The Church That Will Engage**

Our postmodern culture brings some formidable challenges to the church of the 21st century. The church is struggling with foundational issues like the nature of truth, moral absolutes, and spiritual truth. What is required of us if we are to be successful in engaging the world for Christ? It is for Christians to have a courageous faith, committed hearts, a compelling defense, and a compassionate attitude.

1 Peter 3:14-16 states, "'Do not fear what they fear, do not be frightened.' But in your hearts, set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you

to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.”

The world is often hostile to the message of Christ, especially its message of salvation found only in Jesus and its teaching on moral absolutes. That is why courageous faith that overcomes fear is essential.

Second, we are called to engage the world with committed hearts. Peter writes that instead of fear, we are to, “set apart Christ as Lord.” Courageous faith comes from a heart committed to Jesus. When Jesus is Lord of a believer’s heart, he or she responds properly in any situation. The church is the greatest witness for Christ when Jesus is Lord of every member’s life.

Third, to engage the world for Christ, we must have a compelling defense of the faith. Peter writes, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have.” We are exhorted to never be caught unprepared; never unwilling, and never timid about our response. The word “answer” in the Greek is *apologia*, which was used in connection with a formal public defense often before magistrates and in judicial courts. Every Christian is called to defend the faith.

Unfortunately, much of the church is unable to do this. A recent survey by Josh McDowell showed that 84 percent of Christian college freshmen were unable to explain why they believed.<sup>{17}</sup> We can’t expect a skeptical world to believe our message if we can’t give them a compelling reason why they should. For this reason, every Christian is called to the study of apologetics.

Fourth, we must engage with a compassionate attitude. Gentleness refers to the attitude that relies on God to change attitudes and minds. Respect is the same word used in the New Testament for reverence shown towards God. We are not to

witness with an arrogant or combative demeanor, but one of gentleness and respect. Without these two qualities, it is dangerous to attempt to evangelize.

Probe Ministries is committed to equipping the church to engage their world for Christ. Probe's ministries include our Web site, books, and conferences that will equip you to engage our world with insight and integrity, providing Christians a ready answer for their faith.

## Notes

1. George Barna, *The Second Coming of the Church*, (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1998), 1.
2. Charles Colson, *How Shall We Now Live?* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale Publishing, 1999), ix-x.
3. Dennis McCallum ed., *The Death of Truth*, (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1996), "Our New Challenge: Postmodernism," by Jim Leffel, 31.
4. John Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 192.
5. Gene Edward Veith, *Postmodern Times*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 16.
6. Barna, *Third Millenium Teens*, (Ventura, CA.: Barna Research Group, 1999), 44.
7. Josh McDowell and Bob Hostetler, *The New Tolerance* (Wheaton, IL.: Tyndale House Publishers, 1998) 172-173.
8. Barna, *Boiling Point*, (Ventura, CA.: Regal Books, 2001), 78.
9. Francis Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming Revell, 1976), 145.

10. Barna, *Boiling Point*, 78.
11. Ibid., 80.
12. McDowell and Hostetler, 21.
13. Quoted by Michael Horton, *Beyond Culture Wars* (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 37.
14. Barna, *Absolute Confusion*, (Ventura, CA.: Regal Books, 1993), 79-80.
15. Barna, "Born Again Christians," *Barna Research Online*, 19 April 2001, 2.
16. Barna, "Americans' Bible Knowledge is in the Ballpark, But Often Off Base," *Barna Research Online*, 12 July 2000.
17. McDowell and Hostetler, 173.

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14. Veith, Gene Edward. *Postmodern Times*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994.

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## **“What Comes After Post-Modern?”**

**If this is the post-modern age, what will the next age be?**

Wow! What a difficult question. I'm not sure that we can accurately answer such a question. I liken the discussion to trying to define a word that hasn't been put in the dictionary yet. The jury is still out on what the word will mean. For now, it's slang. It'll mean one thing in one setting and may

mean another completely different idea in other settings. Postmodernism has been the greased pig of the state fair competitions. No one has captured it yet to fry it up in a pan. How can we define view of a time period that is still being hashed out? It would be like choosing *Time* magazine's Man of the Year of 2001 in July. September 11th hadn't even happened yet. When our children hear 2001 they'll most likely think of the terrorism and how George W. Bush responded as our leader. So how can we predict a reaction of a way of thinking that hasn't even tucked itself to bed yet?

Another example would be me trying to determine what my grandchildren will look like before even having my own children. I have no idea even what my children will look like. I have no idea who they might marry. I have no idea what kinds of events may occur to change their appearance: such as fads, accidents, exercise habits, etc. The best I can do is suppose that there will be some kind of resemblance to me.

But let's give it a try. Who knows? Maybe I can coin a movement or something in my presumptuousness. Many scholars expect some kind of return to pre-modern thinking. Of course, we can't call the next movement pre-modernism. We already have one of those. Perhaps "neo-modernism" will rise from the ashes of postmodernity. As postmodernism has critiqued the certainty and absolutes of modernity, perhaps "neo-modernity" will seek to find balance between certainty and skepticism. Honestly, I can glean truth from both dispositions. I can also see detrimental holes in both movements. Perhaps neo-modernism will rescue us from the idea that man is the measure of all things while preserving the fact that truth exists. Perhaps it can also harmonize our desire to see the viewpoints of others without giving in to the danger of political correctness. But let's not be too presumptuous. Modernity is not even dead yet. There are still plenty of folks, in the church and outside of it, that are modernists. Could we or our children live in a day when modernists, postmodernists, and "neo-modernists" all

live concurrently? How would that work?

This is more or less a guessing game of entertainment caliber. I have to be honest. Even as I write this I'm shocked by the biblical support for what I just termed as neo-modernity. Isn't what I said just another way of saying Christian? Perhaps we shouldn't get too caught up in any movement, but simply seek to remain true to biblical suppositions. I'm not even sure if all these labels are worth their characterizations anyway. Everyone seems so serious about defining ourselves.

If experience serves as a teacher, we may be on the doorstep of still more confusion. I've been an Arminian, a Calvinist, a Baptist, a Lutheran, a liberal, a conservative, a pre-tribber, a mid-tribber, a son, a father, a philosopher, and a philo-SELF-er. The bottom line is that Christ and Him crucified has been the only constant in my life. He has seen me through all those days of extremes, and He will be my Lord whether I'm a postmodernist, modernist, or a neo-modernist. The name game is only that, a game.

But on a lighter note, I want to be the guy that started the neo-modernist movement. HAHA.

Kris Samons

Probe Ministries

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## **Worldviews, Part 2 – Comparing Postmodernism and**

# Other Worldviews with a Christian View

*Rick Wade adds to our understanding of worldviews by adding three classical and one very current life perspective to our worldview discussion. Understanding how deism, nihilism, existentialism, and postmodernism address the fundamental worldview questions helps us to deeply understand their similarities and differences with Christian theism.*

*This article is also available in [Spanish](#).*



## Introduction

A few years ago, former Probe staff member Jerry Solomon wrote an [article on worldviews](#) in which he provided a basic introduction to the subject, and then gave a sketch of three major worldviews: Christian theism, naturalism, and New Age pantheism.[{1}](#) In this article we'll look at four more worldviews: deism, nihilism, existentialism, and postmodernism. We frequently refer to these various philosophies in our articles, so it seems good to give a brief description for reference.[{2}](#)

### *Worldviews: Some Basics*

What is a worldview? James Orr, the 19th century church historian, said that a worldview “[denotes] the widest view which the mind can take of things in the effort to grasp them together as a whole from the standpoint of some particular philosophy or theology.”[{3}](#) A developed worldview supplies answers to the questions of origin, purpose, and destiny among other things, or as some put it, the “why, whence, and whither” of things.[{4}](#)

But some may object that such a view of Christianity is too



intellectual or esoteric, or might say that Christianity by its very nature doesn't allow being forced into some set of philosophical ideas. It's true that one can present an overly philosophical picture of Christianity, one that makes it seem very remote from real life. But does that invalidate the cognitive element? Note that the apostle Paul had no problem with considering the rational aspect of the faith. There must be knowledge of Christianity in order to live it out. Read Eph. 1:17,18. {5} In Colossians we see how Paul gave his readers intellectual grounds for rejecting the philosophy of the day (cf. 1:9ff).

There are a couple of reasons for thinking of Christianity in worldview terms. Over a hundred years ago church historian James Orr called for such a perspective because first, Christianity *does* involve a lot of interconnected beliefs which cannot be picked and chosen in a cafeteria-style fashion. He says, "He who with his whole heart believes in Jesus as the Son of God is thereby committed to much else besides. He is committed to a view of God, to a view of man, to a view of sin, to a view of Redemption, to a view of the purpose of God in creation and history, to a view of human destiny, found only in Christianity. This forms a '*Weltanschauung*,' or 'Christian view of the world,' which stands in marked contrast with theories wrought out from a purely philosophical or scientific standpoint." {6} Christianity, thus, by its nature forms a worldview.

Second, Orr says, since Christianity as a whole is under attack, it must be defended as a whole; not just as individual doctrines but the whole concept of supernatural, revealed religion. "The opposition which Christianity has to encounter," says Orr, "is no longer confined to special doctrines or to points of supposed conflict with the natural sciences—for example, the relations of Genesis and geology—but extends to the whole manner of conceiving of the world and of man's place in it, the manner of conceiving of the entire

system of things, natural and moral, of which we form a part.”[\[7\]](#)

### *Evaluating Worldviews*

How shall we evaluate a worldview? We have every right to expect that a true description of reality will be rational, be supported by evidence, provide the widest explanation for all of reality, and accord with human experience. Regarding its rational nature, it must both not contradict itself and be coherent as a system. Regarding evidence, it must not only be consistent with and explain the facts of nature and history, but it must give an adequate explanation for special occurrences in history (I’m thinking here specifically of the person and work of Jesus, including His life, death, and resurrection). A worldview answers the “why” question in its ability to explain what we see around and within ourselves. Regarding human experience, it must both explain what we know of ourselves *and* answer our deepest longings and aspirations.

Furthermore, we should not be surprised at supernatural elements such as miracles and prophecies, and reports of such should withstand investigation as far as we’re able.

Finally any truths revealed which couldn’t be known otherwise—even though transcending what we can know on our own and being difficult to understand—should not conclusively contradict what we know in the range of human experience.

Let’s turn now to a consideration of our four worldviews.

## **Deism**

### *Historical background*

The era called the Enlightenment, which spanned the 17th and 18th centuries, saw significant changes in the way Western man viewed his world. The flowering of knowledge in the Renaissance which broke through in the arts and sciences led

to the restoration of a high view of man. Even in the Christian church there developed something called "Christian humanism." In the Enlightenment era which followed, though, the "Christian" part began to fall off, leaving man as the final authority on all that is true. But this change didn't occur overnight. There was a period of time when God was still recognized, although some believed He had lost touch, as it were, with His creation. He was pushed out and restricted to His heaven. Notions of God's providential care over the earth faded away. Thus was born deism, the first of four worldviews.

Several factors were involved in this transition. One was the flowering of science, specifically Newtonian physics, which supposedly gave a rational, orderly explanation of the world, thereby removing the mysterious, supernatural elements. Another factor was the religious wars a century or two before which had a souring effect on people's attitudes about organized religion. Finally, there was a growing awareness of other peoples and religions which made Christianity seem provincial rather than universal.[\[8\]](#) Divine law gave way to natural law. Now there was "revealed religion" coming from God, and "natural religion" discovered in nature. And "natural religion," believed to be neutral and universal, became the norm for what could be accepted as true "revealed religion."

### *Described*

Deism, then, is the belief that "natural religion contains all that is true in revealed religion; where the latter differs, the differences are either morally insignificant or superstitious."[\[9\]](#) There is nothing higher than natural religion. Reason is capable of knowing God and His will, so there is no need for revelation. On the moral side, man's duty is simply to do God's will which is to seek the happiness of all men.

How was it that deists retained belief in God? According to one writer, the Newtonian view of the cosmos seemed to demand

a God; the intricate order of the universe suggested an intelligent designer. In fact, this made God seem bigger than ever. However, God was removed from an active part in human affairs. His transcendence was emphasized at the expense of His immanence. Also, although God was the author of natural law, He “receded behind the battery of secondary causes with which men have daily to do.”[{10}](#) God was seen as too big to be involved in the trivial experiences of man’s life. There was no real concern on God’s part for the details of our lives and no divine purpose in history. Knowledge of God was “emptied of most of its concrete religious connotations.”[{11}](#)

### *Contrasted with Christian Theism*

Three major factors separate deism from biblical Christianity. First, God was separated from the workings of real life due to His awesome transcendence. As Sire puts it, “God is distant, foreign, alien.”[{12}](#) Scripture teaches, however, that God continues to be involved in His creation both in sustaining the natural order (Col. 1:17) and in relating to mankind.

Second, deists saw man as just a part of the clockwork universe, operating according to strict laws. While man was recognized as a creation of God and made in His image, he wasn’t seen as essentially a sinner. Gone was the sense of the drama of human interaction with God over concerns about sin and grace and judgment. Man was now in charge of himself. However, he was not truly free for man was locked in the natural system of cause and effect.[{13}](#)

Third, because the world was not seen as fallen, but rather as God created it to be, the natural order reflected what was good and right. As Pope said, “One truth is clear, whatever is, is right.”[{14}](#) Not every deist went this far, however. Ethics was very important to deists; they didn’t turn morality over to the subjective realm. But wrongdoing wasn’t against God so much as against some abstract ethical principles discernible in nature.

## *Internal Weaknesses*

Although few if any people would claim to be deists today, there are some aspects of deism which still reveal themselves in our beliefs. For example, some speak of one God who is all-powerful yet not directly concerned with the daily lives of human beings, who is known through the world of nature, but who hasn't revealed Himself authoritatively and finally in Scripture or through Jesus.

However, the halfway position of deism made it incapable of standing as a serious worldview for very long. Deists believed they knew things about God, but they were limited to empirical knowledge; that is, knowledge obtained through nature. If we only gain knowledge from nature, we cannot see the whole picture, and there are certainly things about God which can't be known unless He tells us (which is what revelation is). It would seem that they were presupposing certain things about God learned from special revelation without giving credit where it was due.

Thus, one needed to either keep God in the picture and acknowledge His significance, or remove Him altogether. The latter was the response of naturalism. Since that worldview was considered in the previous article, we'll move next to nihilism, a frame of mind growing out of naturalism.

## **Nihilism**

Now that God was pushed to the edge of human experience, why not remove Him altogether? He had lost all practical value; why believe in Him at all? Thus was ushered in naturalism, the belief that there is only one order of existence and that is nature; there is no supernatural order. This view was discussed in the earlier article, so I won't develop it here.

## *Historical Background*

For many, naturalism was a breath of fresh air, for now one

needn't look to religion to find answers. Modern man with his naturalistic beliefs tended to be optimistic about man's prospects for making a good life for himself. Being free from the confines of the supernatural, man was free to make of himself whatever he wanted

Many, however, didn't see the clear benefits of this "freedom." Naturalism produced an emptiness it couldn't fill. Are we really just another stage of evolutionary development? Is this present reality all there is? Is there no permanent, transcendent value in the universe? The worldview—or perhaps we should say, mindset—which emerged was *nihilism*. Nihilism isn't really a philosophy because it doesn't present any kind of a systematic conception of the world. It is more anti-philosophy than philosophy because it is essentially denial—denial of real value in anything. There is no real right and wrong, no beauty, no knowledge, etc.

A name very often associated with nihilism is that of Friedrich Nietzsche, the 19th century philosopher. Having decided that God was dead, Nietzsche saw that with God's death went the high values of Western man which were based upon belief in God. He also recognized the loss of freedom which this loss entailed. That we are just the natural products of evolution, just materialistic bodies and minds means that there is no real freedom at all. We are determined parts of a determined universe.

Another explanation for the rise of nihilism brings in the social and political elements. After going through many "isms" this century, many people have decided that one simply cannot put one's confidence in any of them, so they simply adopt a basic pragmatism, the idea that workability is all that matters. German theologian Helmut Thielicke made this comment:

*In a world that is saturated and infested with pragmatism, the question inevitably arises whether everything is not "pseudo," whether everything is not—at best—a productive lie,*

and thus whether at the tail end of this parade of idols there is Nothing, a Nothing which is always dressed up in some new ideology, but still nothing but nothingness.”[{15}](#)

### *Described*

Thielicke continues, “Nihilism is not a program but rather a value judgment. It is the last of all conceivable value judgments—at least in any logical series—and to that extent a judgment of death. Nihilism has no other will or purpose; it is content to draw a line and call it quits.”[{16}](#)

James Sire mentions *Breath*, a play by Samuel Beckett, as a prime example of nihilism in theater. There are no actors, just a pile of rubbish on the stage. The light on the stage dims, then brightens, then dims again. “There are no words, only a ‘recorded’ cry opening the play, an inhaled breath, an exhaled breath and an identical ‘recorded’ cry closing the play. For Beckett life is such a ‘breath.’”[{17}](#)

Nihilism, then, is a philosophy of loss; those who toy with it as a trendy worldview either don’t understand it or haven’t tried to. As one writer said, “Nietzsche replaces easy-going atheism with agonized atheism.”[{18}](#)

### *Contrasted with Christian Theism*

Nihilism is obviously out of accord with Christian doctrine. God is *not* dead, and His nature and will provide a structure for value and meaning which transcend us. Because God is active in the world and is working to bring about His plans, there is real basis for hope. *Internal Weaknesses*

Nihilism also has its own internal weaknesses. Because it is fundamentally naturalistic, it carries naturalism’s weaknesses. It robs us of any real freedom since the natural order is believed to operate either on a strictly causal basis or by chance (or both). Yet nihilists, like everyone else, act

as if they have significant freedom. We are all daily confronted with the responsibility of making right choices and of facing the consequences if we don't. Also, the strict naturalism of nihilists makes their claims to knowledge suspect. If the chemicals and electrical charges in our brains are simply following the physical laws of cause and effect, why should we believe our ideas reflect any reality outside ourselves and aren't just the results of the random activity of our brain cells? Finally, morality can't be simply a matter of "what is, is what ought to be" or else there would be no room for reform. Any charge that another person or culture *ought* to do something—not just because it would work better but because it is *right*—would be illegitimate. Nihilism thus leaves us empty with respect to our being, our knowledge, and our morality. With all of these goes a loss of meaning.

But all this is to say what the nihilist already knows! Sincere nihilists haven't just adopted this worldview because they like to be trendy. They are simply reflecting back in their words the way they see the world, and they grieve over it.

How can we respond to nihilism? We can start out by pointing out the existential inconsistencies nihilists exhibit. For one thing, although they say there is no meaning to anything, they indicate what *they* think is meaningful by the time and effort they put into various activities. The art of nihilism, such as *Dada*, for example, attempts to say something; it is purported to have *meaning*. If it doesn't mean anything, it can't convey the image of the world nihilism wants to reveal. Second, all their assertions about meaninglessness are supposed to be statements about the way the world *is*. But if there is no knowledge, nihilists can't know the way the world *is*. Third, it simply flies in the face of everything our being seems to require—meaning, value and dignity being three examples.

Very few people can live out a completely nihilistic worldview. The most thoroughgoing cynics will apply themselves



to *something*—even if it's small—which they consider meaningful, even if it is crying out against the meaninglessness of life. To feel the despair of the loss of meaning and value indicates that one really *wants* such things. What can the nihilist do? He can take his life so he doesn't have to face such an absurd world. He can keep on living but keep his philosophy of no value and his life of value-seeking separate. Or he can look for something to give life value and meaning. In existentialism we find a worldview which seeks to find meaning in an absurd universe. To that we now turn.

## **Existentialism**

Existentialism is a worldview (or really a collection of worldviews) which holds, in essence, that our choices determine what we are. We create our *own* meaning and value. "Existence precedes essence," it is said. What we do, the choices we make, determine our essence. Existentialists, thus, seek to create their own meaning in a meaningless world.

(I should note here that there are theistic and atheistic forms of existentialism. Here we will only consider the atheistic variety.) *Historical background*

Existentialism has both philosophical and experiential roots. With respect to philosophy, naturalism had left man without God, and the radical individualism and autonomy endorsed by modernistic thinking had left individuals standing alone. With respect to life's experience, technology had made us just another part of the machine; either be efficient or get out of the way, was the modernistic attitude. In addition, some by-products of technology such as pollution and the atomic bomb made life riskier. Then came two devastating World Wars conducted on the doorsteps of Europeans. The result was that man was thought to be in all alone and in danger. These factors provided the setting for a philosophy of despair. *Described*

Despair is at the foundation of existentialism. We are said to live in “a ‘broken world,’ an ‘ambiguous world,’ a ‘dislocated world,’ a world into which we are ‘thrown’ and ‘condemned’ yet ‘abandoned’ and ‘free,’ a world which appears to be indifferent or even ‘absurd.’”<sup>{19}</sup> Existentialists refused to accept the solutions coming from reason or nation or tradition. They saw that the usual means of happiness failed people, means such as money, physical pleasure, and fame. Of course, atheistic existentialists refused to look to God. God was dead, not only in the halls of philosophy, but also in the city streets, and man was left on his own.

The real problem, they thought, was a false understanding of the human condition itself which kept people from true happiness. We are alone in a vast and scary universe that doesn't care a whit about us. This realization produces anguish, an interplay between a sense of dread on one hand and the exhilaration of complete freedom on the other. We don't know why we exist or what our destiny is; we aren't told where we come from or given the value of anything. It is all up to us—to *me*—to decide. Even though I can have no confidence that the universe will suit itself to my ideas and desires, I must do something—I must act. I am condemned to make of myself whatever I can. And to be authentic I must be true to myself and my own chosen values above all.

Existentialism, then, is first of all a theory of value. It focuses on the human condition and what makes for a good life. This has made it popular with many who are sensitive to the plight of humanity living in a very impersonal world.

Existentialism proved to be very attractive in this country in the '60s. It gave individuals the “freedom” to toss aside convention and tradition and make their own rules. We see traces of it in the prevalent notion that we, individually, are the final authorities for value in our own lives, in our emphasis on experience over reason, in our live-for-the-moment attitude.

The theme of turning one's back on traditional morality in favor of determining one's own life was seen in the movie *Pleasantville*, the story of two young people who are transported into the world of *Pleasantville*, a black and white TV show. Their lives only turn into color when they begin to express their sexuality. The girl eventually finds herself in the healthy area of academics, but this is a choice *she* alone makes; she is in charge of her own existence. *Contrasted with Christian Theism*

The contrasts between atheistic existentialism and Christianity are obvious. The Bible teaches that we *do* know where we came from; the universe isn't just some vast wasteland but the setting in which the true and living God is working out His plans of which we are part. We *do* have a source for truth, morality, and values which stands above us. We *do* (or *can*) know where we're going. On the other hand, however, while we do have significant freedom, we don't have absolute freedom to make of ourselves what we will. Neither are we all alone; we have the resources of God to experience rich and meaningful lives.

There's nothing wrong with taking note of our predicament, with noting the dangers to life, and with being resolved to stand firm in the face of a seemingly absurd world. The problems come with believing we are all alone, and that the burden of our lives rests upon us. God has taken on the burden of our present and future lives. We aren't on our own. *Internal Weaknesses*

There are internal problems with existentialism as well. For one thing, one wonders why we should even care if we are in the condition existentialists say we are. Why care about being authentic, about operating in good faith, as we create our own existence? Why bother about bothering at all? Why not just eat, drink and be merry? Regarding standards of value, how can one avoid the notion that there are some values that everyone should accept, universal standards of good and evil, beauty

and ugliness? We can't help believing some things are worth preserving while others are unworthy of our efforts.

With existentialism there is no basis for judging actions or for making the major decisions of life beyond the simple affirmation, "I choose it."

Is that enough?

## Postmodernism

It is rather easy for us to consider the worldviews already discussed from a distance. Probably few who read this article are deists or nihilists or even existentialists. These can be safely tucked away in the cupboard of tried and forgotten worldviews by most of us (even though many of us can find elements of one or another in our own thinking). The situation is quite different with respect to postmodernism, the last worldview we'll consider, because it describes the basic mindset of turn-of-the-century Western mankind. We are all immersed in the sea of postmodernism whether we know it or not, and its presuppositions are rooted so deeply in our thinking that even those who are Christians often reveal postmodern attitudes. *Described*

What is postmodernism, anyway? In the 1970s, Jean-François Lyotard presented "a report on knowledge in the most highly developed societies" to the Council on Universities of the government of Quebec. This report was published as *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*.<sup>{20}</sup> This book, a standard text in understanding postmodernism, gives a clue as to the nature of this worldview in its very title. Postmodernism isn't really a philosophy, for philosophy traditionally has been a tool used to understand the reality in which we live. Postmodernists believe that can't be done. So postmodernism is more a condition or mood than a philosophy. In short, postmodernism is a reaction against Enlightenment rationalism. But it's also an era, a historical

time period which began somewhere between the late 19th and late 20th centuries.[{21}](#) In this article we'll concentrate on postmodernism as a mood rather than as a time period.

### *Historical Background*

By "Enlightenment rationalism" we're referring to the ideal of knowledge which was developed in the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe. It formed the intellectual basis of what we call *modernity*. Two issues were important in the Enlightenment: criticism and power (*criticism* referring here to close analysis). The object was, as one writer says, to free people from "myth, superstition and enthralled enchantment to mysterious powers and forces of nature."[{22}](#) Truth wasn't found through revelation but through scientific investigation and reason. Knowledge now had to be dispassionate, objective, and certain. Everything now had to conform to the rules of computation and utility; it had to be measurable, and it had to be functional. Reason was in effect reduced to one *kind* of reason, that of mathematics or scientific precision.[{23}](#)

Postmodernists believe that when knowledge was reduced to computation, something was lost.

There were several problems with Enlightenment rationalism. First, newfound knowledge gained through science and the resulting development of technology led people to think that man could solve the major difficulties of life without any transcendent help. It was found, however, that reason didn't have the potency it was thought to have. With all our learning and technology, we still didn't have the power we desired over our lives. Natural disasters and major wars such as the two World Wars in this century made people realize that we *aren't* able to fix everything that ailed us simply through reason.

These and other factors such as new mysteries discovered by science served to undermine our ability to really know what is true. In fact, postmodernists veer away from the classical understanding of truth, that is, the correspondence of

propositions with external reality. Some very influential postmodernists now espouse pragmatism, the belief that workability is all that can be hoped for. This, I would venture to say, is how many if not most Americans think today.

Another postmodern characteristic regarding truth is this. In keeping with its rejection of the individualistic attitude characteristic of modernism, postmodernism holds that truth isn't found in the workings of the individual mind, but in the group. As one writer noted, "Truth consists in the ground rules that facilitate personal well-being in community and the well-being of the community as a whole."[{24}](#) Our thinking like all other aspects of our being is shaped by our community.[{25}](#) Politically and sociologically this means, for example, that the individual is expected to conform in his or her thinking to that of the larger group.

Still another problem which resulted from the secularized nature of knowledge and from the loss of confidence in knowing truth in general was the loss of the knowledge of *ultimate* truths. There can be no "totalising metanarratives," that is, no big stories or explanations of the way things are which encompass everything. This can be both liberating and frightening: liberating in the sense that one needn't feel bound by any system of thought; frightening in the sense that we are in the dark about what is true. This is a bit like eating in a cafeteria where one can choose from a variety of foods without having any confidence in the nourishing value of any of it.

A second problem with Enlightenment rationalism was the separation of fact from value. The mathematical mindset of Enlightenment didn't permit the intrusion of judgments about value; that was something separate. What grounds were left, then, upon which to make judgments? Thus the ethical dilemma of postmodernism: How does one make judgments without having any grounds for judgment?[{26}](#) One writer argues that the Holocaust itself was a model of Enlightenment thinking. "In

the world of the death camps," says author Thomas Docherty, "everything was rationalized." There was the desire to master nature seen in determining which races and kinds of people should survive and which shouldn't. The process was very orderly and efficient. The tools of technology, also, were used efficiently to advance the Nazi cause.[{27}](#) They even used reason as their greatest ally in accomplishing their goals. Thus, the ideals of Enlightenment rationalism could be put to fundamentally evil purposes.

Third, with the secularization of reason in the Enlightenment there developed a growing pessimism about the future. With no transcendent Being to consult, who was to know where history was going? And who was to say whether the direction being taken was truly *progress*? "No longer do we know with any certainty the point towards which history is supposedly progressing," says Docherty. "Humanity has embarked upon a secular movement whose teleology is uncertain."[{28}](#)

Postmodernism, then, leaves us without knowledge of ultimate truths, with no basis for value judgement, and with no basis for confidence in the future. In general, then, the postmodern mood is pessimistic. How, then, do we know what we should believe and do? With no knowledge of why we're here or where we're going to guide us, and no grounds for determining value coming from some transcendent source, people have grown to believe that we must simply choose for ourselves what will be true for us. The *will* is now introduced into knowledge.[{29}](#) The questions postmodernists ask are: "What do *I* choose to believe?" and "What do *I* choose to do?"

The postmodern mindset has shown itself in several areas of life. One is a change in understanding language. Language is now thought to be socially constructed; it conveys what the group says it does. Literature, then, is understood as reflecting the biases of a writer and his cultural group: the writer was obviously saying what would benefit himself or his group. It's up to the reader, then to *deconstruct* the text to

find the *real* meaning. Since the writer is trying to perpetuate his will on the reader, the reader adopts a suspicious mindset and looks for political demons behind every tree. Since the meaning of a text is determined by the reader, a text can have as many interpretations as readers.

In art, there was a move to the abstract, because it was thought that we couldn't accurately represent the essence of whatever the object is being painted, for instance. Those things which couldn't be represented accurately had to be presented abstractly. Also, since there are no rules anymore in general, there are none which define or delimit good art. The artist discovers what she's doing as she does it.

Architecture was one of the first areas in which postmodernism showed its face. With the demise of a modernism which always looked to the future, and, again, the loss of any rules, architecture moved from a functionalistic, forward-looking style to an eclectic style. Old buildings are restored, since the past can be appreciated, too. Several different styles can be mixed together. As one writer said, "postmodern design is historically and stylistically pluralistic."[\[30\]](#)

Earlier I spoke of the fact that even Christians espouse postmodern beliefs without realizing it. It is so much a part of the thinking of young people today that even some in the church accept without even thinking about it a "true for you but not for me" mindset. A young woman who taught high school Sunday School at an evangelical Baptist church in Dallas told a newspaper reporter that *she* believed what the Bible taught, but that it wasn't necessarily true for everyone.[\[31\]](#) Perhaps she doesn't understand the claims of Scripture, but more likely she has fit Christianity into the framework of "my truth, your truth." *Contrasted with Christian Theism*

Although Christians can learn from postmodernists (especially with respect to the excesses of the Enlightenment), it's important to see the fundamental differences between



postmodernism and Christianity. Most importantly, we *can* know ultimate reality because “it” is a “He” who has revealed Himself and His will. The result is that we *can* know truth even though not the exhaustive truth which the Enlightenment thought possible. We *do* have an idea of where history is going, and we *do* have a basis for moral judgment.<sup>{32}</sup> *Internal Weaknesses*

Postmodernism cannot long survive. Besides being devoid of anything upon which to build a philosophy of life, it also reveals internal problems. While we might like to take an aesthetic approach to truth—in other words, judge by style rather than by substance—we want others to treat us in keeping with universal canons of truth and morality. Also, it is impossible, we now know, to make a clean break between fact and value. Even the most precise and objective scientists must make value decisions with respect to the very work they do. In other words, one project must be chosen over others, and such choices reflect certain values. Furthermore, postmodernism strips us of all stability beyond what our immediate culture can give us. But since even a cultural group can't know ultimate truth but can only choose its values based on a pragmatic viewpoint, there is ultimately no stability in one's cultural group either.

As I've noted, postmodernism is a mood rather than a full-fledged worldview. Something must fill the vacuum created by the demise of modernism. This is what excites some Christian thinkers. For now the door blocking out the supernatural has been thrown open, providing an avenue for Christians to announce the good news that in Christ is found truth, value, and hope for the future, indeed, for all the human race.

## Notes

1. Jerry Solomon, “Worldviews,” Probe Ministries International, 1996. Available on our Web site at [www.probe.org/worldviews/](http://www.probe.org/worldviews/).

2. James W. Sire's *The Universe Next Door* (3rd ed., InterVarsity Press, 1997), has provided an almost indispensable guide in understanding worldviews. The choice of views considered in this program were taken from this text.

3. James Orr, *The Christian View of God and the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 3.

4. Orr, 6,7.

5. "[I pray] that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints."

6. Orr, 4.

7. Ibid., 4.

8. Waring, v-viii.

9. Ibid., x.

10. Ibid., xiii.

11. Ibid., xiii.

12. Sire, 44.

13. Ibid., 46.

14. Quoted in Sire, 48.

15. Thielicke, 25.

16. Ibid., 29.

17. Sire, 76.

18. Bloom, quoted in Sire, 93.

19. Robert C. Solomon, ed., *Existentialism* (New York: The Modern Library, 1974), ix.
20. Published in English by the University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
21. Docherty, 1,2. One theologian of our day sees modernism as having ended on July 15, 1972 when a housing project based upon modernistic principles of functionality was demolished. Still another marks its demise with the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Cf. Gene Edward Veith, *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, IL; 1994), 27,39. Perhaps this wide time span points to the way philosophies can take years to come to fruition in the public sphere.
22. Thomas Docherty, ed., *Postmodernism: A Reader* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1993), 5.
23. Docherty, 5.
24. Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 14.
25. For more on this the reader might wish to consult my article "Where Did 'I' Go?: The Loss of the Self in Postmodern Times," available on our Web site at [www.probe.org/where-did-i-go-the-loss-of-self-in-postmodern-times/](http://www.probe.org/where-did-i-go-the-loss-of-self-in-postmodern-times/).
26. Docherty, 26.
27. Ibid., 12,13.
28. Ibid., 10.
29. Ibid., 6.
30. Veith, 114.
31. Mary A. Jacobs, "Truths Under Construction," *Dallas*

*Morning News*, 31 May, 1997.

32. Another major difference is over the matter of human nature and identity. In postmodern thought, the self is lost, whereas Christian theology sees us as distinct individuals with permanent identities (even though we might experience changes in our personalities, vocations, lifestyles, etc.). See my article "Where Did 'I' Go?: The Loss of the Self in Postmodern Times" available on our Web site at [www.probe.org/where-did-i-go-the-loss-of-self-in-postmodern-times/](http://www.probe.org/where-did-i-go-the-loss-of-self-in-postmodern-times/).

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# Where Did "I" Go? The Loss of Self in Postmodern Times

*This article is also available in [Spanish](#).*



## Introduction

Who are you, anyway? Do you have an identity? What constitutes your identity? Who your parents are? Where you were born? What you do for a living?

Christians will rightly locate their identity ultimately in the God who created us in His image. We are His creation made for His purposes and glory. But are we important as individuals before God? Are we just a small part of the mass of humanity? Or are we unique individual selves with some characteristics shared by all people but also with a set of characteristics unique to ourselves?

According to the mindset overtaking the Western world called *postmodernism*, you aren't really a self at all. You have no unique identity that is identifiable from birth to death; there's no real "you" which remains constant throughout all of life's changes.

In a [previous article](#) my colleague, Don Closson, explored the views of human nature held by theists, pantheists, and naturalists. In this article I want to examine the postmodern view of human nature and consider a possible direction for a Christian response.

## **Postmodernism: The End of Modernism**

What is postmodernism? It is generally acknowledged that postmodernism isn't a philosophy as we typically think of philosophies. It isn't a single, well thought out philosophical system which seeks to define and answer the big questions of life. Postmodernism is more of a report on the mindset of Western culture in the latter half of the twentieth century. Some call it a mood. We might say it is a report on the failures of modernism along with a hodgepodge of suggestions for a new direction of thought and life.

Modernism is the name given to a way of thinking born in the Enlightenment era. It was a very optimistic outlook buoyed up by the successes of the sciences which produced some truly wonderful technology. We could understand ourselves and our world, and working together we could fix what was broken in nature and in human life.

Unfortunately the chickens have come home to roost; we've discovered that our optimism was misguided. We obviously haven't fixed all our problems, and the more we learn, the more we realize how little we know. Reason hasn't lived up to its Enlightenment reputation.

Not only have we not been able to fix everything, the

technology we do have has had some bad side effects. For example, the mobility which has resulted from modern transportation has removed us from stable communities which provided standards of conduct, protection, and a sense of continuity between ones home, work, and other activities of life. Add to that the globalization of our lives which brings us into contact with people from many different backgrounds with many different beliefs and ways of life, and we can see why we struggle to maintain some continuity in our own lives. We feel ourselves becoming fractured as we run this way and that; and at each destination we encounter different sets of values and expectations. As theologian Anthony Thiselton says, the resulting “loss of stability, loss of stable identity, and loss of confidence in global norms or goals breed deep uncertainty, insecurity, and anxiety.”<sup>{1}</sup> We no longer take our cues from tradition or from our own inner “gyroscope”—an internalized set of values which guides our lives. Rather we are “other-directed.” We take our cues from other people who are supposedly “in the know” and can tell us what we are supposed to do and be in each different compartment of our lives. We find ourselves “eager to conform, yet always in some doubt as to what exactly it [is] that [we are] to conform to.”<sup>{2}</sup> We are “at home everywhere and nowhere, capable of a superficial intimacy with and response to everyone.”<sup>{3}</sup>

All this produces in us a sense of constantly being in flux. The debate over which was fundamental in our universe—change or stability—occupied the thought of Greek philosophers long before Christ. This debate continues in our day. In fact, one writer noted that “postmodernism can be viewed as a debate about reality.”<sup>{4}</sup> The search in modern times to find what is really real—what is true and stable—has given way. In postmodern times, change is fundamental; flux is normal.

In all of this we seem to lose our sense of identity. In fact, as we will see, avant garde postmodern thinkers say we have no self at all.

## Basic Issues: Truth, Language, and Power

I noted earlier that postmodernism is more a report on the failures of modernism than a philosophy itself. One of the key issues which divides the two eras is that of truth. Whereas modernism was quite optimistic about our ability to know truth not only about ourselves and our world but also about how to make life better, postmodernism says we can't really know truth at all. To mention one way our lack of confidence in reason to get at truth shows itself, consider how often disputes are settled with name-calling or a resort to the ever ready "Well, that's your opinion," as if that settles the issue, or even to force. As one scholar noted, "Argument becomes transposed into rhetoric. Rhetoric then comes to rely on force, seduction, or manipulation." {5}

Since we can't really know truth<sup>3</sup> if there is truth to be known<sup>3</sup> we can't answer questions about ultimate reality. There is no one "story," as it's called, which explains everything. So, for example, the message of the Bible cannot be taken as true because it purports to give final answers for the nature of God, man, and the world. In the jargon of postmodernism, it is a *metanarrative*, a story covering all stories. Any metanarrative is rejected out of hand. We simply can't have that kind of knowledge according to postmodernists. {6}

One of the basic problems in knowing truth is the problem of language. Knowledge is mediated by language, but postmodernists believe that language can't adequately relate truth. Why? Because there is a disjunction between our words and the realities they purport to reflect. Words don't accurately represent objective reality, it is thought; they are just human conventions. But if language is what we use to convey ideas, and words don't accurately reflect objective reality, then we can't know objective reality. What we do with words is not to *reflect* reality, but rather to *create* it. This is called *constructivism*, {7} the power to construct reality

with our words.

What this means for human nature in particular is that we can't really make universal statements about human beings. We can't know if there *is* such a thing as human nature. Those who hold to constructivism say that there is no human nature *per se*; we are what we say we are.

There is a second problem with language. Postmodernists are very sensitive to what they call the *will-to-power*. People exercise power and control over others, and language is one tool used for doing so.<sup>[8]</sup> For instance, we define roles for people, we make claims about God and what He requires of us, and so forth. In doing so, we define expectations and limits. Thus, with our words we control people.

As a result of this idea about language and its power to control, postmodernists are almost by definition suspicious. What people say and even more so what they write is suspected of being a tool for control over others.

What does this mean for human nature? It means that if we try to define human nature, we are seen as attempting to exercise control over people. As one person said, to make a person a *subject*—a topic of study and analysis—is to *subject* that person; in other words, to put him in a box and define his limits.

Thus, human nature can't be defined, so for all practical purposes there is no human nature. There is more, though. Not only is there no human nature generally, but there are no individual selves either.

## Postmodernism and the Self

Lets look more closely at the postmodern view of the self.

Writer Walter Truett Anderson gives four terms postmodernists use to speak of the self which address the issues of change



and multiple identities. The first is *multiphrenia*. This refers to the many different voices in our culture telling us who we are and what we are. As Kenneth Gergen, a professor of psychology, says, "For everything that we 'know to be true' about ourselves, other voices within respond with doubt and even derision."[{9}](#) Our lives are multi-dimensional. The various relationships we have in our lives pull us in different directions. We play "such a variety of roles that the very concept of an 'authentic self' with knowable characteristics recedes from view."[{10}](#) And these roles needn't overlap or be congruent in any significant way. As Anderson says, "In the postmodern world, you just don't get to be a single and consistent somebody."[{11}](#)

The second term used is *protean*. The protean self is capable of changing constantly to suit the present circumstances. "It may include changing political opinions and sexual behavior, changing ideas and ways of expressing them, changing ways of organizing one's life."[{12}](#) Some see this as the process of finding one's true self. But others see it as a manifestation of the idea that there *is* no true, stable self.[{13}](#)

Thirdly, Anderson speaks of the *de-centered* self. This term focuses on the belief that there is no self at all. The self is constantly redefined, constantly undergoing change. As one philosopher taught, "The subject is not the speaker of language but its creation."[{14}](#) Thus, there is no enduring "I". We are what we are described to be.

Anderson's fourth term is *self-in-relation*. This concept is often encountered in feminist studies. It simply means that we live our lives not as islands unto ourselves but in relation to people and to certain cultural contexts. To rightly understand ourselves we must understand the contexts of our lives.[{15}](#)

If we put these four terms together, we have the image of a person who has no center, but who is drawn in many directions

and is constantly changing and being defined externally by the various relations he or she has with others. All these ideas clearly go in a different direction than that taken by modern society. It was formerly believed that our goal should be to achieve wholeness, to find the integrated self, to pull all the seemingly different parts of ourselves together into one cohesive whole. Postmodernism says no; that can't happen because we aren't by nature one cohesive self.

So there is no "I", no inner self to wrestle with all these different roles and determine which I will accept and which I won't and, ultimately, who I really am. How, then, do changes come about? Who decides what I am like or who I am? According to postmodern thought, we are shaped by outside forces. We are *socially constructed*.

## **The Socially Constructed Life**

What does it mean to be socially constructed? It means simply that one's society's values, languages, arts, entertainment, all that we grow up surrounded by, define who we are. We do not have fixed identities which are separable from our surroundings and which remain the same even though certain characteristics and circumstances may change.

It was once believed that what we do externally reflects what we are on the inside. But if there is no "inside," we must rely on that which is outside to define us. We are products of external forces over which we have varying levels of control. The suspicious postmodernist sees us as having little control at all over the forces impinging upon us.

Thus, we are created from the outside in, rather than from the inside out. If in traditional societies one's status was determined by one's role, and in modern societies one's status was determined by achievement, in postmodern times one's status is determined by fashion or style.[\[16\]](#) As styles change, we must change with them or be left with our identity in

question. It's one thing to want to fit in with one's peers. It's another altogether to believe that one's true identity is bound up with the fashions of the day. But that's life in the postmodern world.

Being bound up with the fashions of the day, however, means that there is no eternal context for our lives. We are "historically situated."[\[17\]](#) That means that our lives can only be understood in the context of the present historical moment. All that matters is now. What I was yesterday is irrelevant; what I will be tomorrow is open.

Let's sum up our discussion to this point. In postmodern times there is no confidence in our ability to know truth. There is no metanarrative which serves to define and give a context to everything. Change is fundamental, and changes come often and do not always form a coherent pattern. There is no real human nature, nor are there real selves; there is no real "me" that is identifiable throughout my life. Whatever I am, I am because I have been "created", so to speak, by outside forces. One of the most potent forces is language with its ability to define and control. My life is like a story or text which is being written and rewritten constantly. How I am defined is what I am. What I am today means nothing for tomorrow. To empower myself, I must take charge of defining myself, of writing my own story my way, not letting others write it for me.

But for many postmodernists this isn't really an individual exercise at all. I am a part of a group, and I'm expected to remain a part of my group and be defined in keeping with my group. Furthermore, no one outside the group is permitted to participate in the defining process. So, for example, men have nothing to say to women about how they are to act or what roles they are to fill.

# Results

The bottom line in all this is what you already know. Life in the postmodern world is one of instability. To quote Thiselton again, the losses of stability and identity and confidence “breed deep uncertainty, insecurity and anxiety. . . . [T]he postmodern self lives daily with fragmentation, indeterminacy, and intense distrust” of all claims to ultimate truth or universal moral standards. This results in defensiveness and “an increasing preoccupation with self-protection, self-interest, and desire for power and the recovery of control. *The postmodern self is thus predisposed to assume a stance of readiness for conflict.*”[{18}](#) Our fragmentation, our lack of an internal “gyroscope” to give direction and balance, the pressures of external forces to conform, the lack of continuity in our lives, together work to strip us of a sense of who we are, or that we are a single somebody at all.

Some people might despair over this. But many believe we should embrace this rather than fight it. If we aren’t happy with our own individual “story”, we should rewrite it. We need to simply accept our inner multiplicity and devise a story that accounts for it. “If meaning is constructed in language,” says one writer, we must learn to tell “better, richer, more spacious stories” about our lives.[{19}](#)

But if the forces surrounding us are so strong, how shall we stand against them? If we find ourselves resisting others who try to define us or set standards for us, indicating that we believe they’re strong enough to have an influence over us, how are we ever going to be able to avoid being a pawn for those who are more powerful? How can we avoid get sucked up into “group- think”, where we’re always expected to toe the party line? What happens to our own individuality? Is there no place for our individual unique sets of gifts and abilities, needs and desires, loves and concerns?

Consider also the potential for loss for the individual in

favor of the group. What if the group's standards or goals diminish the individuals in the group? Prof. Ed Veith has spoken of the similarities between this mentality and that of Fascism with its suppression of the individual in favor of the group. With or without realizing it, postmodernists aren't establishing a basis for empowering the oppressed, but are "resurrecting ways of thinking that gave us world war and the Holocaust." [\[20\]](#) Veith quotes writer David Hirsch who said, "Purveyors of postmodern ideologies must consider whether it is possible to diminish human beings in theory, without, at the same time, making individual human lives worthless in the real world." [\[21\]](#)

## A Christian Response

Is there an answer in Christ for the fragmented, suspicious, "non-selves" of the postmodern world?

In this writer's opinion, it is simple common sense that we are individual selves with an identity which we carry throughout our years despite the various changes we experience. "I" can be held accountable for the things "I" did five years ago. The individual brought to the witness stand is believed to be the same "self" who witnessed the particular events in the past. The worker is promised a pension when she retires with the understanding that the retiree will be the same self as the one who worked for many years. [\[22\]](#) Furthermore, we know that we have a set of abilities, great or small, that are our own and that we can use for good or for ill. We naturally resent being molded in the image of other people and prevented from expressing our own true nature.

Does Christ have anything to say to the postmodern individual who can't shake the common sense view that he is the same person today that he was yesterday? Or to the person who wants to affirm or regain her own identity and chart a course for life that she as an individual can experience and learn from and within which to develop as an individual self?

Indeed He does. The call of God in Christ is to individuals within the larger story of God's work in this world.[{23}](#) For one thing, having been created by Him we see ourselves as ones who can be addressed as Jeremiah was with the news that God knew him before he was born. It was the same Jeremiah being formed in his mothers womb to whom God spoke as an adult (Jer. 1:5). Furthermore, in Christ we recognize ourselves as responsible individuals who must give an account for our actions without pointing the finger of blame at "society" (Rev. 20:12).

In Christ we can acknowledge that we are shaped to a great extent by our surroundings, and that we are historically situated to an extent. But we aren't trapped. Redemption "promises deliverance from all the cause-effect chains of forces which hold the self to its past."[{24}](#)

There is more. In Christ the suspicion which marks postmodern man who is ever on guard against being redefined and controlled by others dissolves into a love which gives itself to the interests of God and other men.[{25}](#) The will-to-power of postmodern man which is self-defeating gives way to the will-to-love which reaches out to build up rather than to control.[{26}](#) We can indeed find common ground with people of other groups. "The cross of Christ in principle shatters the boundaries and conflicts between Jew and Gentile, female and male, free person and slave" (Gal. 3:28).[{27}](#) Recognizing our relative historical situatedness should help us to understand the importance of the local church as the social context within which barriers are destroyed.[{28}](#) In Christ, then, we have love rather than conflict, service rather than power, trust rather than suspicion.[{29}](#)

In Christ we recognize that sometimes life seems chaotic, that there are places of darkness in which we feel overwhelmed by outside forces that dont behave the way we think they should. Consider the experiences of Job and of the writer of Ecclesiastes. But we are called to "set our minds on things

above" (Col. 3:2), to put our confidence in "the fear of the Lord" (Prov. 9:10; Job. 28:28; Eccl. 12:13) rather than give in to despair or try to find a solution in simply rewriting our story with our own set of preferred "realities."[{30}](#)

Thiselton emphasizes the importance of the resurrection for postmodern man. "The resurrection holds out the promise of hope from beyond the boundaries of the historical situatedness of the postmodern self in its predicament of constraint."[{31}](#)

In addition, "Promise beckons 'from ahead' to invite the postmodern self to discover a reconstituted identity." It "constitutes 'a sure and steadfast anchor' (Heb. 6:19) which *re-centres* the self. It bestows on the self an *identity of worth* and provides *purposive meaning* for the present." The work of Christ promises a restoration of the individual self which will "once again [come] to bear fully the image of God in Christ (Heb. 1:3; Gen. 1:26) as a self defined by giving and receiving, by loving and being loved unconditionally."[{32}](#)

As Steven Sandage writes, "The core absolute in life is not change but faith in our unchanging God, the 'anchor of the soul' that reminds us we are strangers longing for a better country " (Heb. 6:19; 11:1-16).[{33}](#)

The message of hope is the one postmodern men and women need to hear. That message, delivered two millennia ago, still speaks today. "The word of our God stands forever" (Isa. 40:8). Some things never change.

## Notes

1. Anthony Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self: On Meaning, Manipulation and Promise* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 130.

2. Walter Truett Anderson, *The Future of the Self: Inventing the Postmodern Person* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1997), 26.

3. David Reisman, with Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney, *The*

*Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), 26; quoted in Anderson, 26.

4. Steven J. Sandage, "Power, Knowledge, and the Hermeneutics of Selfhood: Postmodern Wisdom for Christian Therapists," *Mars Hill Review* 12 (Fall 1998): 66.

5. Thiselton, 13.

6. Gene Edward Veith, *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 49. Note Lyotard's brief definition: "Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives." Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans., Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv).

7. Ibid., 47-51.

8. For a Christian's recognition of this in his own life, cf. Sandage, 68-69.

9. Kenneth J. Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), 228. Quoted in Anderson, 38.

10. Gergen quoted in Anderson, 38.

11. Anderson, 38.

12. Ibid., 41.

13. Ibid., 42.

14. Ibid., 42-43.

15. Ibid., 51-56.

16. Veith, 85.



17. Thiselton, 42, 148-150.

18. Ibid., 130-31.

19. Anderson, 56.

20. Veith, 80.

21. David H. Hirsch, *The Deconstruction of Literature: Criticism After Auschwitz* (Hanover, NH: Brown University Press, 1991), 165; quoted in Veith, 80.

22. Thiselton, 74.

23. I am greatly indebted to Thiselton for this portion of the discussion. See chaps. 23 and 24.

24. Thiselton, 155.

25. Ibid., 160.

26. Ibid., 161.

27. Ibid., 43.

28. Cf. Sandage, 72.

29. Thiselton, 43.

30. Sandage, 71-72.

31. Thiselton, 43.

32. Ibid., 163.

33. Sandage, 73.

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# Churches That Equip

I STILL REMEMBER THE SINKING FEELING IN THE PIT OF MY STOMACH. I was a university student, a young believer, and my faith in Christ seemed like a house of cards that had just crumbled. For awhile, the Christian life that had been so exciting and joyful became a myth. I felt rootless, adrift, and confused.

One of my fraternity brothers had just asked me some questions about Christianity that I couldn't answer. This bothered me deeply until Bob Prall, a pastor and campus Christian worker, answered them for me. "Always remember," he advised as he finished, "just because you don't know the answer, doesn't mean there is no answer."

For the next two years I followed him around, watching as he shared Christ with skeptics, listening to his speeches, and observing how he dealt with non-Christians. Bob's loving, learned example and teaching helped me sink my spiritual roots deeply into God's truth and provided a foundation for three decades of interaction with unbelievers. I shall always be grateful to him for equipping me in this way.

Just as Bob helped me, a number of churches across North America are helping equip their members to answer effectively questions that non-Christians ask. Maybe their stories will encourage you.

## Conversation and Cuisine

Dennis McCallum pastors Xenos Christian Fellowship in Columbus, Ohio. He is keenly interested in reaching "postmoderns" for Christ, and Xenos members have developed some successful methods of equipping members for outreach. In his book, *The Death of Truth*, McCallum outlines a practical

plan using dinner-party discussion groups. "It's not impossible to communicate with postmodern culture," he claims, "it's just more difficult." Just as missionaries need to learn the language and customs and build relationships with those they seek to reach, so we must understand and befriend today's postmoderns.

Xenos' "Conversation and Cuisine" gathers Christians in a home with non-Christian friends for food and discussion. Guests are assured it's not a church service and that all opinions are welcome. Topics include "To judge or not to judge," "Forgiveness in relationships," "Views of the afterlife," and current events.

After dinner the facilitator presents several scenarios for discussion. For instance, in a session on judging, he might describe a situation of racism in the workplace and ask participants to decide "OK" or "bad." Next the facilitator tells of a mother who chooses to leave her husband and children for another man. The participants also vote. The point is to create a bit of confusion and help participants realize that—in contrast to today's "tolerate all viewpoints" mindset—they themselves sometimes make judgments that they feel are entirely appropriate.

This dialogue can lead to discussions of, for instance, Hitler's Germany. Was killing Jews merely a cultural tradition that should be respected?

The aim is not to preach, but gently to lead non-Christians to rethink their presuppositions. Sessions don't always include a gospel presentation. They may be "pre-evangelistic"—helping unbelievers reconsider their own relativism, appreciate that some universal or absolute truths might be necessary, and realize that Christians may have some answers. Church members can then continue the relationships and share Christ as appropriate. "Once people's thinking has been thawed—or even shocked—out of their totalistic postmodern pattern," claims

McCallum, “they will have a new receptiveness to the gospel.”

Xenos is also committed to grounding youth in God’s Word. Its curriculum uses age-appropriate games, stories, and study to help grade-school through university students understand and explain God’s truth. High school home meetings designed for secular audiences involve adult-student team teaching: kids reaching kids. Campus Bible studies reach Ohio State students.

Kellie Carter’s New Age background could not save her mom from breast cancer. Disillusioned with God after her mother’s death, Kellie sought answers in crystal healing, astrology, and meditation. Then a friend invited her to a Xenos campus Bible study, where she debated Christianity with attendees.

“The amazing thing here was that I was getting answers,” Kellie recalls. “These people knew what they believed and why. I wanted that.” Scientific and historical evidences for Christianity prompted her to trust Christ as Savior.

Kellie later invited Jeremy (“Germ”) Gedert to a Xenos meeting about anger, a problem he recognized he had. Subsequent Bible studies on fulfilled prophecy pointed Germ to faith in Christ. Now Germ claims God has given him “great relationships, controlled temper, and a real vision for my life with Christ” plus “an awesome wife (named Kellie Gedert).” Equipped students are reaching students.

Xenos offers courses, conferences, papers, and books to help Christians understand and communicate the gospel in modern culture. For information visit their web site at [www.xenos.org](http://www.xenos.org).

## **Spreading the Passion**

When George Haraksin became a Christian while studying at California State University Fullerton, he switched his major to comparative religions so he could investigate Christianity’s truth claims. Through his involvement in New

Song Church in nearby San Dimas, he found his biblical and apologetic knowledge strengthened and was able to teach classes on New Age thinking. Study in philosophy and ethics at Talbot Seminary fanned his passion for communicating biblical truth, which Haraksin now spreads as New Song's Pastor of Teaching and Equipping.

"Ephesians tells us to equip the church," he notes. "People learn on three levels: a classroom level, a relational level, and at home." He and his co-workers seek to use all three levels to help prepare members to be ready to answer questions non-Christians ask.

New Song's leaders integrate equipping the saints into their regular gatherings. Some sermons handle apologetic themes. Weeknight classes cover such topics as "Evangelism and the Postmodern Mindset." Monthly men's breakfasts may deal with "Evidences for the Resurrection" or "Is Jesus the Only Way?" New Song has also invited faculty from the International School of Theology to teach courses on "Developing a Christian World View" and other theological topics.

"I'm trying to find people within the church who have that sort of passion (for apologetics) and gifts for teaching," Haraksin explains. "As I identify them, I'm trying to come alongside them, develop that passion, and develop them as leaders."

If people have questions about science and Christianity, he wants to be able to refer them to a member with that specialty who can help them. He's setting up an apologetics network at the local church level.

New Song member Jeff Lampman received a phone call and letter from a cousin with unusual perspectives on the Bible. "I had no idea how to respond to him," Jeff recalls. He showed the letter to Haraksin, who recognized Jehovah's Witness doctrines. When two Jehovah's Witness members showed up at

Jeff's door, he invited them to meet with him and Haraksin. "I was very uncomfortable at first," Jeff explains, but he grew in his knowledge of the Bible as he watched Haraksin in action over the next six months.

The experience "taught me why I believe what I believe," Jeff remembers. "Before, if somebody asked me why I believe what I do, I wouldn't have a clue as to how to respond to them. Now I do. George [Haraksin] was a tremendous help. I feel a lot more confident now and know where to go to get resources to defend the faith effectively." He continues to apply what he's learned as he interacts with skeptical co-workers and helps equip and encourage other Christians to learn.

Not everyone at New Song is interested in apologetics. Haraksin estimates that about 10 to 20 percent are thirsty enough to attend weekly meetings if personally encouraged to do so. Others want answers on a more spontaneous basis when they encounter a skeptic. Still others have little or no interest.

"There is still an anti-intellectualism in the church," Haraksin notes. People want to know "Why can't I just love God? Why do I need to know all this other stuff?" Society is on information overload, and some "people don't want to take the time to read and study," which can be frustrating to a pastor with a burning desire to see people learn.

Haraksin tells of a woman who questioned Jesus' deity. At another church she had been told not to ask questions but to spend time in personal devotions. Haraksin answered some of her concerns individually and encouraged her to enroll in New Song's "Jesus Under Fire" class, which she did. She could ask questions without fear of causing offense. Soon she became a solid Christian, committed to the church.

"We're relational people in a relational culture," Haraksin notes. We're still learning." This product of his own church's

equipping ministry is helping to light some fires.

## Issues and Answers

Barry Smith is Pastor of Discipleship Ministries at Kendall Presbyterian Church in Miami. He has a keen desire to see adults and youth understand Christianity's truth. Sunday schools have featured quarters on apologetics and on Christian ethics. The heart of Kendall's apologetics emphasis is "Issues and Answers," monthly dinner discussions relating faith to the secular world.

The meetings arose out of conversations between Smith and hospital chaplain Phil Binie, who had served on the staff of L'Abri in Switzerland and Holland. (L'Abri is a network of Christian study centers founded by the late Dr. Francis Schaeffer.) The core group is composed of Kendall members—both men and women—who are professionals in the community. Leaders include a *Miami Herald* editor, a federal judge, a medical professional, University of Miami professors, an attorney, and a musician.

Core members invite friends and colleagues to join them. Families, including children, gather at a home and enjoy mealtime conversation. After the 45-minute dinner, youth workers spend time with the children while a group member guides an hour-long presentation for the adults. Smith led one on the problem of evil: "If God is good, where did evil come from?"

Journalistic ethics dominated another discussion. A judge handled the separation of church and state. An English professor covered "deconstructionism" and literary analysis as they apply to the Bible, a somewhat perplexing but highly relevant theme. (Deconstructionism includes a tendency to seek a text's meaning not in what the original author likely intended, but in what readers today want it to say.)

Smith says that at least one person has professed faith in Christ through a personal search that attending the group prompted. All of the non-clergy members at first felt uncomfortable sharing their faith outside the church; now all feel more at ease. Smith especially notes one couple (a psychology professor and an attorney) who began the program as young Christians and have experienced dramatic growth as they have understood how Christianity makes sense in their work settings.

Smith emphasizes that the "Issues and Answers" format is easy to replicate and need not involve professional clergy leadership. It started informally and at first was not even an official church ministry. "The idea," he explains, "was simply to find people trying to contextualize their Christianity in the marketplace who could share with us how they do that."

Scheduling seems the biggest obstacle; professionals' crowded calendars can be hard to mesh. But Smith is encouraged by what the program has accomplished in its two years. He sees a revival of interest in the works of Francis Schaeffer and enthusiastically recommends them to both believers and seekers.

The apostle Peter told believers, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:15). Paul wrote that God gives spiritual leaders to the church "to prepare God's people for works of service" (Eph. 4:12). Xenos, New Song, and Kendall churches are taking those admonitions seriously and are seeing fruit for God's kingdom.

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# 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 handwritten 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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## Truth or Tolerance?

If I were to ask you what our culture deemed more valuable, truth or tolerance, what would you say? To emphasize the purpose for the question, consider the following three illustrations.

*Case 1.* Recently, I had a conversation with a young man about Christianity. He listened closely to what I had to say about how Jesus Christ had saved me from my sin, but immediately became very defensive when I tried to suggest that he too had that same need for Christ as his Savior. He explained to me that because we live in a pluralistic society, all religions are equally valid roads to God. "You're just being too closed-minded," he said. "Jesus works for you, just like Buddha works for someone else. So if you want people to respect what you have to say, you need to be more tolerant of beliefs unlike

your own.”

Case 2. Last year, a dean at Stanford University began to pressure evangelical Christian groups on campus to stop the practice of “proselytizing other students.” Ironically, what angered the dean was not the content of the message that was being shared, but the practice of sharing itself. He believes that in approaching someone with the Gospel, you are implying that the person’s beliefs are inferior to your own. Such an implication is unacceptable because it is self-righteous, biased, and intolerant.

Case 3. Graduate student Jerome Pinn checked into his dormitory at the University of Michigan to discover that the walls of his new room were covered with posters of nude men and that his new roommate was an active homosexual who expected to have partners in the room. Pinn approached the Michigan housing office requesting that he be transferred to another room. Listen to Pinn’s own description of what followed: “They were outraged by this [request]. They asked me what was wrong with me—what *my* problem was. I said that I had a religious and moral objection to homosexual conduct. They were surprised; they couldn’t believe it. Finally, they assigned me to another room, but they warned me that if I told anyone of the reason, I would face university charges of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.”[{1}](#) In their mind, Jerome had no right to a new room because he was being intolerant.

Notice that in each of these scenarios, Christians are not accused of “false teaching,” but of “false practice.” The young man, the dean, and the housing officials never challenged the *truth* of these moral claims, but the *legitimacy* of making such claims in the first place.[{2}](#) Similar situations occur every day in schools, universities, the media, the marketplace, and the halls of government. Consequently, Christians are being silenced, not by superior ideas, but by our culture’s impeachment of moral absolutes and

inauguration of moral openness.

So what are Christians to do? Are we not called to be confident carriers of the truth of the Gospel? Then how do we voice our belief that Jesus is the *only way* without being intolerant of someone who thinks differently? This is one of the most difficult dilemmas facing Christians today. In this essay we will examine the nature of the tolerance revolution in our culture, expose its strengths and weaknesses, and most importantly, establish a Christian response to the question of truth or tolerance.

## **Tolerance Under a Microscope**

On two different occasions, Fellowship Bible Church in Little Rock, Arkansas, sponsored a campaign to encourage its community to speak out against the excessive amount of violence and sexual promiscuity on television, in the movies, etc. To bolster this drive, they distributed bumper stickers that read, "Speak Up For Decency." Within days of the arrival of these stickers, another bumper sticker appeared that looked practically identical to the first one, except it read, "Speak Up For Liberty." The seriousness of this reaction was nailed home when I came to a stop light and counted over ten "Speak Up For Liberty" stickers on the back of the van in front of me; it was as if the driver was protecting freedom from fascism.

After considering the message on each sticker, I found myself at an impasse. On one hand, I agree that there is too much indecency on television, yet on the other hand, I believe that liberty is our nation's most prized resource. Yet after more consideration, I came to the conclusion that this was not a debate over freedom, but a discrepancy over the interpretation of tolerance.

*The American Heritage Dictionary* defines *tolerance* as "the capacity for or practice of recognizing and respecting the

options, practices, or behavior of others.” First, tolerance demands recognition, which is a legal imperative. Naturally, the Constitution recognizes and protects the diversity of religious beliefs and practices. Second, it calls for respect, which is a social imperative. The Declaration of Independence declares that we are all created equal, indicating that we need to respect all men, even when there are differences of opinion.

However, in our culture, tolerance is not being discussed as a legal or social imperative, but a moral one. In response to a survey concerning beliefs about God, a sixteen-year-old girl replied, “In my mind, the only people who are wrong are the people who will not accept different beliefs as being, well, acceptable.”<sup>{3}</sup> This girl believed that the only real sin is to not accept or *tolerate* other people’s beliefs. Likewise, openness or “uncritical tolerance” has become our society’s moral standard. Consequently, people who seem intolerant are wrong.

But is tolerance a moral virtue? By definition, the function of tolerance is relegated to the legal and social arena in order to *protect* moral issues, not *enforce* them. As a result, talking about tolerance as a moral virtue is a circular argument. Listen to the following statement: “It is morally wrong to say that something is morally wrong.” Is that statement not self-defeating?

In addition, any moral standard necessitates intolerance of anything which violates that standard. Merely using the phrase “a moral standard of tolerance” is a contradiction in terms. In S. D. Gaede’s words, “If you are intolerant of someone who is intolerant, then you have necessarily violated your own principle. But if you tolerate those who are intolerant, you keep your principle, but sacrifice your responsibility to the principle.”<sup>{4}</sup> Consequently, a person who is wholly committed to tolerance, must resort to total apathy. Yet putting over ten bumper stickers on a car is hardly apathetic and thus

anything but tolerant.

The notion that tolerance is a virtue is a paradox. Nevertheless, it has become the dominant moral guideline for our culture.

## What If Truth Is Relative?

Believe it or not, our world is waging a war against truth. Allen Bloom writes, “Openness—and the relativism that makes it the only plausible stance in the face of various claims to truth . . . is the greatest insight of our time.”<sup>{5}</sup> The philosophical basis for the uncritical tolerance that is so prevalent in our society is the replacement of truth with relativism.

According to the *Barna Report*, 66% of the entire population believe “there is no such thing as absolute truth.” Another poll estimated that 72% of Americans between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five also reject the notion of absolutes.<sup>{6}</sup> So what do the majority of Americans believe? Well, without absolutes, they are left with moral relativism: the notion that all values are legitimate, and that it is impossible to judge between them. Truth is reduced to personal preference; what’s true is what works for you.

The assumption that truth is relative has infiltrated almost every facet of our society: the marketplace, the arts, government, education, family, and even religion. According to a poll, 88% of evangelical Christians claim that the “Bible is the written word of God and is totally accurate in all it teaches,” and yet 53% also believe there are no absolutes.<sup>{7}</sup> Ironic? Not when one considers how powerful and pervasive this philosophical trend really is. Allen Bloom summarizes the logic behind the assumption that truth is relative:

*The study of history and of culture teaches that all the world was mad in the past; men always thought they were*

*right, and that led to wars, persecutions, slavery, xenophobia, racism, and chauvinism. The point is not to correct the mistakes and really be right; rather it is not to think you are right at all.*<sup>8</sup> Bloom, 26.

Bloom is saying that instead of searching for mankind's past faults, the world has condemned our ability to claim to be right at all.

But is the viewpoint that truth is undefinable a plausible philosophical position? Is not the claim, "there are no absolute truths" intrinsically self-contradictory? Gene Edward Veith notices that "[t]hose who argue that 'there is no truth' are putting forth that statement as true."<sup>9</sup>

So to make this claim, there must be at least one truth that is universal. And if there is one universal truth, then the premise that there are no absolutes is false.

Another problem was illustrated by R. C. Sproul. He recalled the Senate hearings over Clarence Thomas's Supreme Court nomination and the opposing testimonies of Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas. Sproul admitted that he didn't know who was telling the truth. However, what he knew with absolute certainty was that "they both couldn't be telling the truth." In the same way, Christianity claims exclusively that salvation is an unearnable gift from God, whereas Islam claims exclusively that a man must earn his salvation. It is possible that both are not true, but it is impossible for *both* to be true.

Moral relativism is hard-wired into our culture. But let's reclaim the superiority of truth—God's truth—as the solution for the sickness of our culture, a sickness that tolerance and moral relativism cannot cure.



## Tolerance and Chapped Lips

I would bet that each of you is familiar with the dry, burning sensation of chapped lips. With this in mind, what is the almost instinctual reaction when you feel your lips drying out? You lick them, right? For a moment they feel better, but then what happens? They get even drier, don't they? In fact, the more you lick, the worse they get. This is an example of mistaking the immediate solution for the correct solution. If moist lips are the desirable end, shouldn't we lick them to make them well again? Of course not, even if it feels right at first. As most of you know, the appropriate cure for chapped lips is not licking, it's lip balm.

Well, the same is true in life. We live in a world burdened by injustice, discrimination, and inequality; they are the "chapped lips" of our culture. Many people insist that the best solution is a greater degree of tolerance. In some ways this answer sounds right. But is tolerance the lip balm for our culture or are we just licking our lips? Are we just mistaking the immediate solution for the correct solution?

To answer this question, I want to glance at a couple of what I call "tolerance trends." The first is political correctness. S. D. Gaede notes that the goal of political correctness "is to enforce a universal standard of tolerance, regardless of race, gender, cultural background, or sexual orientation."[\[10\]](#) Thus, the Golden Rule for a politically correct person is to not do, say, or even imply anything that any other individual or group might find offensive.

A second tolerance trend is multiculturalism. Whereas political correctness is more legalistic, the goal of multiculturalism is greater inclusiveness. Schools and universities are not just teaching history from the traditional "dead white male" perspective, but including the experiences of African-Americans, Native Americans, women, and other groups who have been marginalized. Businesses are

supporting this movement as well. “Multicultural workshops” are being created to help workers get along in a more culturally diverse business environment.[\[11\]](#)

On one hand, there is much to be praised about these movements. Christians have more reason than anyone to abhor discrimination and prejudice. God hates injustice and loves to liberate the oppressed, and so should we. Therefore, a Christian perspective should transcend cultural, racial, or class distinctions.

At the same time, these tolerance trends are merely impulsive reactions to the problem and not well-thought-out solutions. The reason is simple. If our goal is just more tolerance, then discrimination isn't wrong in a moral sense, it's only offensive. Yet what constitutes “being offensive” changes according to the whims of the ethnic and social group involved. Consequently, a standard of tolerance becomes arbitrary and variable because it is subject to interpretation based on an underlying bias. Ultimately, no matter how legitimate it sounds, how right it feels, or how rigorously it is enforced, tolerance alone can never eliminate prejudice any more than licking can cure chapped lips.

Justice and equality will become realities not by superficially incorporating tolerance, but by embracing absolute truth—a transcendental truth that includes the foundation for both moral law and human value—an unwavering truth which at times may even demand intolerance. It is a truth that only a God who is a righteous Judge and a loving Creator can establish.

## **Restoring Credibility and Confidence in the Christian Solution**

To this point we have examined the short-comings of tolerance and the superiority of truth. But understanding the situation is only half the battle. As Christians, we are called to

action. So how do we reach a world that is choking on its own tolerance?

First, we must remind ourselves of the authority and power of God's truth. In Ephesians 6, Paul tells us to "put on the full armor of God" as our defense against the enemy. In verse 14, Paul reminds Christians that first and foremost we are to "stand firm . . . having girded your [our] loins with truth." In a culture that is bearing down on Christians, we must remain steadfast and resist evil. We do so by preparing ourselves for the fight, by girding ourselves with the truth. It is the foundation for everything else. In the words of the late Ray Stedman,

*Truth is reality, the way things really are. Therefore it is the explanation of all things. You know you have found the truth when you find something which is wide enough and deep enough and high enough to encompass all things. That is what Jesus Christ does.*

The writer of Hebrews wrote that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, and yes, forever." The truth of Christ is much more encompassing than anything this world has to offer.

Second, if you are walking in truth, you will discover that there is a time for both tolerance and intolerance. For example, Jesus associated with the sick, the poor, and the dejected. He shared meals with prostitutes, tax collectors, and criminals. Christ doesn't judge us by our skin color or social status, but by the condition of our hearts.

Unfortunately, Christians have a long way to go in matching His standard. All too often, we are hampered by racial differences and social barriers. Perhaps it's time that we began to raise our voice against injustice and not leave it up to the ebbing multiculturalist movement.

Yet as accepting as Jesus was, He was extremely rigid about

the exclusiveness of His claims. Of all the choices in life, He tells us there is only one way, one truth, and one life—His. How much more exclusive, even intolerant, can you get? Christians need to remember that loving another person may sometimes mean being respectfully but firmly intolerant of what is not true.

Earlier I told of a conversation I had with a peer about Christianity. After I realized we had actually been disagreeing regarding our assumptions about truth, I started over. I asked him why tolerance was an issue of morality. He thought for a moment. Then I asked him how truth could possibly be relative, and we began questioning his own assumptions about morality. Finally, I shared C. S. Lewis's notion that any moral law, including his claims regarding tolerance, implies the existence of a Moral Law Giver. And by the end of the conversation, he was beginning to consider the possibility of God and his own accountability to Him.

This young man was not ready for a spiritual tract about the Gospel, but he was eager to hear about truth. And there are people everywhere—people you know—who are just like him. Without hearing a verse from Scripture, this man moved one step closer to his Creator. Why? Because, as Paul writes, "truth is in Jesus." That means that sharing truth is sharing Christ, no matter what form or fashion it takes.

## **Notes**

1. Dinesh D'Souza, *Illiberal Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1991}, 8-9.
2. S. D. Gaede, *When Tolerance is No Virtue* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1993}, 12.
3. Lynn Minton, "Fresh Voices," *Parade Magazine*, 11 June 1995, 10.

4. Gaede, 23.

5. Allen Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987}, 26.

6. Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Postmodern Times* (Wheaton, Ill.:Crossway Books, 1994}, 16.

7. Ibid., 16.

8. Bloom, 26.

9. Veith, 59.

10. Gaede, 21.

11. Ibid., 36.

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