



THE TRUTH ABOUT TRUTH

[Truth] allows us to cooperate with reality, whether spiritual or physical, and tap into its power. As we learn to think correctly about God, specific scriptural teachings, the soul, or other important aspects of a Christian worldview, we are placed in touch with God and those realities. And we thereby gain access to the power available to us to live in the kingdom of God

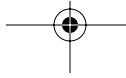
J. P. MORELAND

In ancient times they asked, "Who is your God?" A generation ago, they asked your religion. Today your creed is a preference. Preference? "I take my coffee black, my wine red, my sex straight, and my shirts lightly starched. Oh yes, and put me down for Islam."

CHARLES KRAUTHAMMER



As the typical American today would be quick to point out, there are many ways to understand truth. And, such a person would probably hasten to add, the more individual and subjective the understanding, the more respectable it is. Both academically and popularly truth seems to be regarded as a suspicious idea today, and if it has any pretensions beyond the purely private, it may likely be regarded as downright arrogant. Indeed, it is a profound irony and social tragedy that truth—and any claim to know the actual truth about a given matter or proposition—is more likely to be associated with intolerance than tolerance, with narrow-mindedness and bigotry rather than intellectual good faith and genuine concern for human well-being. This is a phenomenon that no commonwealth can long endure.





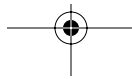
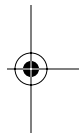
The depth and significance of our cultural confusion over the nature, meaning and application of truth as a concept is difficult to overestimate. It seems as though we are schizophrenic about truth: we use it in our daily lives concerning the likelihood of rain, our bank's accurate accounting of our money on deposit, and whether the president was quoted correctly in the newspaper, but we seem allergic to recognizing the possibility that our opinions about politics, ethics or religious belief might be seriously mistaken or outright false.

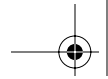
The mind-independent quality of some types of truth is hard for the contemporary American to accept, yet in a very real sense it is this kind of transpersonal truth for which we most deeply hunger. God has placed "eternity in the hearts of men" (Eccles 3:11), a natural yearning to know him and his ways, and unless we are open to the reality of objective, transpersonal, mind-independent truth we risk never finding the fulfillment that is in him alone.

This personal need for transpersonal truth is paralleled by our culture's need for an awareness, acceptance and acknowledgment of public truths, basic moral propositions that can order our society.¹ All societies need such principles if they are to endure. Both individuals and communities are doomed to the fog of confusion and the myopia of self-centeredness if we are unwilling to always hold open the possibility that not only objective truth exists but that it may be what we don't want it to be or think it should be.

This surpassing existential and intellectual commitment to truth—wherever it leads—is at the center of Christian consciousness. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 15:13-19, explicitly declares that Christian faith itself is wholly futile and even a lie against God if Jesus has not been resurrected from the dead as he, the other apostles and the early church had been proclaiming. Paul's personal investment in Christianity was to be discarded if at any time, through any means, the physical resurrection of Jesus was shown to be objectively untrue.

This is a sobering fact for believers and one that should always be kept in mind for three reasons. First, all human beings seem to have a remarkable ability not to let the facts get in the way of what they want to believe, and remembering the contingent nature of Paul's faith will help us remain intellectually honest, not only with respect to religious





matters but also as a general habit of mind.²

Second, the overriding devotion to truth, whatever the consequences, will in time teach us that God is not afraid of any of our questions or confusions, and that in the end, he alone is the author of truth.³ Just as there is nothing that can happen to us in our lives that the absolutely sovereign God has not either directly willed or allowed to come to pass, so too there is no true event or circumstance that he does not fully know and understand, and is able to ultimately use (in ways we may recognize and understand or not) to affirm his own utterly pure, unassailable justice and love, whether in history, society or individual lives.⁴

Third, insisting on the controlling nature of truth and subordinating our own noetic (that is, mental) preferences to what is indeed the case about matters cannot help but lead us to humility of mind. If we acknowledge as Paul did that our own convictions are always in some way evidential and therefore falsifiable by counterevidences, we preserve a winsome philosophical submissiveness as well as an implicit commitment against complacency of reflection and the intellectual arrogance so common to the settled mind.⁵

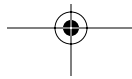
Truth and Humility in the Christian

Indeed, this kind of humility of mind is mandated for the Christian, and the failure of some contemporary Christians to evince this virtue has helped close cultural and personal doors that might otherwise be more amenable to the Christian worldview. As Richard John Neuhaus notes:

As St. Paul reminds the Corinthians, our apprehension of [truth] is always partial, something seen through a glass darkly in anticipation of the time when we will know even as we are known [1 Cor 13:12].

Few things have contributed so powerfully to the unbelief of the modern and postmodern world as the pretension of Christians to know more than we do. . . . If Christians exhibited more intellectual patience, modesty, curiosity, and a sense of adventure, there would be fewer atheists in the world.⁶

Still further troubling is the indulgence by some Christians in what has become an American culture of anger. A powerful case can be made that anger is at the heart of the contemporary American experience, and the effects of this fury, from murder to road rage to divorce to nasty politics,





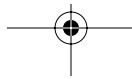
are all around us.⁷ The entry of Christians, including some Christian intellectuals and leaders, into this derby of personal destruction is obviously counterproductive to Christian critique and witness, and it is unbiblical. Occasionally, this unholy rage manifests publicly, as when one prominent pastor, after delivering a stirring Sunday sermon, seized a young church staffer who had inadvertently done something during this “man of God’s” sermon that upset him and delivered a blistering attack on the frightened underling—with his lapel microphone still on! The tirade was broadcast to the entire church campus, from the nursery to the prayer room.⁸

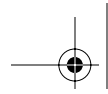
The church too has been infected with the culture of anger, and this, along with the intensity of the American culture wars, has produced a perverse anger among Christians toward unbelievers. This hostility and its theological and cultural consequences also hinder Christian witness, and certainly lead Christians to sometimes manifest an attitude and demeanor, both personally and intellectually, that is regrettable.⁹

Peter’s adjuration in 1 Peter 3:15 to explain Christian belief—as well as its ethical requirements and implications—to non-Christians with “gentleness and respect” must be taken not as an unattainable ideal but rather as a moral requirement. Recognizing the partialness of our own knowledge and understanding will help us fulfill this mandate.

Of course, we should always remember the paradoxical nature of God and the Christian gospel. The God of the Christian tradition deliberately frustrates human pretensions to intellectual and spiritual self-sufficiency (1 Cor 1:19). He urges us to become small in order to become great, to become servants in order to become rulers, to become dependent on him in order to become truly independent, to lose ourselves in order to find ourselves, to aspire to self-negation not self-aggrandizement and so forth.¹⁰ Indeed, God’s habit of confounding human understanding extends to those who we think belong in his kingdom and those who we are sure do not. Knowing this should generate a healthy, ethically essential respect and tolerance for the faiths and worldviews of those we disagree with. As one Christian philosopher put it:

Every religious culture and experience should be deeply respected—even if not adopted and even if regarded as mistaken in important respects.





Christians above all *should* know of God's habit of turning up in the wrong company, where according to the official view He absolutely *could not* be. . . . The partisan of one religion must extend the same generous openness and hopefulness to the practitioners of other religions as he would want them and the atheist to extend to himself.¹¹

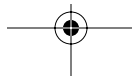
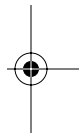
Our human habit of shutting off the kingdom of God to others is our enemy when seeking to cultivate an authentically humble sense and style in our communication of Christian truth. The old quip is all too true: "When you get to heaven, you'll have two surprises: you'll be surprised whom you see there—and they'll all be surprised to see you."

Theories of Truth

Effectively contending for the truth in contemporary culture—whether the truth claims of Christianity, the facts of society and politics, moral truth or the psychological and emotional truths of the human experience—requires we have a comprehensive understanding of truth itself, and the various manners and contexts in which it can be experienced, demonstrated and understood. Toward that end it will be helpful for us to briefly survey the outlines of seven common theories of truth, their respective theoretical and practical virtues and applications, and their significance for our study.¹²

Truth is whatever you want it to be. This relativist view of truth is of course a rejection of truth itself in any public or objective sense, and an inadequate and unrealistic way of understanding life. No one actually lives as a relativist, and as a conceptual disposition relativism is really nothing more than an exercise in self-justification and rationalization, substituting one's own preferences or wishes for any realities that do not coincide with those personal desires. Relativism is fundamentally childish.¹³

That said, Christians should not reject altogether the subjective realities relativism conveys, particularly in a time such as ours, which is substantially emotive and narcissistic in its ethos. Relativism can function as an adequate theory of truth as long as the ideas being asserted are simply expressions of personal preference and make no pretensions to anything beyond that. For example, "I tend to prefer hamburgers to hotdogs," "I like mystery novels," and "I want to hold a



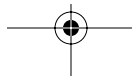


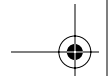
grudge against Bill” would all be true statements about a person who inhabited each of those mental and emotional states. A relativism intending to communicate purely transient private realities is nothing more than a description of one person’s inclinations and therefore has a certain usefulness. But as we ascend to public, political, ethical and metaphysical contexts, relativism loses all legitimacy and explanatory competence.

Truth is what works. This pragmatic understanding of truth is still essentially relativistic; it reduces truth to what *I think* works or what currently *works for me* or what, in light of current social arrangements or realities, is useful for me to do or think. Pragmatism is a reduction of truth to utility and sets truth on a foundation of shifting sand—it is *me*, and not external reality, that determines what *I think* is pragmatically right at the present time. My definition of “usefulness” may change later, as may my aims, hence what is pragmatically true for me now may not be pragmatically true for me in the future.

Further, what is true is not always practical (facing death and paying taxes), and what is practical sometimes violates our moral intuitions (stealing when I know I cannot be caught). As G. K. Chesterton famously noted, the devotion to pragmatism does not answer to the needs of the human heart, to our fully human character, since, as he noted, “Man’s most pragmatic need is to be something more than a pragmatist.”¹⁴

Despite its philosophical limitations, pragmatism is deeply rooted in the American mind and history, and continues to order the lives of many. From William James to John Dewey to Richard Rorty to Jeffrey Stout, the pragmatic approach to the theoretical and practical problems of life and society has always influenced the American mind.¹⁵ And certainly, to say that a certain attitude or practice (e.g., getting paid in cash to aid in avoiding reporting your income to the government) “works” is true, but only as a procedural verdict about its efficacy to achieve a given end, however much the amorality of pragmatism violates our moral sense. Of course, sometimes the utility of a practice does coincide with its morality, as, sometimes at least, with tolerance. It is practically and financially useful for us to cooperate interpersonally and economically, though we may not see eye to eye on a great many values questions. But as the final



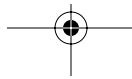
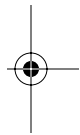


word on truth and understanding the human experience, pragmatism amounts to little more than relativism with a nod toward the fact that I must interact with others.

Truth is what we can sense and sensually perceive. The attraction of this empiricist theory of truth is notorious in American popular and intellectual life today but none the more coherent for it. The empiricist criterion for knowledge—all that I can know is mediated through my five senses (taste, touch, smell, sight, and sound)—is self-refuting because it cannot itself be verified by the human senses. Neither of course, can our senses always be trusted, as when we experience a mirage or a hypnotically induced state.

Further, if bare sensation is accepted as the authoritative touchstone of knowledge and what is really there, then important aspects of knowledge and reality—as commonly presupposed by our daily lives—are lost to us or at the very least called into serious question. These would include, for example, moral and other values, minds, past and future events, theoretical entities (e.g., atoms, unconscious drives or thoughts), and intellectual appreciation of film, to name a few. Reducing knowledge and truth to the claustrophobic arena of the five senses is finally an arbitrary move and one executed usually in the service of the worldview of scientism, the confusion that only “science” and the scientific method provides a reliable way of understanding human experience and the world.¹⁶ Certainly though, while an empiricist theory of truth is ultimately too confining, it is still important to give due attention to the empirical data of our body, values and actual experience.

Truth is what reason declares. Rationalism, the exaltation of reason and thought processes to the royal throne of knowledge, suffers the same self-refuting defect of pragmatism, empiricism and relativism: it cannot be proved by its own standard. Reason alone needs recourse to other dimensions of reality and human experience—formal logical truths like the law of noncontradiction (x cannot equal non-x), deep sentiment (like a father’s inclination to protect his children) and romantic attraction—to properly recognize and understand the human condition. Some dimensions of life and the world are simply ineffable in their wonder and truth, and the finite human mental apparatus is not





competent to completely process it.* Reason is important, but it is not all that is important.

Truth is the coherence of a group of ideas. The “coherence theory of truth” is widely influential today and holds that truth is the coherence or harmony among a set of ideas. Again, though, a problem of intelligibility intrudes. The partisan of this theory of truth seeks to vindicate this perspective not by showing that it *coheres* with other related ideas about truth and knowledge but rather that it matches up with what we mean when we say “true,” that it corresponds with what we believe ourselves to understand when we affirm that a given idea is true. By appealing to correspondence to vindicate coherence, it disproves itself.

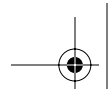
Further, this approach to truth is too insular and self-contained to be of great use to us in our daily lives. When we assert or affirm a given state of affairs, an idea or an event is true, we are claiming more for it than a certain quality about its relation to other similar or relevant states, ideas or events. We are not making simply a statement about relationships among similar ideas but rather a statement about the relationship between a certain idea and the world outside or beyond that idea. We naturally want our concept of truth to be able to address realities “out there” and independent of the ideas in our minds.¹⁷

Though inadequate as the final word on truth, certainly the concept of coherence is one we expect our true ideas to fulfill. We quite rightly intend that values we practice and advocate cohere with other truths we hold about the nature of the world and society. Though coherence is not itself the final criterion for truthfulness, it is an indicator and property of it. Coherence is a necessary condition for truthfulness, but not a sufficient condition.

Truth is what corresponds to reality. The correspondence theory of truth is certainly to be preferred to other candidates, and it best captures

*The film *Grand Canyon* (directed by Lawrence Kasdan, Twentieth Century Fox, 1992) is a provocative illustration—using the metaphor of Arizona’s profound Grand Canyon—of this transcendent dimension to the world and human experience. Deep grief has also been advanced as a “signal of transcendence,” in sociologist Peter Berger’s phrase. For powerful reflection on these lines, see the truly stunning work of Gerald Sittser, *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through Loss* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995). For discussion of the concept of “signals of transcendence,” which Berger defines as “phenomena that are to be found within our ‘natural’ reality but that appear to point beyond that reality,” see his book, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), pp. 52-75.



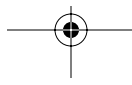
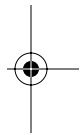


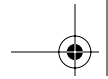
what we most fundamentally mean as we use and interact with the concept of truth. When we say or believe that X is true, we are understanding ourselves to be describing an actual state of affairs, a quality of genuine reality. If we are assured an event is true, we believe it in fact happened; if we are convinced a situation is true, we think that situation prevails and may actually affect us or someone else, and so we act or recommend action accordingly; if it is proven to us that a proposition is true, we have concluded that the proposition portrays a distinct mind-independent reality as that reality essentially is. There is a matching-up or a decisive connection between the statement and the reality it refers to. The actual nature—or some aspect of it—about the world external to us is properly conveyed to us by true statements. Further, that actual nature of the world is not changed or affected by our correctly or incorrectly describing it. The final truth of ideas or events is discovered by people, not created by them.¹⁸

Truth is whatever I feel. Last, and by way of introducing our next discussion, we should note the emotive outlook on truth. Truth is what I feel; truth is found wherever my emotions lead me. As with so many habits of the contemporary mind, its childishness and indefensibility does not prevent it from achieving widespread currency and practice.

Still, there is no reason to believe our feelings are an infallible or even reliable guide to reality, and emotivism embraces a deeply uncritical stance toward ourselves and our emotions. Could it be my feelings of dislike toward someone and my conviction he is a person of bad character are based on jealousy, resentment or unresolved anger in my own life projected toward him? Any equation of emotional impulse and truth falls far short of considering all the evidence—which unless I am entirely self-absorbed I must admit may lie outside of my own mind and experience—that would be relevant to determining the truth of any given matter.¹⁹

This is not to say that feelings cannot be a part of the truth of a matter (e.g., I feel revulsion at the photos of the grisly crime scene, emphasizing to me the injustice and brutality of what was done), but they alone should not be allowed to steer our lives. We must not *identify* truth with feeling. Whether as individuals or as a society, such a move would give rise to impulsiveness, violence, irresponsibility and eventually anarchy.





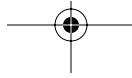
Truth Today

If there were a headline to describe the state of truth in American life today, it might be “Truth in Trouble” or “Tough Times for Truth.” Our essentially postmodern times have created and sustained this confusion over truth, so it is entirely appropriate that postmodernism—this nihilistic Hydra that is part literary criticism, part artistic and architectural style, part philosophical orientation and general sociocultural mood—has come under heavy critical attack.

We will not comprehensively cover the range of postmodernism’s incoherences as an intellectual framework.²⁰ Suffice it to say, it is essentially only subjectivity and relativism wearing many different linguistic costumes. What is little more than “do your own thing” becomes talk of the centrality of “historical embeddedness,” the necessity of recognizing our “socio-linguistic constructedness” and the unavoidability of “discourse communities.” What passes for deep thought in postmodern academia is often little more than an uncritical and rampant skepticism and subjectivity toward anything traditional or not politically correct by the standards of contemporary liberalism.

Postmodernism’s attachment to the absolute subjectivity of values and worldviews inflates a careful and intellectually responsible awareness of subjectivity to absolute proportions, creating a false dichotomy between either wisely incorporating the reality of human subjectivity into our thinking and believing or intellectually operating solely on (putative) subjective grounds at the expense of even the possibility of objective conclusions or bases to our thinking and believing.²¹

This apotheosis or exaltation of subjectivity to a godlike position is a mistake that inheres in postmodernist analyses by its nature. Complete and total subjectivity prevents any interpersonally authoritative conclusions whatsoever, and it insulates us from criticisms external to ourselves since there will always be recourse to the trump: “That’s just your perspective.” But this extreme subjectivism is obviously self-refuting, foreclosing on the possibility of employing public argumentative criteria and the very transpersonal distinctions it needs to sustain its own critique of objectivity. While postmodernists may revel at what they take as the demolition of tradition, they are not so easily able to fill the holes they think they create in the foundation for living that the traditional Judeo-





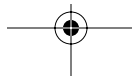
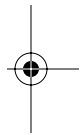
Christian worldview has provided American society. As Professor J. Budziszewski remarks,

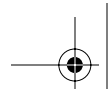
A postmodernist thinks *life* is fragmented. He doesn't believe his life is going anywhere, that it has a theme, that it's *about* anything, and he doesn't think yours is either. At most, he thinks, life is just a series of "projects" and relationships. . . . The biggest problem postmodernists face is meaninglessness.²²

The unrealistic postmodernist orientation toward life proves terribly unsatisfying for the human soul. It ultimately has an isolating effect, disconnecting the person from the relationships and institutions that provide meaning and significance to life, leaving the individual as a lonely bundle of desires and preferences, adrift in a sea of choices with no way to order life's options into a morally sensible hierarchy of goods, and no way to realize any point or goal to life, because there *is* no real, overarching purpose to human existence or anyone's individual human experience as a whole.²³

This isolating effect also prevails when it comes to truth. Under the regime of postmodernism there can be only "truth for me" or truth that I choose within my social setting, there cannot be any public or objective truths. Social practice is the final authority to all critique for the postmodernist, so such norms themselves cannot be the subject of critique. To the postmodernist, truth—as a "construction" of either my own desires or my community at either a micro or macro level—is created, not discovered; it is chosen, not revealed. So truths remain private and only binding on me, with my consent.²⁴ I need not assent to the truth of any moral or philosophical idea that, for whatever reason, I do not want to be true. I create my own reality, and anyone who does not cede to me the reasonableness of doing so is foisting on me a constricting, suffocating alternative.

In fact, since I as a postmodernist believe all truth is exclusively self-created, those who don't and seek to dispel my view, are, in my eyes, *imposing* on me their own private perspective. Since there can be no public truths to which they can legitimately be seeking to gain my assent, they can only be engaged in a kind of conquest of me, an attempt to move me away from my own autonomously chosen preferences and into what they, for their own reasons, want for me. In this way the so-





lipsism or unrelenting self-focus of postmodernist ideologies forecloses on debate itself, ceasing to tolerate dissent and dialogue that, if it claims more for itself other than the purely subjective expressions of the speaker, is sinister. Inevitably this devotion to subjectivity becomes tyrannical and obscurantist. Postmodernists refuse to lift their eyes above the horizon of their own wants and preferences, including what they individually want to be true. The belief in truth as subjectivity short-circuits discussion, construing challenge as imposition. It is a dehumanizing perspective.

It is easy to see how postmodernism—and the larger secular liberalism of which it is really just an academic expression—leads to a suffocating orthodoxy and intolerance to challenge. Postmodernism is not usually the subject of such charges, and that is one of the cardinal ironies of our times. That which is thought to be broad-minded is narrow-minded, that which is thought to be intellectually adventurous is uncritical and unreflective, that which is thought to be liberating is constricting, and that which is thought to permanently safeguard truth by locking it away in the heart of personal preference or social convention has confined it in the solitary and dark prison of self-obsession.

Postmodernism's derelict handling of the idea of truth has only exacerbated our culture wars by leaving us without common philosophical ground on which to dialogue about social controversies. The cultural chasms created by the denial of the possibility of objective truth are proving too expansive for adherents of different worldviews to communicate across. Furthermore, the contemporary reduction of truth to personal preference is stagnating our ethic of toleration, which, like a river, must remain active if it is to support the vitality and diversity of life it is intended to support. We will now turn our attention to how truth, rightly conceived, both requires and supports authentic tolerance.

