

Truth for a Postmodern Era
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In a famous courtroom scene in the Rob Reiner directed movie *A Few Good Men*, Lieutenant Kaffee (played by Tom Cruise) cross examines Colonel Jessup (played by Jack Nicholson) about an unsanctioned disciplinary incident on the Marine base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. In this intense scene, Kaffee demands loudly, “*I want to know the truth!*” Jessup angrily growls, “*You can’t handle the truth!*” Jessup’s retort may have some similarities with the response that evangelical Christians may need to provide to postmodernists. The issue is not that truth cannot be found, but that postmodernists do not want to accept the truth that they encounter.

What is truth in this postmodern era? Many have proposed that we design a new epistemology that is better suited to the inclinations of this postmodern era. However, it is rather strange to suggest that the moving of a clock hand somehow changes truth. Truth is truth in part because it is trustworthy and true across time; it does not change constantly like fashion and personal taste.

This article will propose eleven theses about truth that apply not only in this postmodern era, but in all times and all places. To be more specific and technical, the epistemology here advocated is an objective foundationalist epistemology.

1. *Truth is unified and orderly, not disconnected and chaotic.*

Christians believe that both reality and truth are unified because their origin is the orderly

creation of God (Genesis 1-2, John 1). Not only did creation bring order out of chaos, but in Jesus Christ the world continues to fit together in an orderly schema (Acts 17:28, Col. 1:16-18). As Doug Groothuis affirms, we live in a “uni-verse,” not a “multi-verse.”¹ Even to function effectively in the world we must have a consistent interpretive framework by which to frame and interpret the diverse perceptions of experience.

Postmodernists, however, reject all “received” ontologies and epistemologies.² In their view, these classical perspectives reek of the *metaphysics of presence*, in which reality is said to exist apart from and prior to human opinions (or the “reification” of reality). Each metaphysics of presence is expressed in some *metanarrative*. For the Christian worldview, of course, the biblical narrative of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation is the Christian metanarrative. Postmodernists suspect that any “metaphysics of presence” and its corresponding “metanarrative” are actually tools of class warfare to be used by ruling classes to subdue others. The metaphysics of presence thus effectually becomes a metaphysics of violence through which power is imposed on the powerless. Postmodernists thus approach all metanarratives with a

¹Douglas R. Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove: InverVarsity, 2000), 79.

²Note the distaste for traditional metaphysics and epistemology in the following popular titles by authors who favor a postmodernist perspective (both Christian and non-Christian): Walter Truett Anderson, *Reality Isn't What It Used to Be: Theatrical Politics, Ready-to-Wear Religion, Global Myths, Primitive Chic and Other Wonders of the Postmodern World* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990); Stanley Grenz, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001); Stanley Hauerwas, Nancy C. Murphy, and Mark Nation, eds. *Theology without Foundations: Religious Foundations and the Future of Theological Truth*. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994); Philip Kenneson, “There Is No Such Thing as Objective Truth, and It’s a Good Thing, Too,” in *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, pp. 155-170 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995), and John E. Thiel, *Nonfoundationalism, Guides to Theological Inquiry* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

“hermeneutic of suspicion” because “it seeks to reduce all diversity into a single homogenous unity”³ and to protect the interests of the powerful few. Postmodernist guru Jean-François Lyotard has even gone to far as to *define* postmodernism as “incredulity toward metanarratives.”⁴

One key problem with the postmodernist rejection of metanarratives is that human beings appear to be hardly able to survive or communicate without the use of some metanarrative with which to interpret reality, to frame experience, and to find meaning in life. As Middleton and Walsh acknowledge, “without a coherent metanarrative we are left morally adrift, at the mercy of random violence and brutality.”⁵ This leads to a second problem: the postmodernist appeal to local metanarratives (as opposed to one universal, overarching metanarrative) does not save anyone from the violence that metanarratives purportedly cause; in fact, local metanarratives may demonstrably cause more violence than a single metanarrative. One need merely look at the genocide in the Balkans, intertribal warfare in Africa, and Catholic-Protestant violence in Northern Ireland to see that local stories can be just as easily used to legitimize violence as any metanarrative.⁶ All truth is powerful, and that power can be abused. Electricity is a good thing when used properly, but it can be misused by evil persons to do cruel deeds. Electricity was not

³J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh. *Truth Is Stranger than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995), 34, 49.

⁴Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

⁵Middleton and Walsh, 77.

⁶Groothuis, 75.

created for abuse, but any good thing can be misused. Truth is a good thing that can be used to accomplish great good. Truth is about much more than power; it is about coming to see reality as it really is. The third problem with the postmodernist rejection of metanarratives is the simple fact that postmodernists also have a metanarrative. As Middleton and Walsh point out, “The postmodernist is thus caught in a performative contradiction, arguing against the necessity of metanarratives precisely by (surreptitious) appeal to a metanarrative.”⁷ So Christians need make no apologies for affirming the orderly worldview expressed in the biblical narrative

2. *Truth (and reality) is discovered or revealed, not created as a product of human thought.*

A key issue confronting contemporary epistemology revolves around a kind of “which comes first” (chicken/egg or horse/cart) question: Which comes first – reality (and truth), or human minds creating reality and truth? Postmodernists generally advocate a *constructivist* epistemology in which truth is created or made, not discovered or revealed. In this view, truth is created by human language and perceptions. Truth emerges from social constructs within given communities. Postmodernists reject any epistemology that attempts to reify reality as a thing external to ourselves rather than as the product of human thought.

In contrast, most contemporary scientists (and many evangelicals) would affirm a critical realist epistemology that corresponds to some variety of metaphysical realism. *Critical realism* holds that truth precedes reality, and truth may be known fairly accurately. While our human constructs may only approximate reality, these are fairly close approximations. Truth is prior to our knowing it; it is not dependent on human perceptions or dependent on our beliefs. Critical realists are not scientific positivists; they are aware of the limitations of any human construct.

⁷Middleton and Walsh, 77.

But they understand scientific constructs (properly done) to have a close approximation or high correlation to reality.

Anyone who believes in biblical inerrancy and a high view of biblical inspiration would also consistently affirm that truth is revealed. We know the truths of Scripture not because we created them, but because God did. God revealed His truths to us primarily through books of Scripture (and the incarnation of Jesus Christ), but also in the book of nature. Truth (and reality) thus precede(s) our knowing it. Truth is independent of human perceptions and beliefs. Truth is not created by the knower, but exists prior to our knowing it. In a way analogous to the famous “tree falling in the forest” argument, the critical realist believes that the tree fell whether or not anyone is there to observe it. The fact that two plus two equals four is not created by human beings, but is discovered by humans as a fact that is embedded in reality.

Walter Truett Anderson aptly illustrates the difference in these epistemological perspectives by use of an often cited analogy to the approach of a baseball umpire to making calls in a game. The *naive realist* umpire says, “I call ‘em the way they are.” The *critical realist* umpire says, “I call ‘em the way I see ‘em.” And the *radical perspectivalist* or *constructivist* umpire says, “They ain’t nothing ‘til I call ‘em.”⁸

The problem with critical realism for postmodernists, in the words of Middleton and Walsh, is that it “still seems to hide a pretentious aspiration to ‘get reality right’ Such an

⁸Anderson, 75. The names that Anderson utilizes to describe these three umpires is “objectivist” for the first umpire, “mainstream constructivist” for the second, and “postmodern radical constructivist” for the third. The application of the “mainstream constructivist” appellation (rather than “critical realist” for the second umpire seems inappropriate to me because Anderson acknowledges that in this position the “objective universe still exists and has its own properties,” but that we must use epistemological humility in our claims to knowledge about that “objective” and “real” *cosmos*. A thoroughgoing constructivist would not affirm that an objective reality exists beyond our perceptions and creations (hence the name *constructivist!*).

aspiration, however, is epistemologically impossible to realize. Indeed, it rests upon the conviction that a final, universally true perspective can be achieved.”⁹ Ironically, in making this criticism, Middleton and Walsh are claiming to “get reality right”!

One major problem with the “social construction of reality”¹⁰ in postmodernism is that it appears to produce an infinite regress of social constructs. A present social construct is apparently based upon some earlier social construct, which in turn is based upon a prior social construct, etc. The unhappy consequence for postmodernists in this line of thought is that contemporary social constructs are based upon and derived from ancient social constructs. However, postmodernists are keen on distinguishing themselves from such traditional social constructs.¹¹ There seems to be no escape from the reality that truth precedes our knowing it.

3. *Truth corresponds to reality; it is not merely the creation of the human mind.*

Critical realism relies heavily upon the *correspondence theory of truth*, which simply holds that truth (expressed in propositions) corresponds to reality. Many postmodernists, however, reject the correspondence view of truth as a “modernist fiction.”¹² Rejecting the “myth of the mirror” (that our truth accurately mirrors the world), they affirm views of truth that are pluralistic, community-based, and/or internally coherent. Rejecting the correspondence view of truth is self-defeating, however. For one thing, to claim that the correspondence view of truth is false is saying that it does not correspond to reality, and hence is invoking the correspondence

⁹Middleton and Walsh, 168.

¹⁰Ibid., 31; see John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1995).

¹¹Groothuis, 60.

¹²Ibid., 93.

theory of truth in a futile attempt to reject it. So those who deny the correspondence theory of truth covertly employ it and acknowledge its truth. The more passionately they attempt to undermine or deny the correspondence view of truth, the louder their actions scream that they implicitly acknowledge it.

4. *Truth is objective, not subjective or relative.*

Any purported “truth” that changes cannot indeed be true because it is false at least some of the time. Describing love in one of his sonnets, William Shakespeare said, “Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds, or bends with the remover to remove. Oh no! It is an ever fixed mark that looks on tempests and is never shaken.”¹³ Likewise, truth is not truth when it alters, changes, or goes out of being. Perceptions, opinions, and tastes change, but truth does not change. Truth is objective and unchanging; it is not relative, subjective, or perspectival. Nothing is more widely held (including among postmodernists) than the commonsense intuition that truth is objective. A recent Google Internet search for the phrase “when the truth comes out” produced over 5 million references, such as the truth behind the war in Iraq, the truth about corporate claims, and the truth that vindicates wrongly arrested persons. What all these references had in common was their common belief that although contrary views might be held at present, in the end truth is an objective, nonperspectival matter. When an NFL referee raises his arms in a football game to declare a touchdown, he is attempting to make an objective judgment based on the written rules and his experienced professional judgment. Because referees are humans, they are fallible, of course – they do see the play from a certain perspective, and their view of the play might be partially blocked. However, the coaches of either team may

¹³William Shakespeare, *Sonnet 116*.

challenge and appeal the referee's call. Other referees can review the call on videotape in order to confirm the original referee's call or overrule it. Even this process is fallible, but note that the assumptions of all concerned are (a) that the rule defining what is a touchdown is knowable and measurable, and (b) whether or not a touchdown has taken place can be judged fairly by empirical observation and videotape replay. It is not a matter of preference, taste, or opinion; it is a matter of fact. The same could be said relating to a policeman giving a speeding ticket after tracking a vehicle with radar, or giving a ticket for a card parked by a parking meter with no time left on it.

Persons who imbibe deeply of postmodernism deny objective truth.¹⁴ Postmodernists often stumble over the modernist fact/value distinction by subsuming all facts under values. But in fact, there is a difference to be drawn between facts and values (or, more precisely, tastes). The truth is not a matter of preference, taste, or style, such as which dessert we prefer or what kind of tie is in style. Nor is truth a matter of persons "feeling comfortable" with it, because truth can be uncomfortable and painful at times. Interpretations vary, but truth doesn't. Perceptions vary, but truth doesn't. Tastes vary, but truth doesn't. Beliefs may change, but not truth. Opinions and values may change, but truth doesn't change.

¹⁴This claim in no where more clearly illustrated than in the title of Philip Kenneson's article in *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*: "There Is No Such Thing as Objective Truth, and It's a Good Thing, Too." Richard Rorty asserts that "The application of such honorifics as 'objective' and 'cognitive' is never anything more than the expression of the presence of, and hope for, agreement among inquirers." Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 325. Postmodernist forerunner Friedrich Nietzsche famously opined, "What then is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonym, and anthropomorphisms – in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to people. Truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins." Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense," in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1968), 46-47.

The dilemma of the postmodernist church is its inability to appeal to any common rational foundations accepted by most people in our society. Thus when Stanley Grenz is challenged to identify what it is that makes the church the unique community, he cannot appeal to the Bible or any other kind of absolute truth. He can only appeal to the pragmatic value of the church for creating community.¹⁵ Unfortunately, this appeal may have limited value in communities in which works-oriented religions may produce pragmatic benefits.

One often-raised problem with relativism is that it is self-referentially incoherent. That is, when the relativist says, “All things are relative,” she is making an objective claim. She is making the claim that, objectively, all things are relative. So by making that claim she disproves her own statement. She is making two contradictory statements – that all things are relative, and that at least one thing is not relative.

Nothing could be more patently obvious than the fact that in real life postmodernists do not believe or practice the subjectivism and relativism that they profess to believe. Outside the classrooms and writings of these arrogant pseudo-intellectual elitists, they do not accept such subjectivism when they consult their banker, their plumber, or their mechanic. When they are misunderstood by their readers, they even protest that others do not understand the objective meaning of what they meant.

In this postmodern world, toleration has become the cardinal virtue. Pluralists often understand toleration to mean that not only should all views be tolerated, but that all views are equally true. However, the ironic consequence of pluralism is that toleration loses its virtue. If there is no objective difference between various positions, then there is no virtue in having

¹⁵ Grenz, 54.

toleration of other perspectives. Toleration is virtuous only when truth is recognized as absolute.

5. *Truth is universal, not regional or parochial.*

Truth is not located in any particular time or place, and is not the possession of any one person or ethnic group. Postmodernists, however, usually evaluate Enlightenment perspectives as being overly individualistic, and propose instead a more community-based standard for truth. Indeed, the Enlightenment probably did overemphasize the individual, although not in most cases as much as the parodies and stereotypes produced by some postmodernists. There is a healthy check and balance in having the individual interacting with the community. In Christianity, it is good for an individual Christian not to drift away in subjectivity without some affirmation and support from the church.

The focus on community in postmodernism arose from their unique perspective on the sociology of knowledge. While differing in other areas, Ferdinand de Saussure and Ludwig Wittgenstein both viewed language as a social convention, a language game that worked only within a particular social construct. Poststructuralists denied that there was one universal linguistic structure or rationality. Pragmatists such as Peirce saw truth as an opinion agreed to by the majority of those investigating a particular issue. One analogy of the difference between classical liberalism and postmodernism is that the former was like a big circus tent with all the varied (pluralistic) acts all in one big event, while the latter is more like the cacophonous and diverse sideshows along the midway. Each community has its own language game and local metanarrative. There is no one agreed upon language, rationality, or metanarrative. Nonfoundationalist theology affirms that all theology is local and specific. Like a political party, the church would be broken into various interest groups (as is already happening in versions of feminist, Asian, gay/lesbian, etc. theology). Unfortunately, what nonfoundationalist theology

actually offers is polytheism – a number of conflicting accounts about who God is and what He is about in this world.

The error in the almost exclusive focus that postmodernists have on community is that they overlook the fact that communities are made up of individuals. There is a tendency to praise at the community level what is condemned at the individual level. This view smacks of an overly optimistic anthropology. Communities can be very dangerous, and indeed mob behavior incites individuals to do evil deeds that they would never have contemplated as individuals. Since the community is made up of individuals, the community can be just as fallible and evil as the individual. Obviously, allowing each community to set its own standard entails a tacit acceptance of pluralism. And just because a culture believes or practices something doesn't make it right, as Nazi Germany and other racist societies have made very evident. Communities are helpful in balancing the subjectivity of individuals, but are not a panacea to solve all social woes or lead us into truth.

6. *Truth is narrow and specific, not broad and pluralistic.*

Truth is not broad; it is narrow and specific. As Rushdoony affirms, "Truth is exact and precise, and the slightest departure from the truth is the substitution of falsity for truth."¹⁶

Rational thought in Western culture has classically invoked laws of logic such as the principle of identity, the principle of non-contradiction, and the principle of the excluded middle. Taken together, these principles hold that something cannot be both true and false (or one thing and another thing) in the same way at the same time. In other words, these principles reject the

¹⁶ R. J. Rushdoony, *Foundations of Social Order: Studies in the Creeds and Councils of the Early Church* (Fairfax: Thoburn Press, 1978), 118.

pluralist claim that two mutually exclusive views can be held at the same time. Postmodernists prefer to deny or sidetrack these laws of logic, at least in principle (if not in practice). The author of this paper has been tempted at times to invoke with postmodernists the approach of the Muslim philosopher Avicenna, who proposed that “[T]hose who deny a first principle should be beaten or exposed to fire until they concede that to burn and not to burn, or to be beaten and not to be beaten, are not identical.”¹⁷ These principles are so basic and found rational to our thinking that even a child would quickly acknowledge them. Unfortunately, apparently not all postmodernists have reached the level of understanding of the necessity of these simple principles so apparent to even a child.

Stanley Grenz advocates measuring Christian doctrine by a “centered set” model rather than the “bounded set” that evangelical Christians have normally utilized as a test for fellowship. The problem with the centered set model is its concession to relativism. The community can move the center by joint agreement, or even unconsciously. Grenz speaks of the church community working with the guidance of the Holy Spirit.¹⁸ While the Spirit does guide the church, Christians sometimes mistake their own emotions or desires for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. A compelling historical case could be made that culture has played a more definitive role in many church decisions than the Spirit. All you need to be assured that the church is fallible in regard to the truth is read church history. And the Bible was not so much given *for* the church community (to develop and create new interpretations), as Grenz contends, but God gave the Bible *to* the church (2 Pet. 1:20-21).

¹⁷Avicenna, *Metaphysics*, I; commenting on Aristotle, *Topics* I.11.105a4-5.

¹⁸ Grenz, 5-8.

7. Truth is knowable; it is not totally unknowable or merely perspectival.

Critical realism is confident that reality may be known. This knowledge does not come easy, however. One must practice epistemic virtues in order to know the truth, but noetic unrighteousness will obscure or suppress the truth (Isa. 28:15, Rom. 1:18-20, 2:13-16, 2 Pet. 3:16). Failing to practice such doxastic virtues as intellectual integrity, coherent thinking, and good hermeneutics contributes to noetic unrighteousness.¹⁹ God reveals knowledge to those who seek it in the right way and from the correct Source (2 Chron. 1:12; Prov. 1:7, 22-23, 28-29; 2:6; 3:5-6; Eccl. 2:26; John 18:37).

It is not inconsistent, however, to hold to both critical realism and fallibilism – the view that even well-intended and well-educated humans are fallible. One should always approach knowing with epistemological humility, because a sincere seeker for the truth may miss it. However, critical realists understand there to be a difference between knowledge and certainty. We will virtually never have absolute certainty, but we will discover such high approximations to reality and truth that we can know them with a high degree of confidence. Fallibilism does not entail agnosticism about all things. Truth may, however, be known with varying degrees of confidence.²⁰

¹⁹A good primer on intellectual virtues is Jay Wood, *Epistemology: Becoming Intellectually Virtuous*. Contours of Christian Philosophy. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998. Modestly, perhaps Bruce Corley, Steve Lemke, and Grant Lovejoy, eds., *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Comprehensive Introduction to Interpreting Scripture*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2001) is among the useful tools for good hermeneutics.

²⁰Chisholm suggests a hierarchy of certainty in Roderick M. Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge*. 3rd ed. Foundations of Philosophy series. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1989), 9-13. The levels of certainty are “The Counterbalanced,” “The Probable,” “That Which Is Beyond Reasonable Doubt,” “The Evident,” and “The Certain.”

Postmodernism, however, asserts that reality is unknowable and language is incapable of conveying truth. Everything is reduced to perspective and opinion. As Richard Rorty asserts, a French Quarter fortune teller is on equal epistemological standing with a brilliant physicist regarding planetary motion:

It is useless to ask whether one vocabulary rather than another is closer to reality. The different vocabularies serve different purposes, and there is no such thing as a purpose that is closer to reality than another purpose Nothing is conveyed in saying . . . that the vocabulary in which we predict the motion of a planet is more in touch with how things really are than the vocabulary in which we assign the planet an astrological influence.²¹

One of the fundamental confusions of contemporary discourse is caused by misapplying the distinctive roles of ontology and epistemology. Ontology and epistemology are inextricably bound together, but they are also distinguishable. Ontology should properly address what reality is (or what is the clue to or focus of reality), and epistemology (or how that reality may be known). Confusion arises in epistemology, however, when what may be known is equated with what is real. Truth is real and objective, but knowing objective truth is at least partially subjective. As Groothuis puts it, there is an important distinction between the fact that “objective, absolute, and universal truth exists” and the claim that “one has mastered these objective, absolute, and universal truths.”²² Some beliefs may be more objective, and others more subjective, but we are all limited by the anthropocentric predicament and our own finitude, and thus cannot know with absolute certainty. For example, evangelical Christians confidently assert the ontological claim that Jesus is Lord. This ontological claim cannot be known

²¹Richard Rorty, introduction to John P. Murphy, *Pragmatism: From Peirce to Davidson*. (Boulder: Westview, 1990).

²²Groothuis, 12.

epistemologically, however, apart from a faith commitment to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Once we place our belief in Jesus as Savior and Lord, we come to accept by faith a number of other truths within the Christian worldview. So while we may have great confidence, boldness, and certitude, but we still “see through a glass darkly” until the *eschaton* (Isa. 55:8-9, 1 Cor. 13:12).

Although our human knowing is not final, in the final analysis we must choose whether truth may be known with confidence or not. We must choose between the pluralistic agnosticism of Pilate, so eloquently voiced in his question, “What is truth?” (John 18:38); and the affirmation of Jesus that His very purpose in life was to reveal the truth in a way that was understandable and knowable: “For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice” (John 18:37). For me and my house, we’re going to believe Jesus rather than Pilate!

8. *Truth precedes language; language does not precede reality or truth.*

The “linguistic turn” initiated by George Lindbeck and others brought a new relativistic perspective to language. This Wittgensteinian perspective on language asserted that words do not have inherent meaning, but rather we give a meaning to a word within our language game. Meaning and truth are not directly related to the external world, but are an internal function of language. One of the fundamental confusions of postmodern thought is the claim that language precedes and creates truth. They reject the “myth of the given” and its affirmation that reality exists prior to language. Jean Baudrillard has argued famously that the Gulf War did not take

place, or at least it did not matter if it did.²³ It was a media event orchestrated by Western nations, but it was not a real war.

When John Searle dared to point out the absence of the postmodernist emperor's clothes by claiming that Derrida's deconstructionism was based upon the paradox of using language to claim that language cannot make any unambiguous claims,²⁴ postmodernist guru Jacques Derrida strangely replied that Searle had misread him and misunderstood what he (Derrida) meant.²⁵ Like so many things in postmodernism, postmodernists are unwilling to apply the very principles that they apply so freely to others. Citing Leonard Cohen's poetic rejoinder to postmodern Christianity – "When they said REPENT/I wonder what they meant," Middleton and Walsh acknowledge that "[T]he language of repentance is only understandable if there is a means to be measured and to be found wanting."²⁶ Language without commonly accepted meanings will return us to an even more vicious Tower of Babel.

The truth is that reality is independent of language. Language shapes and filters our human perceptions of reality, but it doesn't change reality itself. Without referents in outward reality, language would have nothing to which to refer. As John Searle puts it, "Facts don't need statements in order to exist, but statements need facts in order to be true."²⁷

²³Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, trans. Paul Patton. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.

²⁴John Searle, "The World Turned Upside Down," review of *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*, by Jonathan Culler, in *New York Review of Books* (October 27, 1983).

²⁵Jacques Derrida, "Limited a b c" and "Afterword: Toward an Ethics of Discussion," in *Limited Inc.* Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988.

²⁶Middleton and Walsh, 58.

²⁷Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*, 218.

9. Truth is both personal and propositional, not just one or the other.

Because Jesus is the creator of all things, all things hold together in Him (John 1:1-4, Acts 17:28, Col. 1:16-18). Therefore, nothing in the universe has its fullest meaning apart from its connection to Christ. Even a simple mathematical formulation such as $2 + 2 = 4$ is true at a foundational level because God through Jesus created an orderly world in which we can rely upon such regularity in logic. Apart from this orderliness, $2 + 2 = 4$ would not be true. Not only did Jesus *reveal* the truth (Matt. 22:16, Mark 12:14, Luke 4:25, 20:21, John 5:32, 7:18, 8:45, 16:7, 18:37), in a deeper sense He himself *is* the truth (John 1:14, 17; 8:32; 14:6). So since all truth is incomplete without reference to the person of Jesus, all truth has this personalistic aspect.

However, it would be a mistake to draw a sharp bifurcation between the personal and propositional. Some who reject biblical inerrancy, for example, have argued that affirming a series of impersonal propositions is of little effect; what we need is personal knowledge.²⁸ It is true that the personal dimension is crucial, but the propositional element is important as well. As Roger Nicole says so eloquently, “It is because truth is conformity to fact that confidence may be placed in it, or in the one who asserts it, and it is because a person is faithful that he or she would be careful to make statements that are true.”²⁹ Even in salvation itself, which is surely coming to a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ, there is nonetheless some propositional content, i.e., affirming “Jesus is Lord” or some other such rudimentary propositional confession (Acts 16:31, Rom 10:9-10, 1 Cor. 12:3). We cannot reasonably believe in a “who” if we do not

²⁸ Groothuis lists Alister McGrath and Stanley Grenz as examples of those making this argument. See Groothuis, 116.

²⁹ Roger Nicole, “The Biblical Concept of Truth,” in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. John D. Woodbridge and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 290.

have some “what” to believe about them.³⁰ If something so personal as salvation has both personalistic and propositional elements, why would we be surprised that everything else does as well?

10. *Truth is usually fruitful, but it is true whether or not it has pragmatic benefits.*

We live in a day in which Pragmatism reigns supreme. William James defined Pragmatism as the “attitude of looking away from first things, principles, ‘categories,’ supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts.”³¹ James believes that truth is not objective, but “truth is made, just as health, wealth, and strength are made, in the course of experience.”³² For James, truth does not have “a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events.”³³ James’s ultimate test of truth thus became: “What, in short, is the truth’s cash-value in experiential terms?”³⁴

Of course, truth generally works better than error. But something is not true because it works; it works because it is true. Mathematics and physics don’t just happen by accident or to fulfill human needs; they work because they are true. Sometimes things work even though they are not true. The church has sometimes struggled with this distinction. Given that we know that, for example, church growth principle or evangelistic technique X works, does that make it

³⁰Groothuis comments, “Christian faith involves both intellectual assent (*fides*) and personal trust (*fiducia*); in fact, the latter is logically dependent on the former for its rationale.” Groothuis, 142. Or, as J. P. Moreland words it, “God has revealed truth to us and not just himself.” J. P. Moreland, *Love Your God with All Your Mind* (Colorado Springs, Nav Press, 1997), 45.

³¹William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, reprint ed. (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1928), 38

³²*Ibid.*, 218.

³³*Ibid.*, 200-201.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 77.

right if in some ways it violates or compromises a biblical principle? Not everything that attracts people (or money) is good. If the church will focus on doing what is right and true, the results will take care of themselves (Matt. 6:33).

11. *Truth is based upon firm foundations, not the shifting sands of human opinion.*

Foundationalism is the epistemological position that one should base one's beliefs on other beliefs that are held most confidently, most assuredly, and most self-evidently. John Thiel defines foundationalism "from a logical perspective as the view that mediately justified beliefs require epistemic support for their validity in immediately justified beliefs, or from a disciplinary perspective as the view that systems of knowledge, in content and method, require first principles."³⁵ Some variety of foundationalism seems to be affirmed in Scripture. Isaiah encourages us with these words: "Therefore thus says the Lord GOD, Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a tested stone, a costly cornerstone for the foundation, firmly placed. He who believes in it will not be disturbed" (Isa. 28:16, NASB). Likewise, the Apostle Paul affirms: "For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 3:11). Those of us who still remember hymns likely have appreciation for the words of that great old hymn by John Rippon, "How firm a foundation, ye saints in the Lord, is laid for your faith in His excellent Word!" In more references than I can list in the Old Testament, God is called the "Rock" upon which we should base our lives (2 Sam. 2:2-3, 32, 47; Ps. 18:2, 31, 46; 62:2, 6-7). Jesus advised us to build our lives upon the firm foundation of the solid Rock, not on

³⁵Thiel, 2. Thiel notes that in contemporary discourse foundationalism "is nearly always a pejorative label that nonfoundationalists give to philosophical positions found guilty in their court of criticism," and that even these definitions he offers are typically "the property of the nonfoundationalist and are offered as expressions of foundationalism's inherent deficiencies." Himself a nonfoundationalist, Thiel notes that nonfoundationalism is "gainsaying" in that it tends to be consumed with a negative critique of foundationalism rather than constructive of a positive alternative.

shifting sand (Matt.7:24-27).

Ultimately, there is no retreat from foundationalism. All other epistemologies also build upon certain first principles, even if they do so less obviously than do foundationalists.³⁶ For example, coherentists purportedly attempt to build an epistemology without any obvious foundation. The problem with coherentism's attempt to build a "foundationless" epistemology is that it is vulnerable to the danger of constructing a house of cards that is internally coherent but is not built upon a sound foundation. It is possible to have an internally consistent system that does not correspond to reality. For example, the concept of reincarnation is consistent and coherent with other beliefs of Hinduism, but there is strong evidence that reincarnation is not factual. But even in coherentism there is a foundation. The principle of coherence and the laws of logic form the foundation for coherentism. Coherence is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the truth.

Reliabilism also appears at first blush to be nonfoundationalist, in that truth is guaranteed by a reliable mechanism. However, the reliable mechanism is the foundation for reliabilist epistemology.³⁷ Even postmodernist epistemology is based on a foundation – the foundational principle that truth is not objective. Postmodernists ardently and passionately defend this foundational belief.

³⁶ While writing to create a theology "beyond foundationalism," Stanley Grenz acknowledges that "In its broadest sense, foundationalism is merely the acknowledgment of the seemingly obvious observation that not all beliefs we hold (or assertions we formulate) are on the same level, but that some beliefs (or assertions) anchor others. . . . Defined in this manner, nearly every thinker is in some sense a foundationalist" (Grenz, *Beyond Foundationalism* 29).

³⁷ Laurence Bonjour aptly labels reliabilism as "externalist foundationalism," while he describes classical foundationalism (which he advocates) as "internalist foundationalism." See Laurence Bonjour and Ernest Sosa. *Epistemic Justification: Internalism vs. Externalism, Foundations vs. Virtues*. Great Debates in Philosophy series. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 13.

One epistemological challenge that could be raised against foundationalism is the foundationalist dilemma, that is, “What is the foundation for foundationalism?” In other words, if truth is to be built from sure foundations, what is it that makes these foundations sure? It would appear that there are no certain foundations on which to base these foundations, at least in classical foundationalism. But there are several varieties of foundationalism. The type of foundationalism that its critics often stereotype is the classical foundationalism of the Enlightenment, which holds that truth may only be known through self-evident propositions, empirical experience, and incorrigible personal beliefs. The Scottish Common Sense philosopher Thomas Reid proposed a broader version of foundationalism in which common sense beliefs (such as belief in God) were included as foundational beliefs. Alvin Plantinga and other Reformed Epistemologists hold similarly that epistemology should be built upon “properly basic” beliefs.

My proposal is for a version of soft or moderate foundationalism in which in addition to the basic foundations of classical foundationalism, epistemology is built upon *prima facie* truths and other beliefs derived from inductive presuppositionalism. *Prima facie* truths are not absolute truths which are never violable, but are commonsense beliefs that are true the overwhelming amount of time that could be proven incorrect in some exceptions with sufficient evidence.

We arrive at these beliefs inductively in a kind of hermeneutical circle in which new beliefs arise by application of other beliefs. Our *prima facie* beliefs form the plausibility

structures through which we interpret the rest of our experience.³⁸ Our experience may lead us to rethink or amend aspects of our plausibility structure, but we usually find that experience confirms our plausibility structures. For example, most people who accept Jesus Christ as the foundation for their lives do not do so as the conclusion of a logical argument. Most people come to Christ by observing Christlikeness in the lives of others, and hearing the gospel of Jesus Christ from people who they trust. Through this inductive process, they come to make Jesus the foundation for their lives and build their worldview upon Him. Christian experience reaffirms and confirms that choice over time.

Now, some might criticize this view by alleging that (unlike classical foundationalism) the foundations have been constructed from other foundations through induction. This charge is partially correct and partially incorrect. The foundations are established through inductive presuppositionalism in the hermeneutical circle described earlier, so they are not *ex nihilo*. However, none of the foundations proposed by the classical foundationalism of the Enlightenment were underived either. Self-evident propositions arose from rationalistic presuppositions, and empirical experience presupposes confidence in empiricist presuppositions. So the best foundations we can construct our superstructure upon are those in which we have the most confidence. In a fallen world with imperfect knowledge, that is the best that we can do. However, Scripture accords us a trustworthy foundation when properly interpreted.

Jesus Christ is indeed a sure foundation, the solid Rock, upon which we can base our lives. He is also the Way, the Truth, and the Life, the One in whom all things hold together, and

³⁸Peter Berger coined the term “plausibility structures” in Peter Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 38-42.

all things are partial truths apart from reference to Him. Evangelical Christians should stand firmly on an objective, foundationalist view of truth. Why would we want to base our beliefs on that which is groundless and without a foundation? Reality is on our side. Truth is on our side.

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