

## WHAT IS TRUTH? TRUTH AND CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

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In 1999, Pulitzer Prize winning historian and biographer Edmund Morris released his much-anticipated work on Ronald Reagan. Entitled *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan*, this novel—or biography, or biographical novel—set off a great deal of controversy, not least among those who had hoped for a successor to Morris’s magisterial and quite factual, if interpretative, biography of Theodore Roosevelt.

Morris was quite upfront that his intention was to capture Reagan’s essence in a mixture of historical narrative, biographical interpretation—and fiction. His publisher, Random House, even had the audacity to claim in its advertising that through this device, Morris was merely telling the truth in an altogether new way. Morris, himself the object of no small amount of criticism, said concerning his project, “It was an advanced and biographical honesty.” In other words, by inventing a good percentage of the biography, he had made the book more honest than it would otherwise have been.

We are living in an age of great confusion about the issue of truth. In recent weeks, Ralph Keyes has authored a book entitled *The Post Truth Era*, in which he suggests that society has now moved beyond a concern for truth. Truth has become such a contested category, he writes, that most persons go through life actually expecting to be lied to, to be the recipients of dishonesty, and to be confronted with endless misrepresentations by advertisers, cultural leaders, and now even biographers. In a world of media invention and virtual reality, truth has become a distant category to many persons, especially in the academic elite. Sociologist Jay A. Barnes, in his recent work on lying, suggests that people have grown so accustomed to untruth that many postmodernists now claim that lies are actually “meaningful data in their own right.”<sup>1</sup>

Today, in sociological analysis, philosophical discussion, and of course, political debate, the issue is truth itself. Recent debates over issues like embryonic stem cell research, same-sex marriage, sexuality, and human cloning are really disguised arguments about the nature of truth itself.

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<sup>1</sup> Jay A. Barnes, *A Pack of Lies: Toward a Sociology of Lying* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 60.

So what is truth? What is the true state of affairs in these situations? What are the truth issues at stake? Whose truth will be victorious?

In every corner of culture, confusion and chaos run rampant in this post-truth age. In literature, for example, postmodern narrative has grown so minimalist that it has reached the point of having no point at all. As critic George Steiner explains, “God the Father of meaning in His authorial guise is gone from the game. There is no longer any privileged judge, interpreter, or explicator who can determine or communicate the truth, the true intent of the matter.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, artists, musicians, architects, and filmmakers have now openly embraced nihilism. There is, as one critic said, “a noticeable hole in the soul of our contemporary culture, both at its popular and elite levels.” Objective meaning has been lost; whatever meaning and truth we find in the artifacts of culture, we are told, is brought there by the viewer in a subjective experience. Directors in the cinema now say that their sole ambition is to tell *their* truth, as if that were something different from *the* truth.

In large sectors of academia as well, truth has become such a contested category that no debate is more intense than whether truth can be known at all. The same is true in law, where truth is now a matter to be decided, not discovered. No longer does the nation’s judicial system operate on the assumption that judges and juries will reach objective decisions after evaluating evidence presented in an objective manner.

How did we get here? Of course we could begin answering that question at almost any point in intellectual history, but we must begin at least with the Enlightenment. Modernist philosophers like Descartes, Locke, and Kant confronted Western culture with a series of tough questions—the problem of knowledge, most notably, and the subsequent postmodern hermeneutical shift to the subject. Such questions transformed the notion of truth in the Western mind.

The result was a confluence of movements all seeking to answer the question of how truth could be known. Rationalists and empiricists made their bids to ground human knowledge, and science began its growth toward intellectual hegemony as people embraced the myth of the objective, adopting the supposedly objective scientific method as the model for all knowledge. In the background to all this, of course, were those whom Paul Ricoeur called the “high priests and prophets of the hermeneutics of suspicion.” Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Charles Darwin, and their heirs intentionally attacked the reigning truth claims of the day in an effort to subvert them, transform them, and ultimately replace them with a very different understanding of reality.

Of course we cannot completely dispense with modernism, or see it as entirely hostile to the Christian faith. There were genuine gains in modernism which made possible everything from CAT scans to penicillin to microwave ovens to jet aircraft. The problem with the Enlightenment was the totalitarian imposition of the scientific model of rationality upon all truth, the claim

<sup>2</sup> George Steiner, *Grammars of Creation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) 161.

that only scientific data can be objectively understood, objectively defined, and objectively defended. The loss in the wake of this modernist agenda was huge. It left Western culture with little more than a materialist worldview. However, in such a world of mere naturalistic materialism, what can truth possibly mean? In a letter to one of his colleagues, Darwin himself wondered about the effect of this very problem. "The horrid doubt always arises," he wrote, "whether the connection of the convictions of man's mind, which he has developed from the mind of lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy." He went on to ask, "Would anyone trust the convictions of a monkey's mind?"

In the United States, there was a quintessentially American response to this crisis, a system of thought known as pragmatism. In his work, *The Metaphysical Club*, intellectual historian Louis Menand considers the influence of Oliver Wendell Holmes, William James, Charles Pierce, and John Dewey. He said of them: "These people had highly distinctive personalities, and they did not always agree with one another, but their careers intersected at many points, and together they were more responsible than any other group for moving American thought into the modern world."<sup>3</sup>

And what was the essential understanding of truth these men used to move America into the modern world? It was the idea that truth is a matter of social negotiation and that ideas are merely instrumental, tools whose truthfulness will be determined by whether or not they meet the particular needs of the present time. In the eyes of these pragmatists, ideas were nothing but provisional responses to actual challenges, and truth, by definition, was relative to the time, to the place, to the need, and to the person.

Oliver Wendell Holmes said this: "Men to a great extent believe what they want to," because it brings them self-satisfaction. William James applied this philosophy to psychology, and in particular to the psychology of religion. He suggested that truth is not something inherent to an idea, concept, or claim. Rather, he said, "Truth happens to an idea." John Dewey applied the same idea to public policy, education, and law. He insisted that the question, "Is it true?" really is not helpful at all, and should be replaced with the question, "Is it meaningful?"

Modernity thus presented the church of the Lord Jesus Christ with a significant intellectual crisis. As David Wells in his book *No Place For Truth* makes very clear, that crisis was the very questioning of whether truth can be known and taught and embraced and confessed at all.

We are now well aware that truth is stranger than it used to be. For modernism has been replaced by postmodernism—or if not replaced, then at least joined, for postmodernism, I will argue, is nothing more than the logical extension of modernism in a new mood. However one understands that shift, the theological community is confronted with a common concern when we understand the changed and strange *Gestalt* of the postmodern age. Much postmodern literature may be nonsensical and incomprehensible—and read

<sup>3</sup> Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001) x–xi.

more like a vocabulary test than a sustained argument—but Christians cannot dismiss postmodernism as unimportant or irrelevant, for it is shaping the mind of the age, especially at the elite level. Therefore, it is a matter of concern not only to academics and the “elite guard,” but to all those who care about the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

On the question of truth in contemporary culture, the postmodern age confronts the church with a challenge of several dimensions. First, *a deconstruction of truth*. Truth has always been a matter of contention. Throughout all the centuries, even as far back as the pre-Socratic philosophers, truth was the major issue of philosophical concern and inquiry. Postmodernism, however, has turned this concern for truth on its head. While most arguments throughout history have been disputes between rival claims to truth, postmodernism rejects the very notion of truth as a fixed universal, or objective absolute. Modernist thinkers had earlier rejected revelation as a source of truth and, confident that their approach would yield objective and universal truths by means of autonomous human reason, had attempted to establish truth on the basis of inductive thought and scientific investigation. Postmodernists reject both these approaches, arguing that neither revelation nor the scientific method is a reliable source for truth. According to postmodern theory, truth is not objective or absolute at all, nor can it be determined by any commonly accepted method. Instead, postmodernists argue that truth is socially constructed, plural, and inaccessible to universal reason, which itself does not exist anyway. As postmodern philosopher Richard Rorty asserts, “Truth is made rather than found.”

According to the deconstructionists, an influential sect among the postmodernists, all truth is socially constructed. That is, social groups construct their own “truth” in order to serve their own interests. Michel Foucault, one of the most significant postmodern theorists, has argued that all claims to truth are constructed to serve those who are in power. Thus the root of the problem is the desire for power, and the role of the intellectual is to deconstruct truth claims in order to liberate the society. What has historically been understood and affirmed as truth, argue these postmodernists, is really nothing more than a convenient structure of thought intended to oppress the powerless. Truth is not universal, for every culture establishes its own. Neither is it objectively real, for all “truth” is merely constructed—or as Rorty would say, “made, not found.”

Little imagination is needed to see that this radical relativism is a direct challenge to the Christian gospel. Our claim is not to preach one truth among many, about one savior among many, through one gospel among many. We do not believe that the Christian gospel is a socially constructed truth, but *the* truth which sets sinners free. It is objectively, historically, and universally true.

Second, *the death of the meta-narrative*. Because postmodernists believe all truth to be socially constructed, all claims of absolute, universal, and established truth must be resisted. All meta-narratives—that is, all grand and expansive accounts of truth, meaning, and existence—are cast aside, for they claim far more than they can deliver.

Jean François Lyotard, perhaps the most famous European postmodernist, defined postmodernism simply as “incredulity toward meta-narratives.”<sup>4</sup> Because they lay claim to universal truth, meta-narratives are oppressive, totalizing, hegemonistic, and thus to be resisted. Therefore, all the great philosophical systems are dead. All cultural accounts are limited. All that remains are little stories accepted as true by different groups and different cultures.

The problem with this, of course, is that Christianity is meaningless apart from the gospel, which is a meta-narrative, indeed the meta-narrative of meta-narratives. The Christian gospel is the great meta-narrative of redemption. Beginning with creation by the sovereign, omnipotent God, it continues through the fall of humanity into sin and the redemption of sinners through the substitutionary work of Christ on the cross, and promises a dual eternal destiny for all humanity—glory with God forever for the redeemed and everlasting punishment for the unredeemed. This message is irreducibly a meta-narrative. We do not preach the gospel as one narrative among many true narratives, or as merely *our* narrative alongside the authentic narratives of others. We cannot retreat to claims that biblical truth is merely true for us. For Christians to surrender the claim that the gospel is universally true and objectively established is to surrender the center of our faith. Our claim is that the Bible is the Word of God for all, a conviction that is deeply offensive to the postmodern worldview.

Third, *the demise of the text*. If the meta-narrative is dead, then the great texts behind those meta-narratives must also be dead. Postmodernism has declared it a fallacy to ascribe meaning to any text, or even to the author of a text. According to their thought, it is the reader of a text who establishes meaning, and there are no controls to limit the interpretation a reader might give. Jacques Derrida, the leading literary deconstructionist, described this move as the death of the author and the death of the text. Meaning is made, he taught, not found. It is created by the reader in the act of reading. Deconstructionists teach that the author must be removed from consideration and the text itself allowed to live as a liberating word.

This new hermeneutical method is no matter of mere academic significance. It explains much of our current debate in literature, politics, law, and theology. Deconstructionism stands behind much of the contemporary constitutional interpretation presented by judges and law professors, and it is also central to the fragmentation of modern biblical scholarship, the rise of the feminist liberation movement, the homosexual movement, and the way such issues are portrayed in the media.

According to the postmodern interpretive grid, every text must be deconstructed because every text contains a subtext of oppressive intentions on the part of the author. All texts, say the deconstructionists, from the United

<sup>4</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Theory and History of Literature 10; trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) xxiv.

States Constitution to the works of Mark Twain, must be subjected to criticism and dissection, all in the name of liberation. Holy Scripture is no exception. Deconstructionists subject the Bible to radical reinterpretation, often with little or no regard for the plain meaning of the text or the clear intention of the human author. Some texts are simply identified as texts of terror, worthy only to be deconstructed so that humanity might be liberated from their tyranny. Any text which is not pleasing to the postmodern mind is rejected as suppressive, patriarchal, heterosexist, homophobic, "speciesist," or similarly deformed by some other political or ideological bias. The authority of the text is denied, and the most fanciful and even ridiculous interpretations are celebrated as affirming and therefore authentic.

Of course, the deconstructionist notion of the death of the author is particularly noxious when applied to Scripture, for Christians claim that the Bible is not merely the words of men, but the Word of God. Therefore postmodernism's insistence on the death of the author is inherently atheistic and anti-supernaturalistic. In that, it continues the modernist project of subverting claims to revealed truth. Any claim to divine revelation is written off as only one more projection of oppressive power.

Fourth, *the dominion of therapy*. When truth is denied, therapy remains. The critical epistemological question is shifted from "What is true?" to "What makes me feel good?" What makes me feel authentic, healthy, and happy? This cultural trend has been developing for centuries, but it has now reached epic proportions. The culture we confront is almost completely under the foot of what Philip Rieff called "the triumph of the therapeutic." In a postmodern world, every issue eventually revolves around the autonomous self, and therefore enhanced self-esteem remains the goal of many educational and theological approaches. Categories like "sin" and "morality" are rejected as oppressive and harmful to self-esteem.

Therapeutic approaches have become dominant as a postmodern culture, made up of individuals uncertain whether truth even exists, tries to deal with the questions of the day. They are sure that self-esteem must remain intact, but there the clarity stops. Right and wrong are discarded as out-of-date reminders of an oppressive past, and all inconvenient moral standards are replaced with what Harvard Law professor Mary Ann Glendon calls "rights talk." There is no longer right and wrong, only rights.

Theology itself is likewise reduced to therapy. Entire theological systems are constructed with the goal of protecting and increasing the self-esteem of certain individuals and special groups. These feel-good theologies dispense with the "negativity" of orthodox Christianity, and do away with any offensive biblical text or even with the Bible altogether. Out are categories such as lostness and judgment, and in their place are set vague notions of acceptance without repentance and wholeness without redemption. Adherents of such theologies may not know or even care if they are saved or lost, but they certainly do feel better about themselves.

Fifth, *the decline of authority*. Since postmodern culture is committed to such a radical vision of liberation, all authority must be overthrown. Texts, authors, traditions, meta-narratives, the Bible, God, and all powers in heaven and on earth must be dethroned. (Except, of course, for the high priests and

apostles of the postmodern worldview who hold tenure in postmodern universities. They, of course, wield their power in the name of oppressed peoples everywhere.) According to the postmodernists, those in authority use their power simply to remain in power, to serve their own interests. Their laws, traditions, texts, and truth are nothing more than instruments designed to sustain them in power.

In such an intellectual atmosphere, the authority of governmental leaders is eroded, as is that of teachers, preachers, community leaders, and parents. In fact, the authority of God himself is ultimately rejected as totalizing, totalitarian, and autocratic. Furthermore, Christian ministers and Christian theologians, as representatives of this autocratic deity, are also resisted, while doctrines, traditions, creeds, and confessions are rejected as well and charged with limiting self-expression and representing oppressive authority.

Sixth, *the displacement of morality*. In Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, the character Ivan famously observed that if God is dead, then everything is permissible. The god allowed by postmodernism is not the God of the Bible; it is merely a vague idea of some spiritual reality. There are no tablets of stone, no Ten Commandments, no rules. Morality, along with the other foundations of culture, is discarded as inherently oppressive and totalitarian. A pervasive moral relativism marks postmodern culture. That is not to say that postmodernists are reluctant to employ moral language. On the contrary, they will often use the language of morality, but only in the hope of subverting a traditional moral code that they understand to be hegemonic and oppressive. Postmodernists are typically quite arbitrary in their moral concerns, and in many cases their causes represent a reversal of biblical morality. Sexuality is central to this, and in many ways both modernism and postmodernism can be understood as lengthy and elaborate rationalizations for sexual misbehavior.

How should we think about all this? From the outset, we must recognize that postmodernism is something new, and yet not *radically* new. Essentially, it is the logical extension of some of the themes already present in modernism. It is modernity in its latest guise. Moreover, we must call attention to the fact that there is an awkwardness and a silliness to much postmodern discourse. Much of it is already dated, and quite frankly, no one is postmodern in the emergency room. When it comes to understanding objective truth, no one wants a postmodern heart surgeon. No one wants their CAT scans interpreted according to the particular anti-totalizing impulses of the surgeon. As Richard Dawkins once pithily noted, there are no postmodernists at 33,000 feet. Furthermore, modernism will not go away. It is still present in persons like Jürgen Habermas, who understands modernity as a project for human liberation and sees postmodernism as a threat to modernism's gains.

In the aftermath to all this, the question of truth is still being batted about as a topic of debate, like something of a ball for intellectual sport. Truth is reduced to Wittgensteinian language games, confined to what anthropologist Clifford Geertz described as "local knowledge" or "cultural linguistic systems." In this hard form, postmodernism assaults us with a barely disguised nihilism. For when everything is reduced to the interplay of words and language without external reference, when there is no truth that can be known and no

reason with which to grasp such truth, then we lose all confidence in shared meaning and even in the communicability of truth itself.

Theologians, of course, have responded to the postmodern crisis. Our concern here is not so much with those who have embraced postmodernism openly and eagerly in its most extreme forms, but rather with those who have tried to find some means of incorporating its themes, mentality, and worldview into their theological systems. George Lindbeck and Hans Frei, for example, have appropriated both the Wittgensteinian understanding of language and the Geertzian understanding of culture to suggest that doctrine is a matter of grammatical rules. Also to be noted are the projects by Stanley Hauerwas, the late John Howard Yoder, and British philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre. In these we have seen the development of something like a new-style neo-orthodoxy, which emphasizes the believing community and construes doctrine as the practice and social embodiment of the church. Having embraced much of the direction and trajectory of modernism, these theologians call themselves “post-liberal” and consider themselves to be literally beyond liberalism. That does not mean, however, that they have come to some conservative understanding, nor have they embraced any kind of evangelical identity. Nevertheless, they do understand that the acids of modernity, and the absolute confusion of postmodernity to which modernity gave birth, have left the church without a distinctive voice or a distinctive message.

How have evangelicals responded to this crisis of truth in contemporary culture? Many have openly celebrated the rise of the postmodern age, re-defining themselves as revisionists, reformists, post-conservatives, or even post-evangelicals. Philip D. Kenneson welcomed the postmodern worldview with the title of his book, *There is No Such Thing as Objective Truth, and It Is a Good Thing, Too*, as did J. Richard Middleton and Brian F. Walsh with their *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used To Be*. Kenneson said of postmodernism, “We need to embrace this,” and move beyond what he calls “the truth question.” The sooner we do so, he says, “the sooner we can get on with being Christian, which in no way entails accepting a certain philosophical account of truth, justification and ‘reality.’”<sup>5</sup>

Yet therein lies the question: Is it really the case that Christianity does not entail accepting a certain philosophical account of truth, justification, and reality? Does our culture’s denial of truth and its increasing embrace of the postmodern worldview mean that evangelicals must abandon their historic theological paradigm?

Some, referring to themselves as post-conservative evangelicals, have argued that indeed postmodernism represents a significant challenge to evangelical theology, but a challenge largely to be embraced. They argue forthrightly that Christians ought to embrace postmodernism, and the sooner the better. Various engaged in different post-conservative movements are individuals like Stanley Grenz, Gary Dorian, Henry Knight, John Franke, Roger Olsen, Clark Pinnock, and William Abraham.

<sup>5</sup> Philip D. Kenneson, “There is No Such Thing as ‘Objective Truth,’ and It’s a Good Thing, Too,” *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World* (ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm; InterVarsity, 1995) 161.

I would suggest that these post-conservative evangelicals make two assertions related to the issue of truth in our contemporary culture. First, there is the negative claim that the classical evangelical paradigm, with its focus on revelation, propositional truth, and issues like biblical inerrancy, is a form of modernism—an evangelical variant of the Enlightenment project and, they would argue, a failed evangelical attempt at foundationalism. Second, there is the positive argument that an open embrace of at least part of the postmodern project—if not the whole of it—will lead to a great apologetic breakthrough and theological advance for the evangelical movement.

Central to this diagnosis is the presumed failure of foundationalism. In a recently released book entitled *Reclaiming the Center*, philosophers J. P. Moreland and Garrett DeWeese argue in a chapter called “The Premature Report of Foundationalism’s Demise” that there are three theoretical commitments held in common by most post-conservatives: first, the rejection of the correspondence theory of truth in favor of an epistemic or deflationary theory of truth; second, the rejection of metaphysical realism in favor of a theory of socially or linguistically constructed reality; and third, the rejection of the referential theory of language in favor of a semiotic theory in which linguistic signs refer only to other signs, and never to the world as it is.

One of the clearest and most lucid representatives of this post-conservative mood is Stanley Grenz, who writes,

The contemporary rejection of foundationalism offers evangelical theologians a great challenge as well as a providential opportunity. The dislocation of the present, together with the quest to move beyond the older foundationalist epistemology, places them [that is, evangelical theologians] in a position to realize how dependent neo-evangelical theology has been on an Enlightenment paradigm, and how decreasingly appropriate this approach is in a world that is increasingly post-theological.<sup>6</sup>

Two significant moves are made here. The first is to embrace the post-modern epistemological crisis as normative, meaning that hierarchies of truth, metaphysical realism, correspondence theories of truth, and propositions are rejected, as well as any understanding of the Bible as our ultimate epistemological foundation. The second move is to criticize the received evangelical tradition as neo-evangelical, and to identify evangelical theologians—Carl Henry and Millard Erickson, for example—as conservative modernists and biblical foundationalists. According to the post-conservative evangelicals, it was Henry who introduced a thoroughgoing rationalism and thoroughgoing propositionalism into the “still fluid goo” of the emerging evangelical theology, a mistake they say the church would do well to reverse.<sup>7</sup>

There is no doubt the postmodern age, just as much as the modern age, demands of the church, and of evangelical theology in particular, some serious thinking, critical engagement, and honest confrontation. In speaking of truth in contemporary culture, however, and in relating it to the future of

<sup>6</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000) 185.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 101.

evangelical theology at large, there is a need not only for honesty, but for decision. We are faced today with two trajectories for the future of evangelical theology, two paradigms of truth and theology, two competing apologetics, two readings of evangelical history, two (or at least two) definitions of evangelical identity, and two models for engaging the culture. As we look into the twenty-first century, we are making significant decisions about which understanding of evangelicalism and which evangelical theology will be handed to the next generation.

The post-conservatives are right to say we must engage the worldview of this age. We need to understand postmodernism. We need to take into account the postmodern turn, but we must also understand that it is still turning. In terms of its ideological shape, postmodernism is still largely confined to an academic elite, even though its nihilistic mood and themes are filtering down into popular culture. Yet in their daily lives, most people still hold to something like a correspondence theory of truth. They still have confidence in the existence of absolute truth and objective reality, and their lives would be unworkable—practically impossible—without it.

Despite the very real intellectual challenge presented to us by postmodernism, I believe it has fatally overreached. First, its outright rejection of foundationalism is untenable. For how are we to understand thought itself without some form—at least a soft form—of foundationalism? Even anti-foundationalists end up with some kind of foundationalism, nuanced and minimal though it may be. Even anarchist groups have leaders. Thought has to begin somewhere, and if there is to be any orderly process of thought, that beginning must be clearly articulated and understood as having some authority. It must be, at least in some sense, at the top of a hierarchy of ideas, and logically prior to all other ideas.

Second, the anti-realism of postmodern theology is faced with severe limitations, and is thus unsustainable. Some correspondence understanding of truth is inherent to every important truth claim. Once again, we could not operate in everyday life without a basic dependence upon a correspondence theory of truth. Furthermore, there is no way to preach the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, nor to describe the contours and substance of the gospel itself, without obviously implying some kind of correspondence. This is not to suggest that correspondence is dependent upon the modernist understanding of truth. It is rather a natural way of talking that allows us to proclaim the faith once for all delivered to the saints, to make truth claims just as the apostles made truth claims, and to speak boldly with the assurance that we are speaking about an objective, transcendent, and revealed reality. We are left finally with what Robert Alston referred to as “eolithic realism,” the absolutely basic awareness that truth, language, and ideas express something other than interiority, and refer to something outside themselves. Furthermore, it is very hard to get by without propositions, despite the hostility directed toward them by postmodernists. Just as anarchist groups have leaders, anti-propositionalist writers themselves use propositions, paragraph by paragraph, to make their arguments. Our minds are made to use propositions, and that is not—to counter Darwin—merely an evolutionary accident.

It is a testimony to the fact that our Creator who made us in his image has created us with a mental capacity and rationality that requires propositional formation.

The way out of this hermeneutical nihilism and metaphysical anti-realism is the doctrine of revelation. It is indeed the evangelical, biblical doctrine of revelation that breaks this epistemological impasse and becomes the foundation for a revelatory epistemology. This is not foundationalism in a modernist sense. It is not rationalism. It is the understanding that God has spoken to us in a reasonable way, in language we can understand, and has given us the gift of revelation, which is his willful disclosure of himself, the forfeiture of his personal privacy.

Post-conservative evangelicals employ a fallacious reading of evangelical history here. The evangelical paradigm never was rationalistic in the sense of claiming an autonomous reason. Nor was it true foundationalism in the sense of establishing a platform for thought independent of God's revelation. At the very heart of the evangelical movement, indeed from the very beginning, is a confidence in the God who speaks. Evangelicals have always believed and taught that it is God's revelation that brings us out of hermeneutical and epistemological nihilism and into a world of true meaning. It is not autonomous human reason, but the Bible which is the error-free, incontrovertible foundation for all evangelical theology. Steven J. Wellum expressed this well: "A scriptural foundationalism is *not* grounded in the finite human subject as both modernism and postmodernism attempt to do, but instead it is rooted and grounded in the Bible's own presentation of the triune God."<sup>8</sup>

Of course, there are some genuine insights that have come from the engagement of evangelical theology and evangelical theologians with the post-modern worldview. The necessity of understanding community, for example, is one. God does not address truth to isolated, autonomous individuals, but rather to the church, to his redeemed people. There is also gain in understanding the sociological and anthropological embeddedness of all human beings, both individually and in communities, as well as in understanding the crucial role of the Holy Spirit, combined with the Word. All this could lead to a healthful renaissance in ecclesiology, but only if the church is understood to be the product of the divine revelation, and not the producer of the divine revelation. Revelation—the in-breaking of the transcendent, sovereign God into our finite and fallen world—must be our epistemological principle, the ground of all our claims to know what is really real and truly true.

Looking back at the history of the evangelical movement, and remembering the intellectual crises our forefathers and foremothers faced, we see that every generation lives in a particular time that demands a particular response. As we face our own challenges in this generation, we can always say more than they did, but we can never say less. Of course truth is more than

<sup>8</sup> Stephen J. Wellum, "Postconservatism, Biblical Authority, and Recent Proposals for Re-Doing Evangelical Theology: A Critical Analysis," in *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times* (ed. Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjos Helseth, and Justin Taylor; Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004) 186.

propositional, but it can never be less than propositional. Of course truth is more than can fit within any correspondence theory, but it can never be less than that which corresponds to the divine reality. When we consider our creeds, confessions, and doctrinal statements, it is always possible—indeed it is necessary—to say more, but we must never say less. We do not want mere propositions, nor mere rationality, but neither do we want anything less than reasoned understanding of the propositions revealed in Scripture.

Carl F. H. Henry defined theology in these terms:

Divine revelation is the source of all truth, the truth of Christianity included. Reason is the instrument for recognizing. Scripture is its verifying principle. Logical consistency is a negative test for truth, and coherence a subordinate test. The task of Christian theology is to exhibit the content of divine revelation as an orderly whole.<sup>9</sup>

Everything Henry says here is accurate and true. He rightly defines and distills an evangelical theological method. Is there more to it than that? Of course there is. That is why we worship and why, even as we use words in worship, we confess that the truth of the one true and living God is so much greater than can be expressed in words. But that truth cannot be expressed in less than words. It cannot be formulated in less than propositions. We can certainly say more than Henry said, but we cannot say anything less.

I fear there are some who would wish to say less, to embrace the themes of the postmodern movement and the postmodern mood in such a way as to create a new paradigm for evangelicalism. This new trajectory would be so de-propositionalized, so epistemologically nuanced that it would have us embrace a queasy postmodern uncertainty about the very certainties that have defined the evangelical movement from the beginning. We would thus become liberals who arrive late, and there would be no methodological controls at all upon what would be acceptable among us.

It is easy to sympathize with those who hope for a theological third way, because it is easy to predict the censure, outrage, and dismissal that will come from the academic elite when they finally comprehend what we are saying. But that is a scandal we are called to bear. If it was a scandal from the beginning of the evangelical movement, why should we think it would be popular now?

In his review of Gary Dorrien's book, *The Remaking of Evangelical Theology*, John G. Stackhouse wrote:

Evangelicalism is a network and tradition of Christians united in a few select convictions. As such, evangelicalism is not essentially committed to this or that theological method, so long as Christ is glorified, the Bible obeyed, the gospel preached, and the Kingdom extended.<sup>10</sup>

That is wishful thinking. Evangelicals are committed to a theological method that understands truth to be something more than the postmodern-

<sup>9</sup> Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, vol. 1 (Waco, TX: Word, 1976) 215.

<sup>10</sup> John G. Stackhouse, Jr., "Review of Gary J. Dorrien, *The Remaking of Evangelical Theology*," *Christian Century* (July 19, 2000) 767.

ist can ever understand or embrace. Truth is revealed in Scripture. Truth is revealed in the One who said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Truth is revealed in Jesus Christ, who prayed that his Father would sanctify his own in the truth and who confessed, "Thy word is truth." That is something far beyond what the postmodern mood, movement, or *Gestalt* can ever comprehend or accept.

Contemporary culture presents us with a challenge, but in essence it is the same challenge that has confronted the church all along. We still stand where Paul stood in Acts 17. We have to give the same answer he gave. If we as evangelicals are not committed to a theological method with a robust understanding of truth, there is a great and imminent danger that Christ will not in fact be glorified, the Bible will not be obeyed, the gospel will not be preached, and the Kingdom will not be extended. Let us therefore be determined to be a people who will say more, but who will never say less.