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Postmodern and Wesleyan?

Exploring the Boundaries and Possibilities

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CHAPTER 3: TRUTH AND POSTMODERNISM

Thomas Jay Oord

Postmodernists reject truth.

At least that's what many Christians think. Type "Christian," "truth," and "postmodern" into an Internet search engine, and you'll find plenty of Christian apologists saying that postmodernism abolishes truth.

These apologists typically react to postmodernism by declaring that God *is* truth. They quote the biblical passage saying that Jesus is the truth. Or they contrast postmodernism with Biblical Truth (capital letters required).

But does postmodernism require rejecting truth?

A wide variety of postmodern traditions exist. So answering this question well is difficult. In this chapter, we briefly explore some central issues regarding truth.

The Loss of Certainty

The story of truth in the postmodern traditions begins with a modernist: Rene Descartes. Descartes discovered that our five senses--sight, smell, touch, taste, sound--cannot give absolute certain knowledge about the world.

We all make mistakes. These mistakes often occur because of faulty sense perception. We think we see water on the roadway, for instance, but it turns out to be an optical illusion. We think we hear our name being called, but our hearing is impaired. We think we're tasting beef, but it turns out to be deer. Our senses are not foolproof.

Descartes came to believe that we cannot know with absolute certainty the truth about objects beyond ourselves. Certainty cannot be attained through sense perception.

It's hard to overestimate the impact of this loss of absolute certainty about what we can know through our senses. So much of what we consider true comes from sensory perception. And yet we have to admit that our senses are not 100 percent accurate.

One modern response to Descartes is to say that language gives us a certain foundation for knowledge. We can be certain about verbal statements that are logically coherent with one another. Various statements--often called propositions--claim to mirror reality faithfully or describe reality fully.

Some Christians jump on the bandwagon that propositions provide absolute certainty. We can have absolute certainty about reality, they say, if the dogmatic propositions we affirm rest on a certain and sure foundation.

The foundation many modern Christians adopt is the Bible. They assume that God inspired the writing of the Bible in such a way as to produce it error-free. These Christians insist

that biblical inerrancy and infallibility guarantee the Bible as a certain foundation for knowledge. Such a deduction defends Christianity from both infidels and modern critics.

Sadly, the modern project of biblical inerrancy collapses on itself. A close reading of the text reveals numerous inconsistencies. And the oldest manuscripts from which our Bibles come differ. Those who cling to the idea of an inerrant Bible must invent wild interpretations to reconcile these inconsistencies. Or they offer the worthless claim that the biblical autographs--which no longer exist--were inerrant. And when history, science, or literature contradicts the Bible, inerrantists are forced to reject this knowledge. They claim that the Bible is *the* book of all truth. It is the authority concerning all things religious but also all things economic, civic, historic, and scientific.

Extreme Relativism

If our perceptions about the world cannot provide us with absolute certainty, if language cannot give certainty, and if the Bible is not a certain foundation, on what basis can we speak of truth at all?

Extreme relativists--including some who adopt the label "postmodernist"--believe we cannot be confident that some statements about reality are truer than others. The truth of any statement--for example, the sun is hot--is ultimately up to the individual or is socially constructed. Extreme relativism says that truth is whatever any person or group decides.

Extreme relativism has many problems. These problems lead other postmodernists to reject the idea that truth is completely dependent upon the individual or the group.

The first problem is that extreme relativism is inconsistent with itself. After all, extreme relativism says it is true that there is no ultimate truth. And yet extreme relativists sound as if they intend this claim to be ultimately true even if some people choose not to believe it.

The second problem with extreme relativism, say some postmodernists, is that it cannot be consistently lived. We all presuppose that some statements about the world are truer than others. The way we live reveals this presupposition. Our friendships, our court system, our agricultural practices, our marriage arrangements, and so on, all presuppose that some views are truer than others. We don't have to know all truth to know this.

Finally, extreme relativism flies in the face of a number of central Christian claims about the superiority and enhanced value of living a life of love. Even if Christians cannot know reality in its fullness, the Christian message seems based upon the view that some ways of living are better than others. And some statements about reality are truer.

Humility and Conviction

Postmodern Christians can live faithfully between the absence of absolute certainty and the abyss of extreme relativism. This middle ground promotes both humility and conviction.

Postmodernists reject the idea that we can know with absolute certainty the full truth about reality. Absolute certainty requires inerrant sense perception. It requires a set of inerrant

ideas. Or it requires an inerrant interpretation of an inerrant source. Such inerrancy does not exist.

This lack of absolute certainty about the full truth of reality, however, is not bad news for Christians. After all, *faith* resides at the heart of the Christian message. Christians are believers not proposition defenders.

Faith is different from absolute certainty. But it's different from absolute mystery too. Faith need not be blind or unreasonable.

To believe is not to reject reason or evidence altogether. One can affirm a degree of confidence in the greater plausibility of statements, ways of living, or perceptions. And this greater confidence can foster reasonable conviction. Faith can be grounded.

A number of postmodernists affirm that what we regard as true extends well beyond verbal statements. Truth also has a livable, embodied element. It has an aesthetic element too. Truth is personal, communal, and even cosmic. Truth is multifaceted.

Postmodernists recognize that we cannot comprehend truth entirely. We see through a glass darkly. And this inability to be absolutely certain or to know reality fully should lead us to humility.

Pride still comes before a fall. But pride emerges not only when we retain full control of our lives but also when we think we have full and certain knowledge. We forget that the just live by faith. Postmodernism can foster the virtue of humble living.

In sum, postmodernists need not reject truth. But postmodernism reminds us that "we know in part." Christian convictions embraced in humility can help us live an abundant life in our emerging world.

Questions

1. Do you feel threatened or encouraged about this chapter? Why?
2. How do we know things are true? What is the difference in believing the sun gives off heat and that God loves the world?
3. Can there be a relationship between faith and absolute certainty? Why or why not?
4. Is evidenceless or reason-free faith enough for us Christians or should we search for evidence, reasons, and even proofs for our beliefs?
5. How do you feel about rejecting both extreme relativism and absolute certainty?

Application

In light of this chapter and its topics, how might you act differently? Think differently? Feel differently? Relate differently?

CHAPTER 13 EVANGELISM IN THE POSTMODERN MATRIX

Dana Hicks

“Suppose you were to die today and stand before God, and he were to say to you, ‘Why should I let you into my heaven?’ What would you say?”

Over the years, I have used this question countless times in my spiritual conversations. You may recognize it as a crucial part in one of the most popular evangelistic tools of the twentieth century. It’s a diagnostic question used to determine whether a person knows the right answer to an ultimate question in life.

Like many who came of age in the 1980s, I was nurtured in a faith community in which canned sales pitches and thinly veiled manipulative invitations were used to get people to say a magic prayer. That prayer was believed to keep people from going to hell when they died.

Like many others, I memorized that pitch. I confronted people I barely knew. And I swallowed hard to bury that deep-seated intuition that this whole process felt off-kilter. Deep down, I felt I was saying something that was pretty much like, “What will it take to get you into this car today?”

The truth is, I care a lot about people. I really believe that life is infinitely better when I follow Jesus. I believe that evangelism is not just something I do to get another notch in my award belt. And yet in my evangelistic journey, the good news of Jesus became associated with a lot of anxiety.

In recent years, conversation--more than confrontation--has become the evangelistic trend among emerging church leaders. For many, evangelism is becoming more respectful, more empowering, and less manipulative. This is a good thing. But this trend is not without its unintended negative consequences.

Brian McLaren’s book *A New Kind of Christian* has a dialogue between Dan and Neo. And that dialogue includes this insight: “One of my mottos in life is that people are often against something worth being against, but in the process they find themselves for some things that aren’t worth being for.”¹³

So here is the dirty little secret about the emerging church: it’s often not very good at evangelism. For all its talk about being missional, the emerging church is generally a monolithic group of burned-out, white, middle-class, college-educated, young adults who are sick of the American expression of church. Somehow being against manipulative and inauthentic evangelism has meant being the kind of person who is insular and conspicuously silent about matters of faith.

When I was a rookie pastor, I became good friends with a man named James who oversaw the local chapter of Narcotics Anonymous. As a former drug addict, James had deep

¹³ Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 48.

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compassion for those suffering from addictions of all kinds. That is why I called him when a guy named Larry visited our church.

“James, I have this guy who came to church. I think he might be a drug user. Can you meet with the two of us and give me some insight?” James quickly agreed and we set up a time for coffee at the local Duffy’s restaurant.

After brief introductions in a window booth, James awkwardly stirred his coffee and said, “So, Larry, when are you going to stop using?” Both Larry and I were stunned at James’s frankness.

“I’m not using,” said Larry. He smiled and shifted uncomfortably on the cheap vinyl bench.

“When are you going to stop lying to yourself and others?” James said without batting an eye.

Just as I was beginning to regret bringing James to this meeting, Larry dropped his head and began to confess his addictions. It was one of those rare moments of both truth and grace. James became a conduit of God’s grace to a broken man in desperate need of reality.

As we stood later in the parking lot, I said to James, “What was that all about?” To which James gave me words that have formed my way of understanding church ever since, “We don’t do people favors by ignoring their self-destructive behavior.”

Drug addiction may be an extreme example. But I believe that if we are serious about loving the people God has placed in our paths, it may mean more than just accepting them. It will likely mean having difficult conversations with people about their self-destructive patterns. Not conversations from a position of superiority but conversations in a spirit of love and compassion.

I think sharing the Good News means both accepting and affirming people as human beings. But it also means helping them escape their own self-destructive sin. Jesus’ words in John 8:11 to the woman caught in adultery illustrate this difficult balance: “Neither do I condemn you,” to which he adds, “go and sin no more” (NKJV).

So how does one reframe evangelism in the postmodern era to reflect our loving hopes for our world? How do we both speak the truth and do it in love?

Simple formulas probably cannot encapsulate the line we must walk. But a good place to begin may be to rethink the questions we ask in our spiritual conversations. Perhaps we should add these to our list of diagnostic evangelism questions:

“If you knew you were going to live another forty years, what kind of person would you want to become?”

This question reimagines the infamous evangelism question about why any of us should get into heaven when we die. Maybe because we live in a society that sterilizes death and removes us from the experience of dying, many people do not agonize over death.

Focusing evangelism on what happens to us after we die tends to create disciples who are not concerned with either whom they are becoming or the kind of world they will leave behind. Of course, we may die tonight. But it is much more likely that we will live a while longer--a decade or two or three or more. What happens in the meantime? Will we live an abundant life? What kind of legacy will we leave behind?

“If you could know what God is doing in the world, would you want to be part of it?”

I have been asking this question a lot lately. And I’ve never had anyone answer by saying, “No!”

I like this question, because it focuses evangelism on God’s agenda instead of our tendency to get God to care about our agendas. I also like this question because it opens the door to talk about what Jesus talked about the most--the kingdom of God breaking in to our world right now.

The modernist style of evangelism focused on right answers. That is, Christians wanted to hear the right answer from others about who Jesus is. Or they wanted the right answer to questions about what it takes to get a ticket to heaven.

People seem to be asking different questions these days. The questions focus less on “Is it true?” and more about “Does it work?” Paul’s posture in 1 Cor. 12:31 to a pluralistic, premodern world can probably help us engage our own postmodern world. Before a description of what the way of love looks like, Paul said “Let me *show* you a more excellent way . . .” (1 Cor. 12:31).

Questions

Do you agree with the author that the dirty little secret of the postmodern church is its lack of evangelism? Explain your answer.

What qualities made James’s straightforward question to Larry appropriate in an awkward moment between strangers? What can we learn from James?

How receptive might your unchurched family, neighbors, and coworkers be to the author’s two main questions? Would you dare ask them at an appropriate time?

What do you think the author means when he says that the kingdom of God is breaking in to our world right now?

Application

In light of this chapter and its topics, how might you act differently? Think differently? Feel differently? Relate differently?

CHAPTER 19: WHY OUR (LOVING) PRACTICES MATTER

Terry Fach

Most people in our culture in the West are nervous about Christianity. For some people, Christianity is considered just one faith among others. But perhaps most distressing are the increasing signs of distrust toward Christians. Growing numbers are spiritually yearning but institutionally alienated. Many see Christianity as a religion of little interest.

Those outside the church often view Christianity as advocating an inert and powerless spirituality that has little relevance for everyday life. Christianity has become a religion that overpromises and under-delivers.

How could this state of affairs come to be?

I believe the answer, at least in part, is that Jesus' core message has largely been lost in contemporary Christianity. Over the past several hundred years, the influence of science and modern philosophy has made the church more concerned with defending the objective truth of its doctrines than with practicing Jesus' way of love.

But I also believe that Christianity has proven itself resilient and self-correcting over the centuries. Today, postmodern expressions of the church are challenging the disembodied holiness of modern faith and recovering essential formational practices from premodern times.

Christianity involves both *a way* and *a creed*. By creed, I mean a set of claims or statements one accepts about the nature of the universe (e.g., that it was created by God). Creeds also offer claims about how God has acted in the universe in various ways (e.g., through taking on fleshly form in Jesus and by sending the Holy Spirit).

But Christianity also offers *a way*--a pattern for living, a set of practices to follow. In fact, in its earliest days the Christian faith was often called "the Way" (Acts 9:2, NLT). Jesus was mainly inviting people to follow his way, his path to God. The earliest accounts of Christian practices include prayer, study, sharing food and fellowship, and the celebration of the Lord's table (Acts 2).

Jesus described the holy life in practical terms: love for God and love for others. Loving relationships are the sign of the true disciple. As Jesus memorably said, "Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples" (John 13:35, NLT). Not only that, Jesus says that those who embrace his way of love will be able to do even greater works than he did (14:12).

How can this kind of love be formed in us? The historic answer is this: by spiritual practices that form our souls in the likeness of Christ.

Unfortunately, many contemporary followers of Jesus have been influenced by a modern version of Christianity that places a strong emphasis on inner, private experiences and having correct beliefs about God.

I'm not saying that beliefs and personal experiences do not matter. But what we believe alone is not what matters most. Don't believe me? How many overweight people *know* that being overweight puts them at greater risk of death from stroke and heart disease?

What we want and need is a spiritual way of life that translates the intellectual and the experiential into a whole-life faith. If we are to be formed in the likeness of Christ and become the people we want to become, mere belief is not enough.

John Wesley frequently described holiness as renewal of the whole image of God. Created in the image of God, our goal is to avail ourselves of the Holy Spirit so that Christ's likeness may be formed in us (2 Cor. 3:18).

When we say yes to God, the Holy Spirit breaks the hold of sin in our lives. Our part is to cooperate with divine grace by submitting to a way of life that shapes not just our minds but our hearts and our bodies as well.

Formational practices, such as corporate worship, prayer, fasting, solitude, and works of mercy, are actions within our power that help us become capable of doing things currently beyond our power. In a world of instant gratification, for example, denying ourselves food through fasting teaches us the practice of impulse control. In a world of pretension and self-promotion, sharing our weaknesses and failures with others through confession teaches us humility and reminds us of God's gracious acceptance.

The premodern practice of the spiritual reading of scripture through *lectio divina* helps us to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit. By allowing head to give way to heart, we are moving beyond information to formation. In this, we can be shaped by what we read.

The good news of Jesus is not a set of beliefs that if accepted will get you into heaven when you die. Rather it is an invitation to a new way of life right now. It is an invitation to participate in God's new community here on earth. This intentional community is called to reveal God's plan to redeem all of creation by its way of life.

In Wesley's view, a holy person is a *whole* person, one whose relationship with God, with other people, and with the natural world is properly expressed. Wesley put it this way: "The Gospel of Christ knows no religion but social, no holiness but social holiness."³⁹

If holiness is social, our formation in holiness must be communal as well as individual. Our communal practices must extend beyond ourselves for the sake of all people, especially the poor. And if love is to be perfected in *all* our relationships, our formational practices will also include caring for the environment.

Why do we often lack the power to live and be formed as we ought? I think I know one answer: we're too busy. Jesus invites those who want to follow his way to deny themselves, to leave behind their selfish ambitions and to take up their crosses. The first important act of self-

³⁹ John Wesley, "Preface to 1739 Hymns and Sacred Poems" in *The Works of John Wesley*, Jackson Ed. vol. 14:321.

denial for twenty-first-century followers of Jesus may be to say no to being too busy to be a disciple.

A Christian community that embodies the gospel does not happen by accident. It requires an intentional commitment to *a way of life* capable of standing against the dominant social realities of our world. In the postmodern world, demonstrating the truth of Christianity cannot be left to the philosophers. The plausibility of the gospel demands its faithful practice by the community of Jesus' followers.

Questions

1. Do you agree that many people are nervous about Christianity or nervous about the actions of “born-again” or “evangelical” Christians?
2. Do you agree that some Christians are more concerned with defending the objective truth of doctrine than with practicing Jesus' way of love? Can you give an example?
3. Do you think that the Church can become more concerned with success and power than self-denial? Can you give an example to augment your view?
4. In what way has being too busy been detrimental to your own attempts to follow God's call and engage in Christian practices?

Application

In light of this chapter and its topics, how might you act differently? Think differently? Feel differently? Relate differently?