

Can We Know the Truth?

Richard D. Phillips

The Gospel Coalition Booklets

Edited by **D. A. Carson & Timothy Keller**

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The well-known Bible teacher James Montgomery Boice was once traveling by plane when the woman seated next to him discovered that he was a Christian minister. She responded by bringing out all of her objections to the Christian faith. First, she spoke against original sin, how it made no sense and how she would not accept it. Boice listened to her and then replied, “I see, but is it true?”

Next, she went on to the idea of judgment and hell, saying how uncivilized and amoral all of it was. “I see how you feel,” Boice answered, “but is it true?”

Finally, she erupted with her great distaste for virtually everything taught in the Bible, how it wasn’t modern or appealing to her way of thinking. As Boice began to open his mouth one last time, she interrupted, “Oh, I know, I know, none of that matters! ‘Is it true?’ you are going to say!”

That conversation took place around the year 1990. I suspect that had it taken place in the year 2010, the ending might well have been somewhat different. Instead of the woman conceding the point that truth is what matters, she likely would have taken the conversation in another direction: “How can you claim that your beliefs are true? No one can really know the truth, so what I feel about it is really all that matters.”

The point is that if Christians are to communicate the gospel truth to today’s postmodern generations, we will likely have to do more than simply state the truth. In many cases, it will not suffice to hold forth our Bible and walk friends down the famous “Romans Road” series of evangelistic verses. In addition, and often beforehand, we will need to answer questions such as, “Why should I accept that the Bible is true?” and, “That may be true for you, but why should it be true for anyone else?” These are questions concerning *epistemology*, that is, our beliefs and assumptions about knowledge and truth. Prior to giving our witness to Christian truth, we will often have to present clear Christian views about truth itself.

An evangelical approach to the knowledge of truth will need to incorporate our biblical convictions regarding God, mankind, sin, salvation, and more. Some might object that beginning with our beliefs injects subjectivity into the question, since our theory of truth presupposes certain truths. Our answer is that as Christians we cannot avoid the realities of who and what we are through our relationship to Jesus Christ.

The purpose of this booklet, then, is not to present an objective epistemology that anyone—Christian or not—would adopt. Rather, this presents a stance toward the knowledge of truth that reflects the core beliefs of our gospel faith and validates our experience as Christian believers. In other words, this chapter presents how we as *Christians* answer questions regarding the knowledge of truth.

Wouldn't it be better, some will ask, to meet our unbelieving neighbors on an objective epistemological common ground? The answer is that no such objective common ground exists that does not require Christians to ignore the lordship of Jesus. This we cannot honestly do. So are we left with nothing to say except the missionally frustrating, "You have to be born again to understand"? Not at all! Just as Christians have a gospel message to share with the world, we also have a God- and Christ-centered answer to important questions about knowing and truth.

Today's Crisis of Truth

We happen to be living in a historical moment of tension between two models or theories regarding the knowledge of truth: the *modern* and the *postmodern*. Modernity advanced for generations on the unshakable conviction that unaided human reason would successfully expand knowledge and apply truth. In the same way that Isaac Newton's physics produced knowledge about the truth of gravity, modernity believed in a rational advance toward truth in virtually every domain of life.

This continued until the realities of the twentieth century shook that unshakable conviction. Unaided reason did not turn out so well in the "truths" of Nazi Germany, post-World War II Communism, or Western imperialism. Nor did the science of unaided reason treat the Bible and its gospel very favorably; the rationalist dogma replaced the biblical version of Jesus with various portraits in its own image.

Even when modern-thinking Christians have sought to use rationalism to support the Bible's teaching, thoughtful Christians have found that the rationalist approach to absolute truth lines up poorly with Christian humility, charity, and our teaching about the human problem of sin. As the Christian witness has moved into the twenty-first century, therefore, we have rightly sought to distance ourselves from the rationalism of modernity.

Appreciating Postmodern Insights

In secular thinking, the collapse of confidence in modernity spawned a rebellious adolescent offspring, postmodernity, whose chief aim is deconstructing everything modern. Almost incidentally, postmodernity has also criticized Christian thought. D. A. Carson has catalogued a number of strengths in the postmodern critique, even when it is applied to recent evangelical approaches to theology and apologetics.¹

First, Christians should acknowledge the role that context plays in anyone's understanding and belief. "Truth" is always held by actual persons, and those persons are deeply shaped by culture, language, heritage, and community. There will be differences, involving both strengths and weaknesses, in how a Westerner will read a certain passage of Scripture and how a sub-Saharan African Christian will read the same passage. For instance, the Westerner is more likely to emphasize the individualist and the African the corporate aspects of the passage.

Regardless of the question of absolute truth itself, postmodernity correctly points out that actual people are finite and therefore have a limited, subjective understanding of truth. As Carson puts it, truth "is necessarily expressed in culture-laden ways and believed or known by finite, culturally restricted people."²

Second, we should share postmodernity's concern that truth may become more an object of power than a means for enlightenment. Here is where the Christian doctrine of sin—including *our* sin—requires that we qualify our approach to truth. Truth does not necessarily imply oppression, but some have oppressed others with truth.

Third, if postmodern critiques cause Christians (among others) to challenge doctrines and views that have become traditional, we can be thankful for the opportunity to reconsider, reformulate, and restate teachings that may have become stale in our practice. This will be seen

especially in confessional church bodies that strive to uphold doctrinal dogmas. Fresh questions and even doubts require church leaders to reexamine the biblical basis for their teaching and may result in genuine advances or some needed reformation.

Fourth, Christians may be cobelligerent with postmodernity's assaults against modernism. Carson compares a Christian's appreciation of postmodern arguments to the Western Allies' pact with Communist Russia against Nazi Germany in World War II. It's not that Christians will ultimately agree with postmodernity any more than the Western democracies approved of the Bolsheviks, but Christians may welcome some postmodern arguments against unbelieving rationalism just as the Western Allies were grateful for all those Russian tanks. Carson writes:

Postmodernity has proved capable, in God's providence, of launching very heavy artillery against the modernity which, across four centuries, developed in such a way that increasingly it taunted confessional Christianity. The irony is delicious. The modernity which has arrogantly insisted that human reason is the final arbiter of truth has spawned a stepchild that has arisen to slay it.³

Given these positive contributions of postmodern epistemology, we should acknowledge its benefits, and in doing so, we may gain a hearing with some who would otherwise tune us out.

The Postmodern Crisis

This appreciation does not mean that Christian epistemology and postmodern skepticism are a well-suited match. We humbly confess that our knowledge of truth is limited, that our context affects how we communicate and receive truth, and that we may need to rethink traditional dogmas. But unlike many postmoderns, Christians believe that truth is real, not merely constructed.

Evangelical Christians, in particular, believe that truth derives from and is revealed by God. Thus, truth is authoritative. Here is where postmodernity parts company with historic Christianity, for the postmodern view rejects the reality of truth, positing an implicit (and in some cases, explicit) relativism in which nothing is really and finally true. Survey after survey shows that this mind-set prevails in Western culture today. "Do you believe in absolute truth, or is all truth relative?"

Clear majorities today, even among professing Christians, affirm the postmodern dogma that nothing is really, absolutely true.

Moreover, postmoderns steadfastly insist that even if there is ultimate truth, finite and flawed men and women can never know the truth authoritatively. The postmodern junta now governing Western culture holds this relativism as its sole absolute: no one has the right to say that he possesses the truth absolutely so that others are absolutely wrong. There may be “my truth” and “your truth,” but the postmodern mind dogmatizes against anyone claiming dogmatically to possess the truth (except the postmodern dogma against said dogma). The result is that of W. B. Yeats’s famous poem: “Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.”

The crisis of the postmodern position is that it cannot believe or live out its own claims. Postmodernity has nothing to believe, including its own unbelief, despite the aching need of humans to know and believe. R. C. Sproul tells of meeting a young woman on a train who had spent time at a New Age camp. When an interested lady asked what she had learned, the young woman answered, “I learned that I am god.” Sproul responded with the following sophisticated apologetic question: “You don’t really believe that, do you?” To this, she answered, “Well, not really.” So it is with the entire postmodern denial of truth: their claim against truth is itself a truth that postmoderns do not believe, so that postmodern epistemology becomes a maze in which the builder is himself forever lost.

For this reason, when some postmoderns say that there is no truth and that all truth is relative, Christians can respond with Sproul’s question to the young woman on the train: “You don’t really believe that, do you?” We can fairly easily point out that postmodernists do not live as if truth is relative. After all, the most fervent deconstructionists expect their own words to be understood. They would not write books if they did not believe in the possibility of knowing and understanding. If one challenges their argument against truth, they counter with reasons to uphold the truth of their argument!

One professor made this point after his college class had united against him in insisting that nothing is ultimately true or morally wrong in an objective sense. The next day the professor informed the students that regardless of their performance on the exam they were all going to receive an F. The students objected in unison, “But that’s

wrong!” and the professor’s point against relativism was made. No one can live it, and therefore no one really believes it. This is the crisis of truth in our postmodern times: our society dogmatically rejects truth in theory but cannot live that way in practice.

Behind all truth is the God of truth. Yeats expresses this in the poem I cited above. He decries the center not holding, so that “things fall apart.” In the previous line Yeats notes the consequence: “Turning and turning in the widening gyre / The falcon cannot hear the falconer.”

Here is the scope of the postmodern crisis: we cannot hear God’s voice without truth. Like the young woman on the train, those who are left to construct their own truth must also make their own gods. On the trajectory marked by relativism, reason gives way to irrationality, and irrationality delivers man into the hands of idols.

A Christian Approach to Truth

Defending truth involves more than protecting ourselves from unbelief. Christian epistemology is also a vital component of our ministry of Christ’s love for a world in crisis. In practice, this means that Christians must go farther than simply disproving the postmodern denial of truth. We must articulate a distinctively Christian doctrine of truth based on what God has revealed to us in the Bible and consistent with our experience.

Christianity presents a legitimate third way over against the modern and the postmodern. With the moderns we believe that truth exists and is accessible, though we steadfastly reject that we can exhaustively know truth by our unaided reason. With the postmoderns we are skeptical that finite, fallible humans are the agents of truth, though we insist that truth is real and that we can know it. A successful Christian epistemology, then, not only responds to evangelical Christian belief but also enables us to communicate our doctrine of knowing to a world that both doubts and greatly desires to know truth.

God, Truth, and Reality

An evangelical Christian epistemology begins by affirming that *truth corresponds to reality*. The external world in which every individual lives is not a world we subjectively construct through our narrow experience. Rather, God created reality and upholds it by his ongoing providential rule.

The basis for this Christian doctrine of real truth is that God exists. This presupposition contrasts with the modern rationalist and the postmodern relativist, who both presuppose that God does not exist. It is *not* the case that modernists and postmodernists develop their theories without presuppositions. Rather, the modern and postmodern unbelievers presuppose that there is no God and as a result end up in the crisis of irrationality. Christians escape the crisis not at the end but at the beginning of their theory of truth by presupposing, as Francis Schaeffer put it, “the God who is there.” Having urged postmodern relativists to consider their crisis resulting from their denial of God, we now invite them to consider the way out of the crisis by presupposing God.

It is, of course, not just “God” that the Christian presupposes, but the God of the Bible. The Holy Scriptures reveal that there is “one God, eternally existing in three equally divine persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who know, love, and glorify one another.”⁴ Each of these statements bears on the Christian belief in truth. Because there is one God, not many, there is a unity to all that God has made. Because this one God exists in three divine persons, there is communication within the Godhead itself. Because of the Trinity, knowing and revealing are intrinsic to God and therefore to all that God has made.

“God is love,” writes the apostle John (1 John 4:7), and the nature of love is to know and be known. Indeed, according to the Bible, the desire of God is for his glory to be known, and the will of each member of the Trinity is to glorify the other divine persons. God’s purpose in creation, therefore, is the revealing of his glory. David sang, “You have set your glory above the heavens” (Ps. 8:1). According to Paul, the essence of sin is to see God in his creation and refuse to “honor him as God or give thanks to him” (Rom. 1:21). This is why The Gospel Coalition’s Confessional Statement asserts, “He is the Creator of all things, visible and invisible, and is therefore worthy to receive all glory and adoration.”⁵

It is because of our belief in the God of the Bible that Christians believe that truth corresponds to reality. The world is not a mere projection of human minds; rather, God created the world with an objective reality that is grounded in his eternal being. The created things that “declare the glory of God” (Ps. 19:1) must be real in order to accomplish their designed purpose.

Chief among these created things are humans, whom God made in his image so that we might know God and reveal him to the rest of creation. The biblical teaching that God made humans in his image includes our capacity to reason in a way that is analogous to God's reasoning; humans image God not in an unknowing way but through the knowledge of God that is the end of both creation and salvation. Jeremiah's new-covenant promise is that "they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD" (Jer. 31:34). Jesus states, "And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God" (John 17:3).

Since God desires to be known in a world that he designed to reveal him, Christians believe that revealed truth is real. God made a real world, and God reveals real truth about himself in and through that world. In short, truth is part of the real world that God made, a world that includes humans as creatures specially designed to receive truth so as to know God.

But the Bible's teaching involves more than creation and salvation. The Bible also teaches that humans fell into sin and subsequently corrupted their nature and society. So sin prevents humans from receiving the truth. Here postmodernity prudently points out that even if there is real truth, humans may not be able to know the truth *truly*.

There are two reasons for this limitation. First, humans are finite, even apart from sin; humans can know truth only partially, so their knowledge is subjective, selective, and incomplete. Second, humans are sinful. When we add the problem of sin, humans are no longer able to know truth truly at all. In rebellion against God, sinful humans tend to "suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (Rom. 1:18 NASB). Paul went so far as to say that man in his sinful nature "does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them" (1 Cor. 2:14). How, then, can Christians speak of knowing truth after humans fell into this dreadful condition?

The answer to the problem of sin is the good news that Jesus saves us from our sin. Jesus told Pontius Pilate, "For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth" (John 18:37). Jesus called himself "the light of the world" (John 8:12) because he saves sinners out of the darkness of ignorance and unbelief. Not only did Jesus come to reveal the glory of God in his incarnate manhood (see John 1:14; 14:9), but he also sends the Holy

Spirit to animate the spirits of sinful men and women to know and believe the truth. Thus, in the same passage where Paul directly states that sinful humans cannot know truth, he reveals that God's Holy Spirit solves this problem by giving new life to undeserving sinners: "Now we have received not the spirit of the world," Paul explains, "but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God" (1 Cor. 2:12).

In creation, fall, and salvation, the Christian doctrine of truth flows from the reality of God. God created the world to display his glory, and he created humans to know him and reflect his glory. Sin involves rejecting the truth revealed about God and thus perverts how humans receive truth. Salvation takes place through God's revealing the truth about Jesus Christ (see 1 Pet. 1:23) and then progressively enables sinful humans to know and accept the truth.

It always remains true, as Herman Bavinck stated, that it is "impossible for God fully to reveal himself to and in his creatures, for the finite does not grasp the infinite."⁶ For this reason, Christians freely admit the limitations of finitude, in addition to our ongoing struggle with sin, that keep any man or woman from knowing truth perfectly or completely. Yet by virtue of God as creator and revealer, Christians insist that there is truth, that truth corresponds to God and his created reality, and that we may know truth because God has revealed himself to us in his creation.

So how does the Christian answer the postmodern unbeliever who simply denies that God exists and thus denies that truth exists? Francis Schaeffer recounts one answer from a conversation he had with a small gathering of college students. One of the students vehemently insisted that there is no truth. Schaeffer wanted to make him see that however much he *said* there is no truth, he could not *live* as if his statement was true.

If there is no real truth, there is no real morality either. "Am I not correct," Schaeffer asked, "in saying that on the basis of your system, cruelty and noncruelty are ultimately equal, that there is no intrinsic difference between them?" The man confirmed that Schaeffer was correct. Hearing this, another student took a kettle of steaming water that was about to be used to make tea and held it over the unbeliever's head. When the atheist demanded an explanation, the student reminded him that since he did not believe in any real difference between cruelty

and noncruelty, he should not mind having the boiling water poured over him.

The man who denied truth raced out of the room, thus proving Schaeffer's point: the person who denies God and thus has no basis for the existence of truth simply cannot and does not live out his doctrine. "God shuts us up to reality," Schaeffer explained. "We cannot escape the reality of what is, no matter what we say we believe or think."⁷

God, Truth, and Scripture

Since Christians affirm truth based on God's revelation, it follows that *the Bible—God's written revelation—conveys truth*. While God reveals himself generally in all creation, God reveals himself specially in the Bible.

According to the Bible itself, "God spoke to our fathers by the prophets" (Heb. 1:1). This statement sums up the Christian view of the Holy Scriptures in which God communicates to humans with propositions. God "spoke" through his human mouthpieces, presenting truth regarding the nature and will of God, the records and meaning of historical, redemptive events, and other truths regarding the creation, fall, and salvation of humans. In the same way that my writing in this paragraph makes propositional truth claims, the written revelation of God's Word declares, explains, and applies truth from God.

The Bible states that God is its ultimate author, the Holy Spirit having employed the human writers by the process known as *inspiration*. Inspiration does not mean that the human writers were "inspiring" on their own. Rather, the Holy Spirit oversaw their writing in such a way that what the human authors wrote ultimately came from God himself. Peter explains, "For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. 1:21). "All Scripture is breathed out by God," Paul writes (2 Tim. 3:16), agreeing with God's assertion: "My word . . . goes out from my mouth" (Isa. 55:11). Consistent with this teaching, the entire Bible presents itself as the Word of God rather than the ideas of humans.

Christians emphasize the truth of God's Word because God is himself true. As the infinitely perfect God, he reveals himself in Scripture without error and with divine authority. Christians uphold the truth of God's Word not because we are able to answer every objection to the Bible's veracity (although good explanations exist for virtually

every objection), but by appealing to the perfect nature of the God who reveals himself in Scripture. Since the perfect God reveals himself in the Bible, we can trust the Bible as true and have no need or warrant to set aside portions of the Bible deemed objectionable or too difficult.

As God's true, revealed Word, the Bible speaks with all the authority of God himself. John Calvin stated, "We owe to the Scripture the same reverence which we owe to God, because it has proceeded from Him alone."⁸ With this in mind, Christians affirm the words spoken by the moderator of the Church of Scotland when presenting a Bible to the new monarch in the coronation service of Great Britain: "The most precious thing this world affords, the most precious thing that this world knows, God's living Word."

As God's special revelation containing propositional statements, the Bible is especially valuable in revealing *doctrinal* truths about God and humans. For instance, the deity of Jesus Christ is a doctrinal truth that the Bible plainly declares (e.g., Titus 2:13). Other doctrines, such as the doctrine of the Trinity, are revealed in Scripture as a necessary implication of its statements about God. Through the Bible's direct statements and necessary inferences derived from Scripture, believers may know the truth about God, humans, sin, salvation, and all other matters necessary to faith and godliness (2 Pet. 1:3).

This is not to say that the Bible is composed solely of propositional truth claims or that God's message to humans is restricted to propositional truth. The Bible presents God's revealed Word in a variety of literary genres: historical narrative, metaphor, apocalypse, prophetic oracle, epistle, and poetry, to name some of the most obvious. Not all of these genres can be reduced to mere propositions; moreover, the character and will of God is biblically presented in ways other than propositions.

The truth communicated in Holy Scripture exceeds what merely propositions can convey, as we would expect since its author is the infinite God. Yet the Bible does convey vital truth in propositional form, and doctrinal statements may communicate these truths accurately even if they cannot communicate them exhaustively. The apostle Paul explicitly endorses Christian doctrine, urging Timothy, "Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 1:13).

While Holy Scripture reveals truth from God in a variety of forms,

including much propositional content, receiving truth by Scripture is the farthest thing from a dry, intellectual pursuit. The Holy Spirit brought the Bible into existence through its human writers, and he also enlightens people so that they can understand and believe the Bible. This is why Peter compares reading Scripture with his personal experience of seeing Jesus display his glory: “We have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts” (2 Pet. 1:19). This perfectly expresses the Christian belief not only in the truth value of Scripture but of the spiritual value of deriving truth from God’s written Word.

Apart from the Holy Spirit’s work, humans are not only unable to know God; they can’t even know themselves. So daunting is the world around us, coupled with the confusion worked within us by the corrupting influence of sin, that K. Scott Oliphint states, “Unless and until we have a Word from God, *the Word of God*, we simply cannot make sense of the world around us or the ‘world’ within us, not to mention the more important truth of how we can please God.”⁹ Only the Bible can help us make sense of ourselves and God’s world.

Truth and the Life of God

Truth exists because God exists, and God’s revelation in the Bible makes this truth known. Furthermore, truth corresponds to God and reality not merely in theory but also in a covenantal relationship that is lived as well as known.

Covenant making is always a function of lordship, so the covenant-making God expresses his lordship over the creation as a whole and especially humans. In a covenant both parties are always involved. God, for his part, has bound himself to his creation for all time. A famous expression of this commitment is God’s covenant with Noah after the receding of the waters from the great flood. God promised, “I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth” (Gen. 9:11). Furthermore, God’s covenants forever bind him with humans, not as an equal but as sovereign and Lord: “I will be your God,” he says, “and you shall be my people” (Jer. 7:23).

In a similar manner, God’s covenant has committed humans to the

creation as a whole. This solidarity between humans and the creation is seen in God's using dust to make Adam, the first man. "Thus we are linked with creation, in one sense, because we are taken from it; we are quite literally a part of it."¹⁰ At the same time as man is joined to the creation, he is set apart from it by his special relationship to God: "Then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature" (Gen. 2:7).

God then installed the first man and woman as his vice-gerents over the creation, commanding them to rule and hold dominion, making the creation fruitful and multiplying (Gen. 1:28). God therefore created humans with special duties toward the creation and toward himself. Oliphint comments, "There is an inextricable link between ourselves and the world, a link that is both established by God and is intended to reflect his character. Because of that, we are people who are created to know and to interact with our world, all to the glory of the triune God, our Creator."¹¹

Because of the covenantal nature of creation, the knowledge of truth carries with it obligations toward God and to others in the world around us. To receive God's truth is therefore to live God's truth. As Moses explained to Israel long ago, "The things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law" (Deut. 29:29).

It is not surprising, then, that when God sent his Son into the world, Jesus was revealed as truth incarnate. "In him was life, and that life was the light of men," wrote John (John 1:4). "I am the way, the truth, and the life," Jesus declared (John 14:6). God's Son came to incarnate the truth of God, to live out God's truth in his obedient life, and to establish God's truth for salvation through his sacrificial death and saving resurrection.

"Truth, then, is correspondence between our entire lives and God's heart, words, and actions, through the mediation of the Word and Spirit."¹² Christians thus regard the Bible as revealing important doctrinal truths through propositions. But through the Scripture's story of the truth of Jesus and his life, Christians also come to know him who is truth, to love him, and to obey his truth. As a friend inscribed in a Bible he gave me, Christians are to "know the truth, live the truth, and tell the truth," knowing above all else that "Jesus is the truth," both as

the way to God through faith in him and as the one who gives true life to all who receive his gospel word in faith.

Christian Truth in Practice

As I have stated, Christians must stand for truth in a world that is bent on denying it. Christians must take this stand for truth—and the knowledge of truth—for God’s sake, for our own sake, and for the sake of the unbelieving world. In declaring that truth is real, we affirm the existence of God, who alone can ground reality, truth, and knowledge.

Chastened Proclamation of Scripture

The best way for Christians to hold forth truth is with a Bible in our hands since, as David rejoiced, “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple” (Ps. 19:7). Yet in proclaiming our biblical message, we Christians should never set ourselves forward as the arbiters of truth. Even as we set forth Jesus Christ as the final and truest revelation of God, we do so only as servants of our hearers (see 2 Cor. 4:5). Listening to the critiques of our postmodern neighbors and admitting that the arrogance of modernity has sometimes influenced our own heritage, Christians should speak truth with a chastened repentance that is less triumphalistic than may previously have been the case. We are finite and fallen, so the message we proclaim should be compared constantly to the Bible.

Yet for all our humility in holding forth truth and our charity in critiquing the claims of others, Christians must still insist that what we proclaim from God’s Word is truth. We reject the notion that our doctrine consists of nothing more than the subjective experience of our own faith community, since the Bible we proclaim presents truth revealed from God. Thus guarded, we remain committed to the authority, power, and unique revelation of the Holy Scriptures through which God speaks to people today.

A Passion for Truth and Life

Just as Christians should strike a balance between boldly proclaiming and humbly presenting truth, we should also seek a balance between the sound grasp of biblical doctrine and a personal passion for a life yielded to Jesus Christ. We believe that “while truth is propositional, it is not only something to be believed, but also to be received in

worship and practiced in wisdom.”¹³ Christian truth never involves merely a transfer of information but a personal relationship of faith and love. Therefore, in our preaching and discipleship, we are zealous for sound doctrine with a passion for changed living. For this reason, the community of God’s people most soundly conveys Christian truth. The practices of prayer, sacraments, fellowship, ministry, and witness shape how we receive and respond to the truth of God’s Word.

The point is not that Christians must labor to make truth relevant to godly living but rather that God’s purpose in revealing his truth always involves a transforming process of love and holiness. What God has thus married, Christians must never separate! Love divorced from truth is not love, and truth divorced from love is not truth. This is why Paul wrote of his teaching, “The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1 Tim. 1:5). Christian truth never involves mere externals, for “in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6).

Judy Telchin won over her traditional Jewish parents to Christianity when she was fervently committed to gospel truth *and* demonstrated Christian love and holiness. A friend at college had given Judy a Bible and helped her to study it, and Judy believed in Jesus Christ. She knew that her Jewish family would bitterly oppose her conversion, but she courageously spoke the truth. She told her father, Stan Telchin, “I believe that the Bible is the Word of God, and I believe that Jesus is the Messiah.” At first, Stan felt utterly betrayed. It would have been better, he said, if she had gotten pregnant or kicked out of school rather than become a Christian.

Judy continued to affirm biblical truth with humility and conviction, and she backed it up with a life changed through love and holiness. She gave her parents New Testaments, saying, “Read it for yourself to find out whether it’s true or not.” Softened by Judy’s example of love, Stan took up her challenge, determined to prove his daughter’s new faith false. Instead, he steadily came to the same conviction as his daughter, through God’s revelation of truth in the Holy Scriptures. When Stan finally gained the courage to share with his wife his belief that Jesus really is the Savior, she admitted to the same belief through her own study of God’s Word.¹⁴

To be effective as a witness, even in the face of such outraged oppo-

sition as her traditional Jewish family, Judy did not have to back off from her witness to the truth of the gospel. Yet it was necessary for her to combine her witness with authentic humility, love, and godliness in order gain a hearing from people who cared about her. All Christians should prayerfully labor to do likewise, holding together truth and love in the power of the Holy Spirit, so that our witness to the Bible will be attended with, as Paul puts it, a “demonstration of the Spirit’s power” (1 Cor. 2:4 NIV).

The Spirituality of Truth

Since the Holy Scriptures convey God’s truth, knowing truth is always a spiritual matter. In defending and declaring truth, “what we proclaim is not ourselves” (2 Cor. 4:5). We are not superior to others, nor should we be obstinate toward those who oppose our tradition. We are grateful that God made himself known to us in love. Our knowledge of God remains partial, even when it is accurate, yet by the Spirit’s witness we can know that we have received saving truth in full assurance. Because of the Spirit’s role in revealing God’s truth in our hearts, we “have certainty concerning the things [we] have been taught” (Luke 1:4). The gospel truth of the knowledge of God has come to us “not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction” (1 Thess. 1:5).

This reflection about the spirituality of truth—truth ultimately conveyed to our spirits by the ministry of the Holy Spirit and by means of the Spirit-inspired Word—answers how we might take up the conversation that opens this booklet. James Boice had answered the objections of his airplane seatmate by insisting, “What really matters is what is true.” In light of today’s relativist hegemony, non-Christians are no longer likely to accept truth as a common ground. How, then, are Christians to proclaim truth in a world that no longer even believes in it?

The answer to the challenge of our times is surely not to turn aside from our biblical witness to argue complicated theories of epistemology and hermeneutics. A better approach is for Christians humbly to answer:

God has provided for our need of truth by sending his Spirit to give us this book, the Bible. In this book, God introduces the truth in the

form of a person, God's own Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus promises that his Spirit will give understanding to anyone who sincerely seeks the truth in God's Word. May I give you a copy of the Bible that you can keep? Here is a card with my phone number, as well. I would be very happy to interact with you—to answer any questions and listen to any objections you may want to give—but I sincerely believe that you can find the truth here if you really are interested. And I will be praying that God will send you his Spirit to lead you into truth.

Will our postmodern friends and neighbors respond to this kind of testimony regarding truth? According to the Bible, they may or may not, depending on how God is pleased to use our witness. But Christians can trust that many people, even unlikely ones, will accept a bold yet humble witness to the truth of God's Word. How can we know this? Because we know that Jesus spoke the truth when he promised to send "the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father" and that through our witness of truth and love from the Scriptures, the Spirit himself, Jesus said, "will bear witness about me" (John 15:26).

Because Jesus is "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6), our calling is to know the truth through his Word, to live the truth in holiness and love, and to tell the truth through a Spirit-led witness to his Word. Will such a witness make any impact on our world today? Jesus himself says that it will. Indeed, Jesus gives us great confidence in the power of his truth today as it is lifted up, as once Jesus was lifted up on the cross. He says in truth, "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32).

Notes

1. D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 96–102.
2. *Ibid.*, 99.
3. *Ibid.*, 100.
4. The Gospel Coalition, Confessional Statement.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, trans. William Hendriksen (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977), 41.
7. Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, Collected Works of Francis A. Schaeffer, 5 vols. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1982), 1:110, 178.
8. John Calvin, cited in J. I. Packer, “Calvin the Theologian,” in *John Calvin: A Collection of Essays*, ed. G. E. Duffield (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1966), 162.
9. K. Scott Oliphint, “*Non Sola Ratione*: Three Presbyterians and the Postmodern Mind,” in *The Practical Calvinist: Essays in Honor of Claire Davis*, ed. Peter A. Lillback (Fearn, Scotland: Mentor, 2002), 382.
10. K. Scott Oliphint, “The Old-New Reformed Epistemology,” in *Revelation and Reason: New Essays in Reformed Apologetics*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint and Lane G. Tipton (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 210.
11. *Ibid.*, 211.
12. The Gospel Coalition, Theological Vision for Ministry.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Stan Telchin, *Betrayed!* (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen Books, 1981), 11, 22.

The Gospel Coalition

The Gospel Coalition is a fellowship of evangelical churches deeply committed to renewing our faith in the gospel of Christ and to reforming our ministry practices to conform fully to the Scriptures. We have become deeply concerned about some movements within traditional evangelicalism that seem to be diminishing the church's life and leading us away from our historic beliefs and practices. On the one hand, we are troubled by the idolatry of personal consumerism and the politicization of faith; on the other hand, we are distressed by the unchallenged acceptance of theological and moral relativism. These movements have led to the easy abandonment of both biblical truth and the transformed living mandated by our historic faith. We not only hear of these influences; we see their effects. We have committed ourselves to invigorating churches with new hope and compelling joy based on the promises received by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

We believe that in many evangelical churches a deep and broad consensus exists regarding the truths of the gospel. Yet we often see the celebration of our union with Christ replaced by the age-old attractions of power and affluence or by monastic retreats into ritual, liturgy, and sacrament. What replaces the gospel will never promote a mission-hearted faith anchored in enduring truth working itself out in unashamed discipleship eager to stand the tests of kingdom calling and sacrifice. We desire to advance along the King's highway, always aiming to provide gospel advocacy, encouragement, and education so that current- and next-generation church leaders are better equipped to fuel their ministries with principles and practices that glorify the Savior and do good to those for whom he shed his life's blood.

We want to generate a unified effort among all peoples—an effort that is zealous to honor Christ and multiply his disciples, joining in a true coalition for Jesus. Such a biblically grounded and united mission

is the only enduring future for the church. This reality compels us to stand with others who are stirred by the conviction that the mercy of God in Jesus Christ is our only hope of eternal salvation. We desire to champion this gospel with clarity, compassion, courage, and joy—gladly linking hearts with fellow believers across denominational, ethnic, and class lines.

Our desire is to serve the church we love by inviting all of our brothers and sisters to join us in an effort to renew the contemporary church in the ancient gospel of Christ so that we truly speak and live for him in a way that clearly communicates to our age. We intend to do this through the ordinary means of his grace: prayer, the ministry of the Word, baptism and the Lord's Supper, and the fellowship of the saints. We yearn to work with all who, in addition to embracing the confession and vision set out here, seek the lordship of Christ over the whole of life with unabashed hope in the power of the Holy Spirit to transform individuals, communities, and cultures.

“If Christians are to communicate the gospel truth to today’s post-modern generations, we will likely have to do more than simply state the truth. . . . We will need to answer questions such as, ‘Why should I accept that the Bible is true?’ and, ‘That may be true for you, but why should it be true for anyone else?’ Prior to giving our witness to Christian truth, we will often have to present clear Christian views about truth itself.”

—From the booklet

These Gospel Coalition booklets are edited by D. A. Carson and Timothy Keller and are designed to offer thoughtful explanations of the ministry’s confessional statement. The Gospel Coalition is an evangelical movement dedicated to the gospel of Christ and a Scripture-based reformation of ministry practices.

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