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Truth-Telling is Stranger Than It Used to Be, Part Three

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In this culture, the task of telling the truth is stranger than it used to be—especially when it comes to the task of presenting Christian truth claims. Postmodern concepts of truth now reign in the postmodern age—and even in the postmodern pew. Research indicates that a growing majority of those who claim to be Christian reject the very notion of absolute truth.

This is no small matter. This generation will gladly use the vocabulary of truth, but deny that any claim to truth is universally valid. Furthermore, some postmodernists embrace contradiction as an intellectual achievement, meaning that individuals can paste together whatever incompatible truth claims meet their personal desires or arouse their intellectual interest. The acceptance of the vocabulary of truth without the notion of truth presents Christians with a unique predicament—we must work harder both to understand and to be understood.

The “death of the text” is evident in the resistance to biblical preaching in many churches. Postmodern ears no longer want to hear the “thus saith the Lord” of the biblical text. Since truth is made, and not found, many postmodern persons believe that we can design our own personal religion or spirituality—and leave out inconvenient doctrines and moral commands. Postmodernism promises that the individual can construct a personal structure of spirituality, free from outside interference or permission. Under the motto, “There’s no truth like my truth,” postmodernism’s children will establish their own doctrinal system, and will defy correction. This idea of a personalized and individually-designed “spirituality” is now the only form of faith some postmodern persons will accept. Any belief that would require a change in thought or behavior is simply ruled out of bounds.

Gene Veith, dean of the School of Arts and Sciences at Concordia University, tells of a young man who claimed to be a Christian and professed belief in Christ and love for the Bible, but also believed in reincarnation. His pastor confronted this belief in reincarnation by directing the young man to Hebrews 9:27. The text was read: “It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment.” The young man looked back at his pastor and replied, “Well, that’s your interpretation.” The young man was simply unwilling to be instructed and bound by the biblical text.

In the name of postmodernism, anything can be explained away as a matter of interpretation. Games played with language mean that every statement must be evaluated with care. A statement as clear and plain as the first line of the Apostles’ Creed, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth,” must be evaluated in terms of the speaker’s intentions. Does this confession assert belief that God is actually the maker of heaven and earth, or is this a statement of mere personal sentiment? When meaningfulness is separated from truthfulness, the faith is severed from its truth claims—a move antithetical to Christian integrity.

The strangeness of ministry in a postmodern age can be seen in Bible studies which do not study the Bible, but are psychological exercises in self-discovery, in the cafeteria-style morality practiced by so many church members, and in the growing acceptance of other religions as valid paths to salvation.

Modern culture is revolt against the truth, and postmodernism is but the latest form of this revolt. Christian witness in these strange times calls for undiluted conviction and faithful apologetics. The temptations to compromise are great, and the opposition which comes to anyone who would contend for absolute and eternal truth is severe. But this is the task of the believing church.

We must understand postmodernism, read its theorists and learn its language. This is as much a missiological challenge as an intellectual exercise. We cannot address ourselves to a postmodern culture unless we understand its mind.

By its very nature, postmodernism is doomed to intellectual self-destruction. Its central principles cannot be consistently applied. (Just ask a postmodern academic to accept the “death of the text” in terms of his contract.) The church must continue to be the people of truth, holding fast to the claims of Christ, and contending for the faith once for all delivered to the saints. Postmodernism rejects any “once for all” truth, but the church cannot compromise its witness.

The task of Christian truth-telling is stranger than it used to be. But this is an era of great evangelistic opportunity, for as the false gods of postmodernism die, the church bears witness to the Word of Life. In the midst of a postmodern age, our task is to bear witness to the Truth, and to pick up the pieces as the culture breaks apart.

Of course, every generation of Christians has faced its own intellectual challenges. Understanding the contours of the postmodern mind is a good place for this generation of Christians to start.

