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Is Truth Really Plural? Postmodernism in Full Flower

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The question of truth stands at the very center of the postmodern challenge. As with any major shift in human thinking, postmodernism comes packaged with both positive and negative elements. Positively, the general worldview of postmodernism reminds us that we are deeply embedded in cultural and linguistic systems that shape and influence our thinking. Furthermore, postmodernism can provide a corrective to epistemological arrogance — the tendency to claim premature finality for our thought and truth claims.

On the other hand, the negative dimensions of the postmodern turn are often deeply subversive of the very concept of truth. Indeed, the rejection of truth in any knowable and objective form is one of the greatest challenges postmodernism presents to the Christian faith. The questions raised by postmodernism can lead to the development of a healthy and faithful epistemological humility. On the other hand, the more general effect of postmodernism has been to insinuate a very dangerous epistemological humility that can undermine confidence that any truth can actually be known.



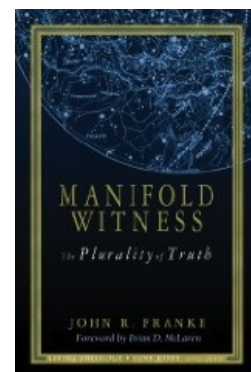
In recent years, John R. Franke, a professor at Biblical Theological Seminary in Hatfield, Pennsylvania, has been among the foremost proponents of the embrace of a postmodern worldview. A major figure in the emergent church, Franke has been a significant critic of modern evangelicalism. In his new book, *Manifold Witness: The Plurality of Truth*, Franke offers an argument that pushes the postmodern envelope and offers what amounts to a completely new way of understanding truth. Truth, Franke argues, is inherently plural.

Franke's new book is part of the "Living Theology" series published by Abingdon Press in cooperation with Emergent Village. The book deserves close attention, for it presents a vision of truth we are sure to confront in years to come.

From the onset, Franke speaks honestly of his frustration when asked about his understanding of truth. "Personally I will admit that I am beginning to find the question more than a little annoying," he states. Franke forcefully insists that he *does* believe in truth, but manifold witness presents an understanding of truth that amounts to postmodernism in full force.

Is Christianity Pluralist?

Helpfully, Franke sets out his thesis early in the book. He begins with the argument that the Christian church has embraced pluriform truth claims and then argues that the Christian faith "is inherently and irreducibly pluralist." As he explains, "The diversity of the Christian faith is not, as some approaches to church and theology might seem to suggest, a problem that needs to be overcome. Instead, this diversity is part of the divine design and intention for the Church as the image of God and the body of Christ in the world. Christian plurality is a good thing, not something that needs to be struggled against and overturned."



This is a truly breathtaking argument. Indeed, Franke understands that his embrace of pluralism is itself a product of his own postmodern context. Previous generations of Christians, he acknowledges, considered plural truth claims, doctrinal formulas, and theological systems to be a challenge that required clarification and the discernment of truth — not as a condition to be embraced. “The early Protestant church was characterized by plurality, but this does not mean that Protestants were pluralists,” he concedes. “They were not. Instead, they were committed to establishing the one true church over against the Roman Catholic Church, which they viewed as a heretical distortion of the one true church. They were committed to one true way to be a Christian, the one right way to read the Bible, the one system of doctrine, the one right set of practices.”

Not so in the emerging church movement. Instead, that movement “is similarly characterized by plurality.” But, in contrast to historic Protestantism, “it also *affirms* plurality as an appropriate and necessary manifestation of Christian community.” Thus, plurality “is not to be opposed, but rather something to be sought and celebrated.” This explains how the Emergent Village community can claim “to honor and serve the church in all its forms — Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant, Pentecostal, Anabaptist.”

In *Manifold Witness*, Franke offers a skillful review of postmodernism and its understanding of truth. Furthermore, he expends considerable energy and thought in the task of calling Christians to an understanding of the careless way some believers speak of truth. Many of his thematic statements are both eloquent and helpful. Franke is certainly right when he exhorts:

“Christians committed to the Lordship of Jesus Christ should not acquiesce to the cultural relativism that gives up on the notion of ultimate or transcendent truth. But we must also resist the temptation of espousing a notion of truth that makes an idol out of our own conceptions, assumptions, and desires as though they are not subject to critique.”

Is the Trinity Pluralist?

So far, so good. Franke also offers a genuine and prophetic warning when he urges white Western evangelicals to consider the extent to which our own cultural context has shaped our thinking and beliefs and the temptation to assert our own cultural assumptions, rather than the Gospel, as the Christian message.

Nevertheless, the thrust of Franke’s argument goes far beyond that warning. In arguing for the plurality of truth, Franke seeks to ground this plurality in the very nature of God. In emphasizing a social understanding of the Trinity, Franke argues that plurality exists even within God. As he explains, “difference is part of the life of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit live in the fellowship of missional love.”

The ministry of the Trinity is indeed so profound as to be beyond human imagination and knowledge. Nevertheless, the Bible does reveal the *unity* of the Trinity to be definitive. Throughout the centuries, faithful Christians have taken care to honor what the Bible reveals about the unity of the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit. Yet, Franke asserts “in the life of God is the experience of what is different, other, not the same.”

Franke argues that God does reveal himself to his creatures, but he also insists “that God chooses to be revealed through creaturely mediums that bear the marks of their finite character.” In other words, the actual text of the Bible involves creaturely limitations. “These limitations remain in place in spite of the use God makes of them as the bearers of revelation,” Franke asserts.

In the end, Franke’s understanding of the Bible falls desperately short of evangelical conviction. In an argument similar to that made by his late mentor, Stanley Grenz, Franke argues that “Christian communal identity has been bound up with a particular set of literary texts that together have been identified by that community as canonical Scripture.” He speaks of the Bible as “inspired,” but his argument is that “the Spirit has spoken, and now speaks, and will continue to speak with authority, guiding the church into truth, through the canonical texts of Scripture.” His proposal seems to leave no room whatsoever for verbal inspiration.

“The Bible is the principal means by which the Spirit guides the church today,” Franke affirms, but he goes on to state that “the speaking of the Spirit is not bound solely to the original intention of the biblical authors.” Utilizing a postmodern understanding of literary texts and their interpretation, Franke asserts: “The speaking of the Spirit through the texts of Scripture means that while the intention of the author is an important concern, it is not the only concern. It does not

represent the fullness of the speaking of the Spirit, since this always involves the response of the reader.”

Further:

“Put another way, the goal of reading the Bible is not the attempt to identify and codify the true meaning of the text in a series of systematically arranged assertions that then function as the only proper interpretive grid through which we read the Bible. Such an approach is characteristic among those who hold particular approaches to theology and hermeneutics in an absolutist fashion and claim that such procedures will lead to the arrival of the one true and proper conception of doctrine contained in Scripture. The danger here is that such a procedure can hinder our ability to read the text and listen to the speaking of the Spirit in new ways.”

This means that we are not actually bound by the words of Scripture. Instead, the church is to engage the Bible, trusting that the Holy Spirit will lead the community into a new understanding. Thus, the emerging church would be freed from accountability to the actual words and propositional statements of Scripture. The community can simply claim that it is being led by the Spirit into a new and different understanding.

Theological Liberalism in a New Key

Of course, this is the very argument asserted by Protestant liberals over the last two centuries. Franke adds postmodern concepts and language to an old argument. The new liberalism, chastened by postmodernism for its extreme individualism, now puts theological revisionism in a communal context. The result is the same — the subversion of biblical Christianity.

Clearly, Franke and other emerging types will chafe under that criticism. Indeed, even as he criticizes the notion of “historic Christianity” and any set of “minimum beliefs” necessary to be a Christian, he also asserts: “Of course I believe in truth. I believe in God. I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of the saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.”

The problem is this – Franke’s argument that truth is plural means that the church should both embrace and celebrate different and even contradictory understandings of these doctrinal statements and core truths. While Franke is undoubtedly correct in warning that no theological system is free of cultural limitations, his proposal amounts to a total and unconditional surrender of doctrinal accountability. While he insists that not all doctrinal assertions are allowable, he undercuts the authority of Scripture to serve as the norm for establishing truth from error.

The Protestant liberals of the 19th and 20th centuries often offered words of criticism that orthodox believers and theologians needed to hear. Nevertheless, their subversion of biblical truth and their embrace of heresy rather than orthodoxy established these theological liberals as adherents of a religion fully distinct from Biblical Christianity.

Now, the leading edge of the emergent church movement follows the very same trajectory. *Manifold Witness* is a fascinating book, but John Franke’s proposal is a recipe for theological disaster. In this book, a new postmodern form of theological liberalism comes fully into view.

I’m always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler.

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