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Following Jesus as the Truth: Postmodernity and Challenges of Relativism

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TO PROCLAIM JESUS of Nazareth as Lord and Saviour is to make an absolute and universal truth claim. When the church declares that he is the way to the truth about God and eternal life, she is making a statement about reality that is true for everyone and everywhere, and not just for Christians. Implicit in the confession of Jesus as Lord is the acknowledgement of his sovereign jurisdiction over the whole world. The universal Lordship of Christ thus goes hand in hand with the claim of his identity as Truth-Incarnate.

Such an uncompromising affirmation, however, is anathema to postmodern sensitivities, where the very notion of absolute and objective truth is either politely passed over as a relic

from a defunct Cartesianism or roundly scoffed at as a guise for ideological imposition. Christians who persist in proclaiming Christ as Truth-Incarnate risk being tarred with the brush of narrow-mindedness or even bigotry.

How then is the church to share the truth about Jesus and follow Jesus as the truth in a postmodern world where truth itself has been made problematic? The challenge in the postmodern age is to commend the truth of Christ to those who do not believe in the very notion of truth. What follows is an attempt to chart a course forward for evangelism that takes into account the opportunities and challenges posed by postmodernity.¹

¹ The distinction is often made between 'postmodernity' as a description of a socio-cultural phenomenon or ethos, and 'postmodernism' as an ideology or a philosophical viewpoint.

I Features of the Postmodern Mood

Postmodernism is famously difficult to define. The word 'postmodern' is used in a variety of ways, and postmodernism or postmodernity is a complex and hydra-headed phenomenon not amenable to easy characterization. Postmodernism can mean different things to different people. To the architect, artist, or novelist, postmodernism refers to a particular style; to the philosopher, it designates a movement away from Cartesian epistemology; to the political theorist, it signals the end of utopian ideologies; and to the economist, it may describe the transition from an industrial-age economy to an information-age economy.

Postmodernity seems to be best described than defined. It is more a mood than a movement, with its impact felt not only in academia but also in (popular) culture at large.² It is generally acknowledged that postmodernity represents a new chapter in the cultural history of the world, even though the extent to which it is related to modernity is a matter of debate. Some scholars understand postmodernity as a new phase in philosophical reflection, while others see it as a form of hypermodernity.

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, the postmodern tag has been

applied to various developments in architecture, art, music, epistemology, philosophy of science, literary criticism, philosophy of language, ethics, and critical theory. These varied tributaries that together run into the big postmodern lake converge on a common revolt against modernity and its key ideas. Postmodernism may be used as a label to designate the positive philosophical viewpoints represented by Foucault, Rorty, Derrida, and other scions of suspicion and deconstruction, or it may simply describe the mood of life that bears the marks of exhaustion from a spent modernity.

Such is the diversity of postmodernism that it is better described as a loosely connected bundle of diverse viewpoints than as a unified and monolithic movement with a clear centre, sharp boundaries, and official spokespersons. Nevertheless, despite the variety, there are leitmotifs that seem to coagulate into a fairly discernible shape such that one is justified in painting a portrait of it, albeit with broad impressionist strokes.

1 Rejection of an authoritative meta-narrative (Grand Story)

A key pillar of the postmodern mutiny against an Enlightenment-defined modernity is the rejection of all overarching stories that explain and give meaning to life. As Lyotard characterizes it, there is in postmodernity an 'incredulity toward meta-narratives'.³

2 See Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); Walter Truett Anderson, *Reality Isn't What It Used to Be: Theatrical Politics, Ready-to-Wear Religion, Global Myths, Primitive Chic, and Other Wonders of the Postmodern World* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990); and Gene Edward Veith, *Guide to Contemporary Culture* (Leicester: Crossway Books, 1994).

3 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. xxiv.

Whereas modernity valorizes human self-confidence and glories in the fruits of rational scientific achievements, postmodernity decries such utopian triumphalism in favour of a modest if not despairing stance towards the idea of truth as unitary and universal. In place of the universal, postmodernity focuses on the particular. There is no simple reality, only representations of it; there is no singular truth, only multiple truths. There is no grand reason, only socially defined reasons. As a way of looking at the world, postmodernism is the worldview that says no worldview exists. It denies the possibility of a 'God's eye view' of anything, and in place of universal and objective truth that transcends all expressions of it, postmodern pluralists argue that we have only community-specific stories that have no truth-validity outside the communities in which they function. The idea of an independent external reality that can be intersubjectively investigated is dismissed as a myth.

2 The non-existence of ultimate foundations

The search for a firm philosophical foundation for knowledge has exercised thinkers since the Middle Ages. Descartes's nomination of the thinking *cogito* as a philosophical first principle exemplifies the kind of epistemological foundationalism that says a belief is justified only if it can be shown to be anchored in some foundation of indubitable first principles. Without going into the intricacies of this discussion, suffice to say that the postmodern insistence on the contextual contingency of all ideas means that even the so-called indubitable foundational

beliefs are socially constructed and have no priority over the beliefs that they purportedly support. Instead of a hierarchical structure for knowledge, postmodernism is decidedly anti-foundational. It focuses instead on the contextuality of human knowledge and probes epistemological claims in the light of human limits. Accordingly, knowledge is by nature uncertain and subject to revision since knowledge claims are interpretations rooted in social contexts.

3 Relativizing truth-claims; celebrating of diversity

Modernity seeks a truth that is objectively out there in the world. In postmodernity however, one has no access to the truth 'out there'. All we have is truth that is essentially a social construct made up of raw materials supplied by historical and social conditions. It assumes a constructivist view of knowledge whereby all truth claims are claims *from somewhere*. To enquire into the nature of knowledge or truth can be, according to philosopher, Richard Rorty, only 'a sociohistorical account of how various people have tried to reach agreement on what to believe'.⁴ Truth is perspectival. The quest for objective truth independent of the knower is a lost cause. Instead of *the* truth, we only have 'truths'.

Since people cannot be abstracted from their contexts, the way they 'see' the world is by learning the language of

4 'Solidarity or Objectivity', in Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers, Vol. 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 24.

the communities of which they are a part. There is no access to how things really are (i.e., objective truth) since one cannot escape the influence of language on one's thoughts, beliefs, and even experiences. In short, what we experience as 'reality' is mediated through language, which is in turn supplied by community and tradition.

If all claims to universality are relative to the social contexts in which they arise, and if there is no neutral and objective basis upon which differing viewpoints may be adjudicated, then one ends up with multiple perspectives jockeying for supremacy with no one perspective enjoying privilege status. Diversity of viewpoints is celebrated. When everyone has a right to his opinions, and when these opinions cannot in principle be challenged, then no opinion is wrong. Thus the Bible is no more authoritative than other sacred texts. Each is relevant within the context of the different religions, and none can claim to be an exclusive route to the truth.

The aversion to unity and universality results in a *pluralization* and a *parochialization* of truth. What is true for a group of people at a certain point in time is not necessarily true for another group. Truth is assumed to be contingent on one's point of view. Truth is tribalized in postmodernity. Such egalitarianism means that the criteria for truth are strictly immanent to the form of life or social contexts in which the different truth-claimants live. With no pressure to conform to an agreed upon standard, the door is opened to a plurality of viewpoints and the embrace of differences.

Postmodernists are not as exercised over whether a truth-claim corre-

sponds to reality as they are over whether it works. It is in this sense decidedly pragmatic in orientation. As Rorty puts it, 'There is nothing to be said about truth save that each of us will commend as true those beliefs which he or she finds good to believe'.⁵ In other words, truth is really a matter of preference, and preference depends on how useful a particular 'truth' is in a particular situation.

Postmodernity has a high tolerance for the inexplicable since there is no longer any need to conform to an overarching standard of rationality before something may be said to be meaningful. The postmodern mood, unlike the arguably arrogant mindset of the Enlightenment, accepts epistemological scepticism as a given and is even prepared to embrace potential meaninglessness. Pushed to its extreme, postmodernism has a nihilistic streak.

4 Hermeneutics of Suspicion

The contingent provenance of all ideas in postmodernity is joined by the suspicion that claims to absolute truth are but attempts by the powerful or those with vested interests to stifle dissent and push their agenda. 'Reality' is the creation of those in control. Reason and truth are therefore regarded as inherently political and subversive. Thanks to Foucault, Nietzsche, Derrida, and others, all assertions of truth are really propaganda. Foucault claims that we 'cannot exercise power except through the production of truth',⁶ and

⁵ Rorty, *Objectivity*, p. 24.

⁶ Michael Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), p. 132.

'truth' can be twisted and distorted to suit those in control. For Nietzsche, there are no facts, only interpretations brought about as a means to achieve the individual's 'will to power'. If 'truth' is really an attempt by the powerful to make us conform to their reality, then one can understand the need to apply a hermeneutics of suspicion.

Postmodernism in its atheistic form is wary of truth claims and suspicious of religious authorities and pronouncements. To some postmoderns, the claim that Jesus is the truth may simply be a mask for colonial imperialism, religious intolerance, or even patriarchal chauvinism.

5 Tradition, subjective (spiritual) and holistic experience

Following on from its social constructivist view of knowledge, attention is paid to the formative role played by tradition in shaping how people think and what they think about. Postmodernism critiques the modern idea of the autonomous, imperious, and unified ego, and displaces individualism with an emphasis on the communal. Yet there is ironically a strong individualistic strand in postmodernism. The systemic suspicion that one has towards authorities leads to a situation where one can believe or trust only one's own assessment. In the absence of a frame of reference other than oneself, each person becomes his or her own authority in interpreting what is right and determining how one ought to act.

Reacting to the dominance of reason in the industrial-scientific ethos of modernity, the postmodern temper

promotes a more holistic understanding of the human person that takes into account the physical, affective, aesthetic, social-interactive, and spiritual dimensions. Not wanting to restrict knowledge to simply apprehending with the mind, postmodernists seek experiences that engage the entirety of their beings, particularly those that are unconventional and thrill inducing. Words alone are not enough; they seek participatory engagement in the consumption of experiences. There is a greater willingness to experiment and try new things as postmodernism sanctions the evolving of new trends and multiplying of fads.

6 Transience and the triumph of style

The repudiation of an essentialist metaphysics in radical postmodernism impacts not only its view on truth but also its understanding of the self. Unlike the Cartesian self and the Kantian self, in postmodern thinking, the self is no longer an active agent but 'an opaque product of variable roles and performances which have been imposed upon it by the constraints of society and by its own inner drives or conflicts'.⁷ Instead of a substantive essence at the core of a person's being, the self, like notions of truth and reality, is a constructed persona contingent on social and linguistic conditions and influences. And because the postmodern self is fragmented, multi-

⁷ Anthony C. Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self: On Meaning, Manipulation and Promise* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 121.

phrenic, and saturated,⁸ it is not surprising to find people in the postmodern age plagued by an inner uncertainty about their identity. The postmodern self seeks constantly to invent and reinvent itself. Substance gives way to form, as attention is paid more and more to one's roles and functions, with people looking to their social contexts for cues on what they should be and do. Since there is nothing beyond what you see on the outside, then what you see is what you get. The obsession with the body beautiful and other industries devoted to image manipulation and the changing or polishing of persona are but symptomatic of the loss of stability at the heart of the postmodern self.

And to make the already protean nature of the self even more fluid and uncertain, we have the proliferation of choices made possible by globalization and the blinding speed of life in the urban centres of our world. The incessant bombardment of the senses with offers of goods and services in our media-saturated society leads to a heightening of the consumerist appetite, which in turn translates into the easy replacement of the old with the new and novel. Instead of lamenting the loss of permanence, transience is lauded as a good thing. Without an inner stable identity to help one navigate the turbulent waters of postmodern pluralism, and without a centralized authority to appeal to for guidance, the postmodern denizen is left hanging on the floating debris of a

destroyed modernity, and drifting with the ebb and flow of fads and fashions.

II Engaging Postmodern Relativists Evangelistically

The fact of ethnic, philosophical, and religious diversity in society is incontrovertible. While this empirical pluralism is not without its social problems, what concerns us is the kind of postmodern philosophical pluralism that relativizes all truth-claims. How should the church respond to the challenges posed by relativism as she seeks to fulfill her mandate to point the world to Jesus the Truth?

The response to postmodernity within evangelical Christianity is not uniform.⁹ It ranges from those who are convinced that it is no friend of the gospel considering its epistemological bankruptcy, its tendency towards nihilism and its moral relativism,¹⁰ to

9 For a survey of the various responses to postmodernity within evangelicalism, see Millard Erickson, *Postmodernizing the Faith: Evangelical Responses to the Challenge of Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998) and Myron Penner, ed., *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005).

10 See for instance David Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005); Millard Erickson, Paul K. Helseth and Justin Taylor, eds., *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004); Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000); and D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).

8 Kenneth J. Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

those who agree essentially with its critique of the Enlightenment project and seek to reconfigure theology to fit the anti-foundationalism of postmodernity.¹¹ Also representative of this positive stance are leaders of the 'emerging church' movement who seek to 'do church' in a way that resonates with the postmodern temper.¹² Straddling between cautious antipathy and hearty endorsement are those who seek to engage critically with postmodernity, acknowledging the validity of its critique of various aspects of the Enlightenment project while steering clear of its more egregious ramifications. This critical engagement faces up honestly to the rapid changes that characterize life today and is ready to seize oppor-

tunities to present Christ in our post-modern world.

It is not our purpose to assess the validity of the postmodern case against modernity, or to critique the proposals of postmodernity as a whole.¹³ Our concern is with the challenge of following Jesus as Truth at a time when the concept of universal truth is in question. With the failure of modernity to deliver on utopia and the disenchantment with the promises of 'Reason' and 'Science' come new opportunities for evangelism. The postmodern assumption that all voices have a right to be heard in the marketplace of ideas means that the church can without apology make her voice heard in the postmodern world. Pluralism cuts both ways. Postmodernity may have made commitment harder, but it is, in this sense, more amenable to the communication of the gospel. How then should we proceed?

11 E.g., Stanley Grenz & John Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001); Stanley Hauerwas, Nancey Murphy and Mark Nation, eds., *Theology Without Foundations: Religious Practice and the Future of Theological Truth* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994); Nancey Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1996); James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).

12 E.g., Philip Kennison, 'There's No Such Thing As Objective Truth, and It's a Good Thing, Too', in Timothy Philips and Dennis Okholm, eds., *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), pp. 155-72; Brian McClaren, *A New Kind of Christians* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001); Tony Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001); Carl Raschke, *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).

1 Jesus Christ as revealed Truth

The Bible is unapologetic in speaking of truth. Jesus claims to be the truth (John 14:6), and the early Christians boldly insist that 'there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven...by which we must be saved' (Acts 4:12). The gospel message about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is described as 'the

13 Suffice to say that the pronouncement on the demise of foundationalism in postmodern philosophy is premature and fails to take into account the fact that a foundationalist structure of epistemic justification remains a useful and productive framework for many, particularly within Anglo-American analytic philosophy.

word of truth' (Eph. 1:13; Col. 1:5; Jas. 1:18), and Christians are said to be those who 'belong to the truth' (1 John 3:19) and are instructed by the Spirit of truth (Jn. 14:17; 1 Jn. 5:6). So there is really no getting around the truth!

Christians are not untouched by the relativism of our age, and the work of bearing witness to the truth must begin with the induction of believers into the truth of Christ given in Scripture. To follow Jesus as truth is to refuse to fudge the dividing line between truth and falsehood. This ability presupposes an acquaintance with what truth is, without which one cannot accurately identify what is false. The grounding of believers in the truth is the first step to mounting a credible apologetics in our (post)modern age. This is a prelude to witness in the world. It is not enough to get believers to share the gospel with their neighbours. We need to pay attention to the catechizing of these same believers, imparting to them the deposit of apostolic faith, and helping them to grow in the knowledge of biblical truth.

2 Contextual, winsome, and persuasive witness

The truth to which Christians give their allegiance is not merely a body of teachings but the person of Jesus. When Jesus said, 'I am the way, the truth and the life' (Jn. 14:6), he is not just claiming to speak the truth; he is claiming to *be* the truth. He *is* the truth, for only in him does one come to know the truth about his or her sinful condition; and only in him can one be saved from damnation to eternal life. This focus on the person of Christ must not be obfuscated as the church mounts an

apologetic for truth in dialogue with postmodern ideas and ideologies. The goal of philosophical engagement is for the sake of pointing to Christ.

The church's truth-claims concerning Jesus are, like all human expressions, necessarily made from somewhere in time and space. But so is the truth-claim of postmodern relativism. The Christian is entitled to ask gently why one should take postmodernism's claim of relativism as incontrovertible truth since its emergence can be traced to the particular sets of circumstances in the later part of the twentieth century. Instead of it being a liability, the historical situatedness of Christian truth and witness means that the message of Jesus, rather than being an otherworldly abstraction, is historically engaged and contextually relevant.

The confirmed postmodernist will say that it is arrogant and intolerant to claim Christ alone is the way to God. Ironically, such 'intolerance' is not tolerated in postmodernism. We must not confuse *social* tolerance with *intellectual* tolerance. Intellectual tolerance argues that all truth-claims are valid and true. This typical postmodern stance contradicts the truth of the uniqueness of Christ and is obviously unacceptable to the Christian. Social tolerance on the other hand simply says that people have a right to their own beliefs without necessarily saying that all beliefs are valid. One can respect the religious and philosophical views of people without necessarily agreeing with them. As this pertains to evangelism, we need to distinguish between behaving in a disagreeable and offensive manner, i.e., failing to practice social tolerance, and facing up to the intellectual intolerance of rela-

tivists. If there is any offence, it ought to come from the particularity of truth in Christ and not the Christian witness.

Postmodernity's insistence on respecting and honouring human differences reminds the Christian witness to be sensitive to the many genuine differences that exist between people. We can also take to heart resources from postmodernism on the unmasking of power interests, such as Foucault's stricture against reason as an instrument of oppression. His call to recover the discourse of the marginalized may be seen as an echo of the Old Testament prophets in their concern for the poor, the oppressed and those without a voice. When we acknowledge that the church has not always been innocent of oppressive practices, we add to the authenticity, honesty and humaneness of our witness.

Winsome witness to the truth means seeking to commend the gospel and humbly persuading people to make an informed decision to commit their lives to Christ. This entails the use of reason in making the case for Christ. Despite postmodernism's pronouncement on the demise of reason, we maintain that interpersonal persuasion of a reasonable sort continues to be practiced in everyday life. Sellers seek to persuade potential buyers that their products are superior to those of their competitors. Schoolteachers appeal to the reasoning faculty of students, while government leaders defend the rationale for their policies. Even enthusiastic relativists who are out to convince others of the superiority of their philosophies of life do so by turning to the tools of persuasive speech, reasoning with their listeners or readers. There is therefore room for the use of

the mind in a 'humble apologetics'¹⁴ that furnishes a reasonable commendation of the gospel. While we acknowledge the limits of reason, it does not mean that there is no room for enlisting reason in the service of the gospel.

As we commend the truth of Christ in a postmodern world, we do so knowing that the final outcome does not rest with us but with God's Spirit in bringing the truth to bear on the hearts and minds of people. The truth, like Aslan in C. S. Lewis's *Narnia*, is capable of defending itself. The truth will prevail in the end. We can be bold in testifying to Christ because there is something coherent and persuasive about the truth that rings true to life. Regardless of the sophistry and rhetorical prowess of relativists, God's truth is more powerful yet. In the final analysis, persuading relativists to the truth of Jesus is the work of God's Spirit. Winsome witness and humble apologetics must be joined by prayerful intercession.

3 Ecclesial embodiment of the truth

The verbalization of the truth of Christ is most powerful and effective when it is accompanied by the visualization of the gospel in the sense of seeing its salvific effects embodied in the lives of Christians. To bear witness to the truth, Christian witnesses must be truth-centred and truth-defined in their lives. Christian communities need to embody the truth of the gospel both in

¹⁴ John Stackhouse, Jr., *Humble Apologetics: Defending the Faith Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

terms of personal and corporate holiness. Whatever their religious persuasion or ideological positions (or the lack of it), people everywhere are looking for congruence between what is professed and what is practised. As congenital believers, people are on the lookout for signs that would either confirm them in their current beliefs, or cause them to shift or change. Christians are walking invitations for the world to come and inspect the viability and cogency of the Christian faith. The unbelieving world is watching. What are we showing them? Are we giving grounds for misconceptions by what we say and do? Or are we demonstrating the plausibility and truth of the gospel by our lifestyle?

The greatest apologetic for the gospel and the only hermeneutic of the gospel is, in the view of Lesslie Newbigin, a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.¹⁵ The credibility of our witness depends on it. Transparent holiness and the authenticity of holistic love go a long way to support our claims to know the truth. The call to proclaim Christ and make disciples is at the same time a call to authentic Christian living within Christian communities. In this sense, passionate evangelism takes off from sound ecclesiology. In situating our evangelistic presentation within the social structure of Christian community and tradition, we are certainly doing something that coheres with the postmodern preference for the communal and collective over the kind of

atomistic individualism that is so characteristic of modernity.

4 Telling the story in love

It is often said that postmodernity prefers narratives to propositions, real life stories over grand but abstract theories. Reaching our postmodern generation entails investing time and effort to listen to their stories and share our stories. It is in the context and process of the sharing of stories that we introduce God's story, a story of the divine love and search for lost humanity. It is only befitting that God's love story should be communicated in a loving manner. And learning to speak the truth in love is crucial in commending Christ to the postmodern.

Postmodernity often regards the assertion of uncompromising truth as a manifestation and a reinforcement of intolerant fundamentalism. Very often this comes out of the failure to differentiate between the convictions themselves and the way convictions are expressed. What is right can be expressed wrongly, and what is truthful loses its appeal because of the unworthy manner in which it is presented. It is important to learn how to speak the truth in Christian love, for it will make the invitation to step into God's story (the grandest of grand-narratives) all the more attractive.

Whatever their philosophical assumptions, people have an instinctive yearning for connection and relationship. This is constitutional to the human psyche on account of our being created in the image of God. Even the most radical champions of deconstructive postmodernity need people they can trust. Evangelism in a postmodern

¹⁵ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), pp. 222ff.

age has to be done up close and personal. By building bridges of trust and authentic love, the church weaves for people a plausibility framework in which the truth of Christ may be understood and the prospect of a personal relationship with Christ desired. Providing opportunities for unbelievers to draw close has the added advantage of addressing misconceptions. For instance, the failures of Christians and the established church may have left a bad taste on the part of non-Christians and raised barriers in their minds. Depending on how entrenched the mistrust is, it takes investment of time and tender love to overcome these barriers. Prejudices and misconceptions cannot be dealt with from a distance; it requires people to draw near.

The postmodern mood values experiences, and those who have grown up in a postmodern milieu cherish and are very open to real life experiences, especially experiences of a spiritual kind. Head knowledge is not enough; spirituality in a postmodern world wants something that works in real life. It craves relationships that are real. It seeks a spirituality that encompasses the physical, intellectual, social, emotional, volitional and spiritual. This is simply a manifestation of the holism that God has created humans to be. The church as a fellowship of people committed to holistic love already has in its communal life a point of contact for postmodern seekers. Having said that, it does not mean that in focusing on experiential engagement with the truth we do away with biblical theology. Experience and sound theology are not mutually exclusive. What it does mean is that when we engage the world of the postmodern, we need to do

so in a manner that welcomes and actively enlists their participation in discovering and experiencing the truth of the gospel for themselves.

The overarching paradigm of the kingdom of God serves as a powerful framework for postmodern activists to be inducted into a purpose larger than themselves. The New Testament description of the kingdom of God as the coming of 'the age to come' into this 'present evil age' (Lk. 18:30; Gal. 1:4) and the ushering in of the contrast between life 'in the flesh' and the 'new life of the Spirit' (Rom. 7:5-6; 8:5-9) is not an other-worldly reality confined to the realm of the spiritual. On the contrary, the kingdom of God is about the redeeming and transforming of this world. This is attractive to those within the postmodern family who value social justice and want to get their hands soiled in order to build a better world.

Postmodernists tend by and large to be impatient with holy-huddles; they pride themselves as activists seeking to engage and even transform the world. The message of the kingdom, with its emphasis on the renovation, restoration, and realignment of all aspects of earthly life after God's redemptive design for creation, offers a vision of life that is potentially appealing to postmodern activists. The gospel is not about getting people ready for heaven; it is about changing this world. And relativists who are activists may well find participation in doing the works of the kingdom a good starting point for coming to faith in Christ.

5 Reference points and areas of commonality

That people are different and have different philosophies of life should not overshadow the fact that people do have much in common. Without minimizing the real differences between people, there is much that they share that can be appealed to in evangelism. Religious and ideological differences notwithstanding, people everywhere are all part of the same human race. Whether one is a devout Christian or a convinced relativist, we both share many of the same human aspirations and foibles, and face many of the same challenges. Natural disasters and national crises, for instance, do not discriminate between those who believe in truth and those who do not. They are indiscriminate in apportioning woes and sufferings. Whatever the religious or philosophical persuasion of the parents of children lost in a disaster, the pain is unbearably real and the longing for solace and support dearly needed by all who are affected. Learning to meet people of all faiths at the level of our common humanity is a good place to start in sharing the truth of Christ.

6 Affirming truth and sowing seeds of subversion

Learn to affirm signs of the human quest for God. There are instincts in the human soul—and the confirmed relativist is no exception—that point in the direction of God. These intimations and inclinations, or what sociologist Peter Berger calls ‘signals of transcendence’, are signs of a spiritual wistfulness that yearns after a God people do not yet know and cannot quite

describe.¹⁶ Even in the midst of errors, there are always glimmers of the truth because man the sinner is still in the image of God. Calvin refers to this as a *divinitatis sensum* (sense of deity, or seed of religion) in man.¹⁷ Affirm these God-given instincts wherever they are found; they are excellent points of contact for conversations about the truth.

The multiplying of options and the loss of faith in institutions result in an inner disquiet on the part of people as they seek some solid ground to stand on. The unlimited choices available to people today and the disconnectedness that comes with it have only intensified people’s quest for connection. David Brooks maintains,

The life of perpetual choice is a life of perpetual longing as you are prodded by the inextinguishable desire to try the next new thing. But maybe what the soul hungers for is ultimately not a variety of interesting and moving insights but a single universal truth.¹⁸

In other words, the denial of truth does not make people less needy of the truth in the depth of their being.

Learn to discern underlying beliefs, assumptions and frameworks. As we relate with non-Christian friends, learn to read between the lines and listen for that which lies behind their words. Without coming across as prosecutors in a courtroom, we can sensitively

¹⁶ See Richard Mouw’s helpful discussion in *Distorted Truth* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989).

¹⁷ *Institutes*, I, 3.1.

¹⁸ David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), pp. 239-40.

probe for their operating assumptions and discern their fundamental beliefs. What sort of mindset stands behind their views? What is unsaid in what is said? Even misconceptions about Christianity arise from some underlying conceptions. Look at their actions. They tell a lot about their basic commitments.

Cultivate the art of gentle subversion. Learn to sow seeds of doubt in the field of unbelief and pray that God's Spirit will cause the inadequacy of all ungodly belief-systems to be revealed. This is spiritual warfare, is it not, when we tear down strongholds of argumentative unbelief by bringing the truth of God to bear on mistaken and misguided views?

Evangelism entails challenging the assumptions of postmodern relativism and presenting the gospel as a viable alternative. Part of this involves probing the adequacy of the postmodern view of life. Take for instance postmodernity's distaste for meta-narratives. Even if we grant (for the sake of argument) that totalizing discourses or meta-narratives can be oppressive and violent, it does not mean that all meta-narratives are of this nature. Even if one chooses to jettison a meta-narrative framework and opts for a local meta-narrative, i.e., community-based and tradition-bound set of operational guidelines, the question remains as to the adequacy of the assumptions entailed in this localized framework. The question that we all need to ask is this: 'Can you really live and build your life on these premises?'

Furthermore, the appeal to local meta-narrative does not save one from the violence and oppression that a universal and overarching meta-narrative

supposedly causes. Arguably, local meta-narratives can be shown to cause more violence than a single meta-narrative. The inter-tribal atrocities in Rwanda, the genocide in the Balkans, the acts of terrorism by British-born radical Muslims, etc, are examples of how local meta-narratives can be used to legitimize violence. Thus when opportunities arise, raise questions about the adequacy of absolute moral relativism as a guide for life.

III Conclusion: There are no Nonbelievers

All people are believers because all people believe in something. No one is a 'free thinker' in the sense of being completely free from beliefs and fundamental commitments. Even people who say they do not believe in anything believe that there is nothing to believe in! Even the hardened postmodernist who loudly proclaims, 'There is no such thing as universal truth!' subscribes to the truth that there is no truth! One may not want to believe in Jesus as the Son of God, but one cannot *not* believe in something. A person may be an *unbeliever*, but she cannot be a *non-believer*, for there are strictly speaking no non-believers. The question therefore is not so much *whether* people believe, but *what* do they believe.

Embedded in all human beings is a natural tendency to measure their lives against some greater scheme outside of themselves. The Bible suggests that this is how our Creator has wired us. We are by default seekers of meaning because we are created to be seekers of God. That is why there are no non-

believers. We are made to believe. It comes with being created in the image of God. Just as an image has no independent existence apart from the object it images, our identity is inalienably wrapped up with our relationship with God. There is a fundamental God-relatedness at the core of every human being.

This God-relatedness remains true even after the devastation of the fall. Sin may have opened a chasm between God and humankind, disobedience may have severed humans' relationship with God, and people may 'suppress the truth in unrighteousness' (Rom. 1:18), but they remain inescapably God-related. The runaway sinner continues to be related to God, just as the prodigal son continues to be related to his father, even when he goes gallivanting in 'the far country'. The nature of that relationship may have been altered, but the fact of relatedness remains.

Humans made in the image of God are ontologically constituted such that they cannot but yearn for God and the truth. All people have an awareness of God from creation (Rom. 1:20) and they know right from wrong innately (Rom. 2:14-15). We do not need to be unnecessarily alarmed or rattled by media-savvy evangelists for atheism who ridicule our belief in God. Whether

a fish denies the existence of water or not will not make an iota of difference to the reality that without water the fish simply cannot exist! We evangelize on the basis of what we know from the Bible about the human person.

That is why people who have not yet been reconciled to God through Christ have a deep sense of restlessness in their soul. They may try to flee from God, but they are incapable of shaking off that inner restlessness. People may try and suppress that but they cannot eradicate this divine haunting of the soul. For this reason, even an atheist can define himself only in relation to God, for atheism is by definition parasitic on theism. That is the irony at the heart of human existence. People cannot run from God without running into God at every turn because they have been stamped with the image of God; and this God is actively seeking out and drawing them to himself. Relativists may insist that there is no such thing as universal truth, but they live instinctively on the assumption of the reality of truth despite protestation to the contrary.

To use the language of business, there is always a market for the gospel since people never run out of their need for God. Of this we can be confident: even in the relativistic climate of our postmodern times, the gospel remains perennially relevant.