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Modernity's Assault on Truth

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Modernity has given way to postmodernity, which is simply modernity in its latest guise. Claiming that all notions of truth are socially constructed, postmodernists are committed to total war on truth itself, a deconstructionist project bent on the casting down of all religious, philosophical, political, and cultural authorities. A postmodernist ahead of his times, Karl Marx warned that in the light of modernity, "all that is solid melts into air." It is precisely to this mission of vaporization that the deconstructionists are committed.

In the wake of this project of deconstruction is left the debris of truth and virtue, order and structure, orthodoxy and heresy. As postmodern critic Matei Calinescu comments, "Even more difficult to defend in a pluralistic age like ours is the idea of an orthodoxy by whose standards we could decide whether this or that tendency is heretical or not. Our specific time consciousness, which has brought about the loss of transcendence, is also responsible for the present-day conceptual emptiness of the opposition between orthodoxy and heresy."

All this would be tragic enough if such trends shaped the consciousness of the world, but not of the church. Yet to our shame, the modern secular worldview has wrought destruction within the church as well. The modern attempt to dominate truth has given way within sectors of the church to the postmodern rejection of truth itself. Indeed, in many denominations and churches, notions of orthodoxy and heresy have become "conceptual emptiness." The boundaries have vanished. The very possibility of heresy is dismissed in many circles within mainline Protestantism, and many evangelicals seem to have no better grasp of the moral imperative to honor the truth and to oppose error. Matters of truth and falsehood are not matters of moral indifference to the Christian church. We are to contend for the faith, and the love of the truth is an essential mark of the believer. An attitude of indifference, whether based in postmodern deconstructionist theory or simple epistemological apathy, is a scandal to the gospel and a looming threat to the church.

Christians are called to love the truth and refute error, not in a spirit of pride and vindictiveness, but in a spirit of humility and faithfulness. Our responsibility is clear, as articulated well by Blaise Pascal: "It is as much a crime to disturb the peace when truth prevails as it is to keep the peace when truth is violated. There is therefore a time in which peace is justified and another time when it is not justifiable. For it is written that there is a time for peace and a time for war and it is the law of truth that distinguishes the two. But at no time is there a time for truth and a time for error, for it is written that God's truth shall abide forever. That is why Christ has said that He has come to bring peace and at the same time that He has come to bring the sword. But He does not say that He has come to bring both the truth and falsehood."

The secularization of mainline Protestantism and the dominant theological academy is evident in the evisceration of the Christian truth-claim at the hands of theologians and church leadership. Virtually no doctrinal essential has been left untouched, no truth left intact, no creed or confession defended against compromise. Increasingly—in the name of pluralism, tolerance, inclusivity, and sensitivity—all that is solid appears indeed to melt into air.

And yet the tragedy is not limited to mainline liberal Protestantism. The modern secular worldview is increasingly apparent within evangelicalism as well. An aversion to doctrinal Christianity has been growing for several decades, along with an increasing intolerance for doctrinal and confessional accountability. Evangelicals have embraced the technologies of modernity, often without recognizing that these technologies have claimed the role of master rather than servant.

The ubiquitous culture of consumerism and materialism has seduced many evangelicals into a ministry mode driven by marketing rather than mission. To an ever greater extent, evangelicals are accommodating themselves to moral compromise in the name of lifestyle and choice. Authentic biblical worship is often supplanted by the entertainment culture as issues of performance and taste displace the simplicity and God-centeredness of true worship.

Voices within and without warn of a crisis of truth among evangelicals. Theologian David Wells argues that modernity has left virtually “no place for truth.” Sociologists have traced the increasingly secular message of evangelical preaching and the triumph of the autonomous self over theological concerns in evangelical piety. James Davison Hunter has traced and projected the pattern of “cognitive bargaining” by which the younger generation of evangelical intellectuals is increasingly forfeiting biblical orthodoxy in the face of academic hostility. A candid survey reveals even more ominous signs. Some evangelicals are embracing the radical subjectivity, perspectivalism, dehistoricism, and relativism of the postmodernist academy. In the name of a paradigm shift, the claim to objective truth has itself been forfeited by some evangelicals. Book and chapter titles such as *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used To Be* and “There’s No Such Thing as Objective Truth and It’s a Good Thing, Too” serve notice that postmodernism is not merely a problem external to evangelicalism.

Indeed, evidence of the embrace of relativistic, subjectivistic, perspectival, privatistic, and constructivist theories of truth is widespread among evangelicals. In the name of narrative some have discarded propositions, and are thus unable or unwilling to make any statement of propositional truth. In the name of pluralism some have excluded the existence of absolute truth, and have thus abdicated the foundation of Christian truth, only to land in various relativisms. In the name of perspectivalism, some have rejected the unity of truth and embraced unconditional subjectivity. In order to gain distance from “foundationalism,” many evangelicals have abandoned the foundation.

Evangelicals are faced with a stark choice: either to join the postmodern descent into a truthless, foundationless confusion, or to stand with conviction on the truth of God’s Word. Of course the glory of God can never be captured in propositional statements; but neither can it be denied that the God’s glory is seen in the propositional form of Christianity’s revealed truth claims. Christians understand truth to be more than propositional, but never less than propositional. Jesus died for sinners. He rose from the dead. And He is coming again to judge the world. Make no mistake—when those truths are reduced by postmodern anti-propositionalism, what remains is something less than biblical Christianity.

