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Some ideas *when* considering the question: "Is Objective Truth Possible?"

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"A present day teacher of philosophy doesn't select food for his pupil with the aim of flattering his taste, but with the aim of changing it." (Ludwig Wittgenstein *Culture and Value*, 1980).

"All movements tend to extremes, which is approximately where we are today. The exuberant self-realization that ran from romanticism to modernism has given rise now to philosophical postmodernism (often called poststructuralism, especially in its more political and sociological expressions). Postmodernism is the ultimate polar antithesis of the Enlightenment. The difference between the two extremes can be expressed roughly as follows: Enlightenment thinkers believe we can know everything, and radical postmodernists believe we can know nothing. . . ."

"Reality, they propose, is a state constructed by the mind, not perceived by it. In the most extravagant version of this constructivism, there is no "real" reality, no objective truths external to mental activity, only prevailing versions disseminated by ruling social groups. Nor can ethics be firmly grounded, given that each society creates its own codes for the benefit of the same oppressive forces" (Edward O. Wilson, *Free Inquiry* Fall, 1998).

Christians are called not only to believe certain truths for themselves, but also to make those truth claims known to lost humanity. This explains why Christians in particular are interested in the idea of truth. Traditionally, Christians have claimed that the Bible is a word from God—Truth. However, Christians are not the only ones interested in epistemology. The idea of knowing truth and determining what is truth, has occupied the western mind at least since Socrates. Philosophically, the study of how we know is called epistemology. Whereas we all make certain belief claims and argue that we know something, the fact is, this matter of knowing is not without its complications. In fact, epistemology has a rather turbulent history, especially since the Enlightenment. What I offer here is not a critique of postmodernism in its entirety, but a critique of what the postmodernists refer to as their anti-epistemology and anti-realism.

Beginning with the 17th Century a vigorous search for certainty began (the reasons for this are discussed in workshop #2). As the search continued, it became rather clear that, given Enlightenment assumptions, the search for epistemological certainty was going to be far more difficult than initially thought. In fact, by the latter half of the 20th century, many were concluding that the search should be called off because absolute truth did not exist. This movement is known as postmodernism. However, by the end of the 20th century, a growing number of intellectuals (especially from the hard sciences) judged the conclusions of postmodernism regarding modernity unacceptable. This has led to a movement suggesting a return to the Enlightenment project with one change—conclusions of Reason are to be held tentatively. In less than 300 hundred years, the western mind has come almost full circle.

In order to understand why the epistemological search landed where it did and the present state of the search, it is necessary to take a brief look at the history of epistemology in the western world beginning with the 17th century.

A Little History¹

Beginning with the 17th century (interestingly, the century following the Reformation), the issue occupying the western mind centered in epistemology. The key question of epistemology is that of certainty and how one might justify or legitimize a truth claim. Descartes and Bacon, for example, were convinced certainty of knowledge about *nature* was possible (knowledge of religious claims was not in question). They each posited what they believed to be the sure path to epistemological certainty. Gassendi, a moderate skeptic, had much less confidence in what man could know.

One can see this in the works of Bacon, Gassendi, and Descartes. Bacon thought his *new method* would lead to epistemological certainty about this world. Because of this, he thought that science could restore man's dominion over creation while religion restored man's relationship with God. Gassendi, who thought Bacon promised too much, tended to keep science and religion in separate epistemological compartments. Descartes, who would not quote from any before him, was sure his foundationalism (clear and distinct ideas) would lead to certainty beginning with systematic doubt. Descartes, however, more importantly, split knowledge into two spheres (quite unintentionally I think). This is what I will call the two-circle theory of truth.

Descartes expressed this clearly when he wrote, "Having thus provided myself with these maxims, and having put them on one side along with the truths of faith, which have always held first place in my belief, I judged that, as for the rest of my opinion, I was free to undertake to divest myself of them."² In other words, *faith-truths* were not under scrutiny as they needed no certification of truthfulness—they were just true because they were grounded in the Bible. However, by placing *faith-truths* in a separate circle, he was also saying something about their grounding, and hence their importance in terms of understanding nature. It must be remembered that Descartes was a believer in God. Up until this point, *nature-truths* and *faith-truths* were both related to knowledge

¹ Historical perspective is important, as many who are in the conversation today are not always well informed on historical development of ideas, as intellectual history does not have much of a place in a postmodern age.

² Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method and the Meditations*, trans. F. E. Sutcliffe (London: Penguin Books, 1968), 49.

about God. There was one truth which connected the two spheres—heaven and nature. This view was represented by the two-book notion where both natural revelation and special revelation pointed in the same direction. Now, this changes because the two-circle theory involves two directions—either towards God or towards nature. By placing *faith-truth* in a separate circle, what Descartes intended as a safe thing, led to just the opposite. This would become evident in the 20th Century.

In time, the two-circle theory of truth would be thought of as two different kinds of knowledge, requiring different ways of knowing or justification. There was one way for knowing matters of nature and the other for matters of faith. This was seemingly innocuous epistemologically and wise personally—do not place Reason over Revelation, just separate the two. The force of this move did not become evident as long as God's truth was assumed as a self-justifying truth (for whatever reason). However, later, as nature became everything and God was eviscerated from cultural thought, epistemology began to look quite different. At first, the two-circle theory of truth simply looked at *faith-truths* and *nature-truths* as different kinds of knowledge requiring different forms of justification. Then, as *nature-truths* moved to center stage (because science was put on a new track by Bacon), *faith-truths* were assigned a different epistemological status. With the ascendancy of the naturalistic worldview, there was the loss of the universal. God ceased to be a part of reality, so knowledge of Him was rather a moot point. Working only with the particulars, epistemology finally concluded the search for certainty could be called off, as there was no 'God's eye' view of things. This seems to be precisely where a person would end up if there were no transcendent being.

The cry of the Enlightenment was freedom for reason. Immanuel Kant said, "For enlightenment of this kind, all that is needed is *freedom*. And the freedom in question is the most innocuous form of all—freedom to make *public use* of one's reason in all matters. But I hear on all sides the cry: *Don't argue!* The officer says: Don't argue, get on parade! The tax-official: Don't argue, pay! The clergyman: Don't argue, believe."³ Reason needed to be freedom from anything that did not rest on reason.

At this point, no one was advocating atheism, only that Reason was the path to truth. This meant there was no knowable truth "out there" which gave a standard by which to measure the truthfulness of knowledge claims teased out of nature. Edward O. Wilson notes, "The Enlightenment, defiantly secular in orientation while indebted and attentive to theology, had brought the Western mind to the threshold of a new freedom. It waved aside everything, every form of religious and civil authority, every imaginable fear, to give precedence to the ethic of free inquiry."⁴ In other words, revelation (the Bible) is only about *faith-truth* and eventually the idea of truth would be dropped leaving only faith.

The eventual naturalistic assumption of the Enlightenment left it epistemologically castrated. It was not its belief in the powers of man's reason, but that Reason was the ultimate epistemological arbitrator. This is to say, that Reason stood alone providing man with the privileged position by which all truth claims could be

³ Immanuel Kant, *An Answer to the Question: What is the Enlightenment?* in *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, ed. Lawrence Cahoon, (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 53.

⁴ Edward O. Wilson, "Back to the Enlightenment: We Must Know, We Will Know," *Free Inquiry* Fall 1998, *Questia*, 28 Apr. 2004 <<http://www.questia.com/>>.

measured as true or false. As Henry May (a true modernist) point out, “[t]he Enlightenment consists of all those who believe two propositions: first, that the present age is more enlightened than the past; and second, that we understand nature and man best through the use of our natural faculties.”⁵ He continues, “All are excluded, that is, who think that the surest guide for human beings is revelation, tradition, or illumination.”⁶ In time, the Enlightenment carried Descartes’ two-circle theory of truth to its logical conclusion. Denying revelation any place in the epistemological discourse left man with only Reason as the final appeal for adjudication in knowledge claims. Furthermore, conversation was restricted to a discussion of the particulars by themselves. This was true whether the knowledge disputes involved political, ethical or religious statements.

However, fatigued by unsatisfactory results in the search for Truth, many philosophers moved the discussion to language itself. In time, this also proved problematic. In due course, some philosophers called off the search for some totalizing metanarrative that could bring certainty of knowledge. For them, certainty was impossible because Truth and Reality did not exist. There is no “God’s eye” knowledge of things, universals do not exist, and there is no essence of the thing itself. This new position known as Postmodernism confessed that the emperor had no clothes and modernity is not just a failure, it is a lie told in the name of political and ethical terrorism. Ironically, what started out as a search for certainty culminated in naïve skepticism for many in the humanities and social sciences. This is not true, however, of those in the hard sciences, as reflected in the writings of Edward O. Wilson.⁷

There seems to be little doubt that the modern project promised more than it could deliver epistemologically.⁸ The key question, however, concerns naming precisely the causal factor (or factors) for this outcome. What should occupy our attention is not that it failed, but on what grounds did it fail? Is it because, as Paul Kurtz posits that “Its view of Reason as an absolute rather than as a tentative and fallible instrument of human purpose was overdrawn?”⁹ Or was it the ontological assumptions of modernity that subverted modernity’s best of intentions? Has postmodernism only taken the ontological assumption of modernity to its logical conclusions? Prior to assessing post modernity’s view of truth in general and its relationship to Christianity in particular, one needs to consider these questions.

The postmodernist sees the epistemological lapse in modernity’s confidence in legitimizing truth-value claims by reason. While post modernity’s challenge of modernity at this point seems right, unfortunately it fails to understand the cure because it misdiagnosed the ailment of the Enlightenment. Consequently, it attempts a solution to modernity while maintaining the two crippling assumptions of modernity. One is the

⁵ Henry May, *The Enlightenment in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), xiv.

⁶ *Ibid.*, xiv.

⁷ Edward O. Wilson is a premier biologist at Harvard who has authored two Pulitzer Prize-winning books, *On Human Nature* (1978) and *The Ants* (1990, with Bert H. Olden) and is the recipient of numerous fellowships, honors, and awards. His 1998 book, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* and his signature to the *Humanist Manifesto 2000* testify to the disavowal of postmodernism by the hard sciences.

⁸ We must be clear that science during the age of Modernity has achieved much in terms of technology and medical advancements. When discussing this issue, we must be precise on what is being challenged by the postmodernists. We are not putting everything from the Enlightenment on the scrap heap.

⁹ Paul Kurtz (drafter), *Humanist Manifesto 2000* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2000), 23.

epistemological assumption regarding revelation and the other is the corollary assumption of naturalism. Both of these led to the epistemological impotence of modernity.

Post modernity, however, fares no better, nor will post post modernity. In Paul Kurtz's critique of post modernism's failures and his case for returning to the Enlightenment he writes, "Scientific naturalism holds a form of nonreductive materialism; natural processes and events are best accounted for by reference to material causes."¹⁰ The affirmation is that "Scientific naturalism enables human beings to construct a coherent worldview disentangled from metaphysics or theology and based on the sciences."¹¹ Edward O. Wilson speaking for post post modernism writes, "Science offers the boldest metaphysics of the age. It is a thoroughly human construct, driven by the faith that if we dream, press to discover, explain, and dream again, thereby plunging repeatedly into new terrain, the world will somehow come clearer and we will grasp the true strangeness of the universe."¹² Working from the two-circle theory of truth, both post modernism and post post modernism fail to see the fundamental flaw in Enlightenment epistemology. Post modernity simply gives up the notion of some totalizing metanarratives, while post post modernity believes it can still be done legitimately from science with some modifications of modernity.

One can also find a critique of postmodern in an edited work titled *After Postmodernism: An Introduction to Critical Realism*.¹³ However, as long as the assumptions of the Enlightenment remain the starting point, then there is little hope to move beyond the present epistemological stalemate. What is obvious at this point is that for all the protest against foundationalism, postmodernism itself has its own foundational belief—this is a naturalistic closed universe. In a naturalistic universe, or "time-bound" universe there is no possibility of revelation—truth from "out there". One could argue that the major point of critique of postmodernism (and post postmodernism) is its *a priori* commitment to naturalism with its corollary dismissal of the possibility of revelation in an objective inscripturated format (something firmly believed by the Reformers). The privileged position of Reason-based truth claims is rightly challenged by postmodernists. However, their critique is not based on the epistemological mistake of the Enlightenment, but on what the postmodernists viewed as modernity's resulting political and ethical totalitarian terrorizing imperatives.

The Postmodernist's Position

Probably many of us are a little tired of all the talk about postmodernism these days. However, unfortunately some of the conclusions of postmodernism have been accepted by many in different fields including Christianity. The underlying assumptions of post modernity have gone unnoticed. Personally, I think postmodernism is on the decline, however, I think it will cast a long shadow over epistemology in the decades to come. Furthermore, it seems possible to appreciate some of postmodernism's critique of modernity without accepting postmodernism's foundationalist assumptions.

¹⁰ Paul Kurtz (drafter), *Humanist Manifesto 2000* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2000), 25.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹² Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (New York: Alfred A. Knoff, Inc., 1998), 12.

¹³ Jose Lopez and Gary Potter, eds. *After Postmodernism: An Introduction to Critical Realism* (London: The Athlone Press, 2001).

According to Lawrence Cahoon, the term “postmodernism” was first used by the German philosopher Rudolf Pannwitz to describe the ‘nihilism’ of twentieth-century Western culture. However, he says, “In philosophy it came in the 1980s to refer primarily to French poststructuralist philosophy, and secondarily to a general reaction against modern rationalism, utopianism, and what came to be called ‘foundationalism,’ the attempt to establish the foundations of knowledge and judgment. . . .”¹⁴ It is this latter notion of postmodernism as an epistemological concern that is most discussed today.

Jean-François Lyotard says, “Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives. The incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it.”¹⁵ Further he states, “Postmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable. Its principle is not the expert’s homology, but the inventor’s paralogy.”¹⁶ Charles Jencks writes, “One of the keys to the Post-Modern world will be a change in epistemology, the understanding of knowledge and how it grows and relates to other assumptions. Not only will it emphasise [*sic*] continuities of nature, but the time-bound, cultural nature of knowledge. . . . It will not embrace an absolute relativism and contend that one scientific hypothesis is as good as another, or as Jean-François Lyotard has argued, a complete scepticism [*sic*] and an end to all master narratives and beliefs. Rather, it will support relative absolutism, or fragmented holism, which insists on the developing and jumping nature of scientific growth, and the fact that all propositions of truth are time-and context-sensitive.”¹⁷

Richard Tarnas writes, “Properly speaking, therefore, there is no ‘postmodern world view’, nor the possibility of one. The postmodern paradigm is by its nature fundamentally subversive of all paradigms, for at its core is the awareness of reality as being at once multiple, local, and temporal, and without demonstrable foundation.”¹⁸ Furthermore, Tarnas admiringly points out, “There is an appreciation of the plasticity and constant change of reality and knowledge, a stress on the priority of concrete experience over fixed abstract principles, and a conviction that no single a priori thought system should govern belief or investigation. It is recognized that human knowledge is subjectively determined by a multitude of factors; that objective essences, or thing-in-themselves, are neither accessible nor positable; and that the value of all truths and assumptions must be constantly subjected to direct testing. The critical search for truth is constrained to be tolerant of ambiguity and pluralism, and its outcome will necessarily be knowledge that is relative and fallible rather than absolute and certain.”¹⁹ Understandably, Wilson’s anti-postmodernism critique claims that, “The philosophical

¹⁴ Lawrence Cahoon, ed. *From Modernism to Postmodernism* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 3.

¹⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* in *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, ed. Lawrence Cahoon, (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 482.

¹⁶ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* in *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, ed. Lawrence Cahoon, (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 483.

¹⁷ Charles Jencks, *What is Post-Modernism?* in *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, ed. Lawrence Cahoon, (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 478.

¹⁸ Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind* (New York: Ballantine, 1993), 401.

¹⁹ Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind* (New York: Ballantine, 1993), 395-6.

postmodernists, a rebel crew milling beneath the black flag of anarchy, challenge the very foundations of science and traditional philosophy."²⁰ One would expect this harsh criticism from someone in the hard sciences, but that does not necessarily de-legitimize the critique itself.

Richard Rorty writes, "Furthermore, my views—especially my scorn for the correspondence theory of truth and for the claim that the natural scientist gets closer to the way things are in themselves than the carpenter, the moralist, or the literary critic—are sometimes described as 'postmodernist'."²¹ Echoing Tarnas's view of postmodernism, Rorty explains, "The academic disciplines are not, and are not supposed to be, 'reflections of the real world.' They are supposed to provide ways of doing things in the real world, of reweaving the great seamless causal web so that various human purposes might be accomplished. Reality is one, but descriptions of it are many. They ought to be many, for human beings have, and ought to have, many different purposes."²²

Rorty chides the realists and then casts his lot with the pragmatist (Rorty acknowledges himself as a neo pragmatist). He writes, "They [pragmatists with which Rorty identifies] view truth as, in William James' phrase, what is good for *us* to believe. So they do not need an account of a relation between beliefs and objects called 'correspondence,' nor an account of human cognitive abilities which ensures that our species is capable of entering into that relation. They see the gap between truth and justification not as something to be bridged by isolating a natural and transcultural sort of rationality which can be used to criticize certain cultures and praise of others, but simply as a gap between the actual good and the possible better."²³

It is understandable that those who critique postmodernism often associate it with relativism. Rorty argues that this is not a fair caricature of postmodernism's view of truth. He explains:

"Relativism" is a traditional epithet applied to pragmatism by realists. Three different views are commonly referred to by this name. The first is the view that every belief is as good as every other. The second is the view that 'true' is an equivocal term, having as many meanings as there are procedures of justification. The third is the view that there is nothing to be said about either truth or rationality apart from the descriptions of the familiar procedures of justification which a given society—ours—uses in one or another area of inquiry. The pragmatist holds the ethnocentric third view. But he does not hold the self-refuting first view, nor the eccentric second view. He thinks that his views are better than the realists', but he does not think that his views correspond to the nature of things. He thinks that the very flexibility of the word "true"—the fact that

²⁰ Edward O. Wilson, "Back to the Enlightenment: We Must Know, We Will Know," Free Inquiry Fall 1998, *Questia*, 28 Apr. 2004 <<http://www.questia.com/>>.

²¹ Edward O. Wilson, Richard Rorty, and Paul R. Gross, "Is Everything Relative?: A Debate on the Unity of Knowledge," *The Wilson Quarterly*, Wntr 1998 [database on-line]; available from *Questia*, <http://www.questia.com/>; Internet; accessed 7 April 2004.

²² Edward O. Wilson, Richard Rorty, and Paul R. Gross, "Is Everything Relative?: A Debate on the Unity of Knowledge," *The Wilson Quarterly*, Wntr 1998 [database on-line]; available from *Questia*, <http://www.questia.com/>; Internet; accessed 7 April 2004.

²³ Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity" in *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, ed. Lawrence Cahoon, (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 575.

it is merely an expression of commendation—insures its univocity. The term “true,” on his account, means the same in all cultures, just as equally flexible terms like “here,” “there,” “good,” “bad,” “you,” and “me” mean the same in all cultures. But the identity of meaning is, of course, compatible with diversity of reference, and with diversity of procedures for assigning the terms. So he feels free to use the term “true” as a general term of commendation in the same way as his realist opponent does—and in particular to use it to commend his own view.²⁴

He thinks that the cry of relativism is simply a “red herring. The realist is, once again, projecting his own habits of thought upon the pragmatist when he charges him with relativism.”²⁵

Rorty is clear on how the postmodernist uses terms like knowledge and truth. He says, “For the pragmatist, by contrast, ‘knowledge’ is, like ‘truth’ simply a compliment paid to the beliefs which we think so well justified that, for the moment, further justification is not needed.”²⁶ There are no universals and names we give are only descriptions of the way things are used. Rorty, argues that “Human beings, like computers, dogs, and works of art, can be described in lots of different ways, depending on what you want to do with them—take them apart for repairs, re-educate them, play with them, admire them, and so on for a long list of alternative purposes. None of these descriptions is closer to what human beings really are than any of the others. Descriptions are tools invented for particular purposes, not attempts to describe things as they are in themselves, apart from any such purposes.”²⁷

While, postmodernism’s controversy with modernity is sweeping, it nonetheless, retains modernity’s naturalistic ontological assumption. Therefore, postmodernism denies any totalizing metanarratives and affirms a perspectival epistemology. Furthermore, post modernity discounts the notion of essences and sees no distinction between opinion and knowledge. Consequently, they claim there is not such thing as a correspondence theory of truth as there is no privileged position from which knowledge statements can be judged as either true or false. It does seem, however, that if there are no universals, no transcendent being who is truth and has revealed Himself to man, then this is precisely where the discussion must end. All that is left is little narratives. No truth from “out there” because there is no reality “out there”—no fixed truth. Man is time bound, or in a closed system that is silent. No one outside nature speaks for nature, so man is free to put words in nature’s mouth.

It is in this context that the Church must be a witness. How should it approach the task of witnessing to the postmodern mind? Unfortunately there is a rather wide range of opinions on this issue. The fact that postmodernism disavows any metanarratives, no “truth from out there” is of concern to Christians. Christianity is a religion of revelation. Not just revelation in a general sense, but in a very specific way in that the revelation has been put in an inscripturated format. The very message the

²⁴ Richard Rorty, “Solidarity or Objectivity” in *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, ed. Lawrence Cahoon, (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 576.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 582.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 577.

²⁷ Edward O. Wilson, Richard Rorty, and Paul R. Gross, "Is Everything Relative?: A Debate on the Unity of Knowledge," *The Wilson Quarterly*, Wntr 1998 [database on-line]; available from Questia, <http://www.questia.com/>; Internet; accessed 7 April 2004.

Church has is in a written form that claims to be from God, who is there. Furthermore, historically the Church has believed its message to be a message of truth, and whatever contradicted it was false. Postmodernism's critique of modernity is right to a point—with reason at the helm, there can be no talk of fixed truth.

Christian Responses to Postmodernism

The following is not a critique of individuals. The purpose is to show what the Christian view of truth looks like when it is subjected to the postmodern anti-epistemological paradigm. Millard Erickson has edited a volume titled, *Postmodernizing the Faith*. He provides the two extreme positions of the evangelical response to the challenge of postmodernism. Three authors “basically contend that the contemporary trends known as postmodernism are incompatible with genuine Christian faith and therefore must be rejected. The latter three believe that postmodernism is a development that needs to be accepted, and incorporate at least some of its tenets.”²⁸ In the concluding chapter, Erickson offers a somewhat of a middle-of-the-road approach. He asks the question: “Can Deconstructed Horses Even Be Led to Water?” He thinks the answer is that we must use deconstructed rope, that is, our method must be relevant to the situation. Further, he thinks that we must de-deconstruct the horse, that is, to show the deconstructed horse that it is impossible to live the postmodern way.

During the April 7-8, 1994, the annual Wheaton Theology Conference titled “Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World: Strategies for the Local Church” addressed contemporary issues facing the Church on how to convince the postmodernists of the truth of the Gospel. This is an interesting volume that presents different Christian apologetic approaches to the postmodern mind. A number attending, including James Sire, David Wells, and Os Guinness think, “[M]uch of the evangelical church is more concerned to convince ‘cultural despisers’ of the relevance of the church than the truth of the gospel.”²⁹ On the other hand, there is the position, as also represented in Erickson's book, that maintains postmodernism is a development that needs to be accepted by Christians as a way to reach the postmodern mind.

The article from the Wheaton Conference that most forthrightly advocates this position is the article by Philip Kenneson, titled “There Is No Such Thing As Objective Truth and It's a Good Thing, Too”. Kenneson celebrates the postmodern attack on objective truth and the correspondence theory of truth and is followed timidly by Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh. This article characterizes the thinking that postmodernism has it right concerning truth and the Christian community would be better off the sooner it falls in step with that view. After criticizing the correspondence theory of truth, Kenneson writes: “In short, because I have neither a theory of truth nor an epistemology, I cannot have a relativistic one of either. My point is that Christians need not continue to answer ‘the truth question,’ and the sooner we see that we needn't, the sooner we can get on with the business of being Christians which in no way entails

²⁸ Millard Erickson, *Postmodernizing the Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 20.

²⁹ Timothy Phillips and Dennis Okholm, eds. *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World* (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 1995), 11.

accepting a certain philosophical account of truth, justification and ‘reality’.”³⁰ He denies “something called Truth is ‘out there’ waiting to be discovered or represented in language.”³¹ He frequently quotes Rorty in defense of his position. Kenneson says that “within such a model, the church has a word to speak to the world not because it has a message that is objectively true, a message which could be separated from the embodied message that the church always is. Rather, the church has a word to speak to the world because it embodies an alternative politics, an alternative way of ordering human life made possible by Jesus Christ.”³² However, he further states, “I realize there are plenty of Christians who think it makes good sense to say that the proposition ‘Jesus Christ is Lord of the universe’ is objectively true; that is, our temptation is to insist that this is simply true whether we or anyone else believe it or not. But succumbing to such a temptation is deadly for the church. There is no place to stand and judge this statement as true per se. There is no view from nowhere. But neither should we say that such a statement is just one opinion among others, for such a view would also require a view from nowhere. . . . We know who Jesus is only on the basis of human witnesses to the history of God’s dealings with God’s people, which is mediated to us, not objectively, but through communities of human beings animated by the Holy Spirit.”³³ Truth is community related, according to Kenneson, and one community has no justification for claiming its view as correct—the view that corresponds to reality.

Two other Christian theologians who share, at least in part, sympathies with Kenneson are Stanley Grenz and John Franke. They argue that the church must “take seriously the postmodern critique of Enlightenment foundationalism and must capitalize on the attempts of philosophers to formulate alternatives.”³⁴ This reflects his dislike for foundationalism because of its claim for objective truth. Furthermore, Stanley and Franke maintain there is no “one-to-one correspondence between the revelation of God and the Bible, that is, between the Word of God and the words of Scripture.”³⁵ Scripture is important, but it is only a vehicle through which the Spirit brings to the community a word from God. He writes, “If the final authority in the church is the Holy Spirit speaking through scripture, then theology’s norming norm is the message the Spirit declares through the text. The Spirit does not address this message to us by means of a double discourse that centers on what the biblical author said (not merely *intended* to say) by authoring the text, as Wolterstorff suggests. Rather—to push Wolterstorff’s own terminology further—the Spirit speaks by ‘appropriating’ the biblical text itself.”³⁶ The Holy Spirit is the final authority, not the scriptures. So, a Christian should not point to the scriptures in any objective way and claim that the propositional statements are the Word of God. He writes, “The Pauline statement to Timothy suggests that through scripture, the Spirit teaches, reprovcs, corrects, and instructs (2 Tim. 3:16). Also, through the text

³⁰ Philip Kenneson, “There Is No Such Thing As Objective Truth, And It’s A Good Thing, Too,” in Timothy Phillips and Dennis Okholm, eds. *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World* (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 1995), 161.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 159.

³² *Ibid.*, 162.

³³ *Ibid.*, 167.

³⁴ Stanley Grenz and John Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 46.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.

the Spirit offers divine promises and calls us to respond to the grace available through Christ.”³⁷ One is not sure how there is any dependable beginning point for theology which is necessary in discerning what the Spirit is saying: “In the process of listening to the Spirit speaking through the appropriated text, theology assists the community of faith both in discerning what the Spirit is saying and in fostering an appropriate obedient response to the Spirit’s voice.”³⁸ In fact, the scriptures have no unique quality; they do not give a privileged position from which to make truth claims. He notes, “In chapter 3 we suggested that the authority of scripture does not ultimately rest with any quality that inheres in the text itself but with the work of the Spirit who speaks in and through the text. Scripture is authoritative because it is the vehicle through which the Spirit speaks. That is to say, the authority of the Bible is ultimately the authority of the Spirit whose instrumentality it is.”³⁹ Further they criticize conservative systematic theologies that claim “revelation is inscripturated in the Bible, which now functions as its inerrant repository.”⁴⁰ However, they do believe God works in time. Seemingly, that would challenge the naturalistic assumption of postmodernism on which it builds its anti-epistemology view. If God is there, then the question that naturally follows is why there is no fixed truth. In the end, Kenneson, Grenz and Franke are less than convincing as to why we should jettison the notion of a fixed truth. Furthermore, it appears the criticism against their position as being relativistic requires more of an answer than has been given.

Nancy Murphy posits a more moderating paradigm for doing theology within the natural order of things aimed at encouraging ecumenism. She distinguishes her notion of postmodernism from that which is associated with Continental schools of thought. She believes they shared too much of modernity to count as truly postmodern (I think postmodern as a whole is more modern than it would like to admit). Instead, she builds on what she refers to as the Anglo-American postmodernism (it seems that most of the theologians work off this paradigm). Murphy writes, “If we want a handy date to mark the beginning of the end of the modern period, I suggest 1951. It was the date of publication of W. V. O. Quine’s ‘Two Dogmas of Empiricism,’ a highly respected article calling into question tow of the positions necessary for a foundationalist account of knowledge.”⁴¹ Interestingly enough, Murphy still talks about a postmodern worldview and hopes that the new worldview will provide “fresh approaches to issues of method, to conceptions of the nature of the theological task. And these new approaches ought to form more of a continuum or spectrum of theological options than a dichotomy.”⁴² She argues for a systematic theology text that does not begin with “prolegomena called ‘theological foundations.’”⁴³ In this, she proposes a both/and approach to theology (Scripture and experience) but maintains, “Scripture has its authoritative and ineliminable role in the tradition as the formative text.”⁴⁴ Still, it is a position that shrinks

³⁷ Ibid., 75.

³⁸ Ibid., 75.

³⁹ Ibid., 114-5.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 233-4.

⁴¹ Nancy Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 87.

⁴² Ibid., 154.

⁴³ Ibid., 152.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 154.

back from the conclusions of the correspondence theory of truth. Murphy wants to keep divine action as a viable reality within nature. She thinks that it is reasonable to hold God as the Creator giving theology a proper place within the understanding of the cosmos. She writes, "The critical issue is to avoid reducing God to a mere physical cause, yet to find ways of recognizing that God's intentional action can bring about events above and beyond what could be accomplished merely by holding the (lower level) natural processes and causes in existence."⁴⁵ However, she admits that there are still two pressing problems that must be addressed: "(1) solution to the second-order epistemological question; (2) making good on the promise of new views of science, causality, and the relations among the disciplines for the purpose of integrating theological accounts of divine action with knowledge of the world."⁴⁶ If the postmodernist view of truth is correct, it does raise some questions about the qualitative nature of the Bible. Furthermore, it raises questions regarding whether the church has anything meaningful to say to its culture once it has culture's ear. If the correspondence theory of truth is bogus, if there is no way to justify belief and one truth claim cannot be determined as truth and another truth claim false, then how does Christianity employ such a view in its responsibility to be a witness to the truth (I Tim. 3:15-16).

What does this mean for the Church

Christians who think that postmodernism's critique of foundationalism is correct and that there is no theory of truth are genuinely concerned about the church and its life in the Spirit. Whereas the postmodernist impulse is rather pervasive in our culture, it is not surprising that most of us have been, to varying degrees, influenced by it. Consequently, it is rather impossible to escape the problem of analyzing postmodernism with a mind that has been shaped by postmodernism—it is the philosophic air we breathe. It seems to me that at least one way to get at this is to consider how the Bible itself reports the use of Scripture. Furthermore, it would be helpful to investigate the writings of the early Church to see how they treat the issue of Scripture in epistemological terms.

The history of the early Church reveals a compulsion to cover the known world with the Gospel message in obedience to its risen Head. This implies that the early Christians believed not all truth claims shared the same epistemic privilege. Paul on Mars Hill (Acts 17) explains a cosmology different from that held by the hearers. He presents a grand metanarrative to explain the world and the way it is. He follows this with a claim for the resurrection that corresponded both to his metanarrative and to the particular event surrounding the empty tomb. He did not accommodate the worldview of those there that day. In fact, a look at all the apologetic narratives in the book of Acts reveals the same thing. The author of the epistle to the Hebrews claims that God confirmed the message of the apostles with signs and wonders (Heb. 3:4). Luke employs such words as "reason," "persuade," "dispute," to characterize the witnessing encounters of the early apostles. This, taken with the extreme measures in going to the pagan world suggests they thought their beliefs were not just better than the pagan beliefs—they thought they were true in that they corresponded to the way things were.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 147.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 156.

When questions arose concerning how to interpret events, if one appealed to Scripture that settled it (Acts 2:37-40). There was an uncontested belief within Judaism that the Scriptures were from God. Jesus often quoted from the Old Testament in answering accusations or making a point because the Jews believed the Scriptures were the final word in matters of truth. Jesus actually spoke of the Scriptures as being the word of God (Mk. 7:9-13). He speaks to the two on the road to Emmaus using the Old Testament to explain the events of the past few days (Lk. 24:44-49). The Apostle Paul said the Old Testament Scriptures were able to make one wise unto salvation and that Scripture is given by inspiration of God (II Tim. 3:14-16). The apostle Peter makes the same claim (II Peter 1:19-21). The Apostle Paul says that there is one Lord, one Faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all" (Eph. 4:4-6) Paul says that if one preach a different Gospel than what he preached, let him be accursed (Gal. 1:8). In other words, there is a true Gospel and a false Gospel.

When we read the early Church fathers, it seems they also have the idea that the Scriptures are truth from God, giving the Scriptures a privileged position epistemologically. For example, consider Irenaus (120-203) "Against Heresies" the Scriptures were considered the truth standard for all other truth claims. He gives mention of the New Testament books mentioning all but two. The same can be found in the writings of Athanasius (298-373) and Athenagoras (Second century).

Considering this testimony, it seems there is reason to believe that Christianity early on held to some idea of universal truth (fixed truth) and that it could be found in the Scriptures. This would appear to include some notion of correspondence view of truth and maybe even a moderate form of foundationalism. Surely, it reveals a commitment to some form of realism. Having said that, what must the Church say about itself in the 20th Century. Has it brought criticism unnecessarily by over stating its case? Maybe there is a sense that postmodernism is giving the Church a Kantian experience, awakening it out of its overstated dogmatic slumbers. But, can the Church give up its belief in the transcendent without sacrificing itself?

I think that maybe Richard Weaver (1910-1963 professor of English at the University of Chicago) said it best. He said, triumph of William of Occam's nominalism "tended to leave universal terms mere names serving our convenience. The issue ultimately involved is whether there is a source of truth higher than, and independent of, man; and the answer to the question is decisive for one's view of nature and destiny of mankind. The practical reality of nominalist philosophy is to banish the reality which is perceived by the intellect and to posit as reality that which is perceived by the senses. With this change in the affirmation of what is real, the whole orientation of culture takes a turn, and we are on the road to modern empiricism. . . . The denial of universals carries with it the denial of everything transcending experience. The denial of everything transcending experience means inevitably—though ways are found to hedge on this—the denial of truth. With the denial of objective truth there is no escape from the relativism of 'man the measure of all things'. . . . Thus began the 'abomination of desolation' appearing today as a feeling of alienation from all fixed truth."⁴⁷ Without fixed truth can a man seriously believe anything?

⁴⁷ Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1948; the paperback edition, 1984 which is quoted here), 4.

In conclusion, it might be helpful to suggest dangers of the postmodernist impulse to the Christian epistemological enterprise, as well as, insights to be gained from postmodernism. I will begin with the dangers. The foundational naturalistic assumption of postmodernism is contrary to Christianity's essential belief—there is no Christianity if God is not there and has not spoken. If, however, there is a transcendent One who has not been silent, then that would have to be a serious part of any epistemology. The denial of objective truth (fixed truth) “out there” reduces truth claims to mental perceptions, making all truth claims equal. If this is so, would this not negatively impact Christian missionary activity and preaching—what would the Christian have to say than to simply offer a suggestion? The anti-realism and rejection of the correspondence theory of truth, makes meaningful discourse little more than intellectual entertainment. When Jesus said, I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life it is merely a statement of opinion.

As for the insights of post modernity, I would suggest the following: (1), it is important to do theology in community, not as Grenz suggests, but beginning with the Bible as the Truth. (2) Living truth is as important as defining truth, something the Church desperately needs to hear. (3) Postmodernism is a clear example of the epistemological cul-de-sac when revelation is denied. (4) Postmodernism is also a reminder to Christians not to overstate their case epistemologically. Finally, maybe coherentists such as Quine have something to offer with his notion of web of beliefs.. Sociologist Peter Berger said something like, he who dines with the devil of modernity must do so with a long handled spoon. I think the same advice is good regarding postmodernism.

Given that, how might the insight of postmodernism and the uniqueness of Christianity be brought together? I think it would look something like first century Christianity. Christians did not sacrifice their epistemological birthright. They believed that God had spoken and they were responsible to live that way. In time, together the proclaiming truth and living truth they made a great difference. I suggest it could be the same for Christians today. We would live our theology grounded in fixed truth in the community of faith and before the world (postmodernism insight) while holding firmly to our epistemological uniqueness. The Church could take a lesson from science in a sense. While holding to its epistemology grounded in the belief there is “truth out there” and just keep living the life that flows from that epistemology. Christians would be humble and measured in their proclamation of the truth without denying the reality of revelation. It appears that this is precisely how the first century Church made such a difference. Just maybe this is the model we should look to for speaking meaningfully to our culture—postmodern or otherwise.

The Question Box

- I. Did the basic witnessing activity of the Church entail the notion that some beliefs correspond to the nature of things certifying those beliefs as true and contrary beliefs necessarily false?
- II. Should the Church accept the epistemological (or anti-epistemological) approach of postmodernism if it is constructed on naturalistic assumptions?
- III. Is there is a difference between claiming objective truth exists and claiming to know truth objectively?
- IV. Do Kenneson and Rorty escape the criticism of relativism?
- V. Must it be either solidarity or objectivity?
- VI. Is the postmodernist's view of mankind naïve?
- VII. Does Christianity seek to explain anything, that is, is it intend to speak to only the individual matters or does it speak to cosmic matters as well?
- VIII. Would Christianity do better at this time siding more with science and investigating where or not some form of critical realism is not more promising than postmodernism, especially in light of the growing criticism of