

## Are You Sure?

The Certainty of Truth in  
a Postmodern World

### David Wells in *Table Talk*

- Are there moral absolutes?
- General population
  - 22 % - yes
  - 64 % - no
- Teenagers
  - 83 % - no
  - 6 % - yes

### Nov. 2004, *Christianity Today*

- Rob Bell and his wife, Kristen
- The author of the article writes that the Bells “found themselves increasingly uncomfortable with church. ‘Life in the church had become so small,’ Kristen says. ‘It had worked for me for a long time. Then it stopped working.’ The Bells started questioning their assumptions about the Bible itself—‘discovering the Bible as a human product,’ as Rob puts it, ‘rather than the product of divine fiat.’

### Nov. 2004, *Christianity Today*

- ‘The Bible is still the center for us,’ Rob says, ‘but it’s a different kind of center. We want to embrace mystery, rather than conquer it.’ ‘I grew us thinking that we’ve figured out the Bible,’ Kristen says, ‘that we knew what it means. Now I have no idea what most of it means. And yet I feel like life is big again—like life used to be black and white, and now it’s in color.’”

## A Brief History of Ideas

- In the world
  - Epistemology = study of knowledge.
    - What is knowledge?
    - How we know what we know?
  - Three stages in human history
    - 1) Pre-modern epistemology
    - 2) Modern epistemology
    - 3) Postmodern epistemology

### Pre-modern

- From creation—1500s
- Nearly universal agreement: knowledge depends on divine revelation.
- Knowledge or truth is based on the authority of God’s revelation.
  - in nature
  - in the Bible

## Modern

- Began in 1610.
- Period known as the Enlightenment
- From the early 1600s until the early 1970s

## The Philosophers

- Descartes:
  - We come to the truth not through revelation but through human reason (rationalism).
  - One starts with a few self-evident, foundational truths (foundationalism) and builds the rest of knowledge on that foundation.
- Locke:
  - We acquire knowledge of what is true only through the senses and observation (empiricism).

## The Philosophers

- Immanuel Kant:
  - Combined rationalism and empiricism.
  - But with his book, Critique of Pure Reason, Kant made it fashionable to doubt that we can truly know reality as it is.
  - Knowledge is really just a matter of interpretation.

## Modernity

- The belief that truth exists.
- And the only reliable way to know it is through the scientific method.
  - The use of reason
  - The use of the senses

## Post-modern

- Began with the writings of Michael Foucault (foo-KO; 1926-84).
  - Embraced a fragmented view of reality
  - Morley's summary: "There is no single correct view of the world, but countless views that are correct in their own way."

## The Philosophers

- Jacques Derrida (1930- )
  - Even words are unpredictable for communication.
  - Meanings are always changing.
  - He raised doubts about the 3 foundations of logic since Aristotle recorded them 2500 years before:
    - The law of identity - a thing is what it is ( $A = A$ )
    - The law of non-contradiction - a proposition and its denial cannot both be true. (A cannot be A and non-A at the same time and same relationship)
    - The law of the excluded middle - a proposition must be either true or false.

## The Philosophers

- Richard Rorty & Stanley Fish
  - The meaning of a text depends entirely upon the community's interpretation.
  - When the community changes the interpretation changes.
- Jean-Francois Lyotard (1924- )
  - Rejected "metanarratives" - unifying theories of universal meaning.
  - The overarching explanations of life are not the truth but rather simply grow out of religion, conventional philosophy, capitalism, and gender.
  - Grenz: "scholars disagree among themselves as to what postmodernism involves, but they have reached a consensus on one point: this phenomenon marks the end of a single, universal worldview."

## Post-modernism

- Post-modernism is a label for the prevailing intellectual mood and perspective in today's Western society, a perspective that began early in the 1970s.
- Two simple beliefs:
  - 1) You can never be certain of the truth, if truth exists at all.
  - 2) There is no universal explanation or meta-narrative of meaning.
- At its heart postmodernism is a rejection of certainty about anything.

## In the Church

- Academically
  - In 2001 Stanley Grenz and John Franke, wrote a book called *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern World*.
    - They argue that theology is in a constant state of change and that no issue should ever be considered as finally settled.
    - Their major target = certitude.

## In the Church

- Popular level
  - Brian McLaren: *A Generous Orthodoxy*
  - Rob Bell: *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith*
  - Donald Miller: *Blue Like Jazz*

## The Tragic Consequences of Ideas

- Truth is not absolute.
- The Bible is not about propositional truth.
- No one can claim their interpretation of any truth is certain.
- Sin is subjective.
- There is no body of necessary doctrine that must be believed.

## The Biblical Argument for Truth

- Truth?
  - the self-expression of God
  - Two realities
    - 1) God has an eternally-consistent, unchanging nature.
    - 2) God's communications with us always perfectly correspond to His unchanging nature and to reality as He knows it to be true.

## Objective

- 2 Sam. 7:28 - "Now, O Lord GOD, You are God, and Your words are truth, and You have promised this good thing to Your servant.
- Ps. 25:4-5 - Make me know Your ways, O LORD; Teach me Your paths. 5 Lead me in Your truth and teach me, For You are the God of my salvation; For You I wait all the day.
- Ps. 31:5 - Into Your hand I commit my spirit; You have ransomed me, O LORD, God of truth.
- Ps. 119:160 - The sum of Your word is truth, And every one of Your righteous ordinances is everlasting. Shin.

## Objective

- Is. 65:16 - " he who is blessed in the earth Will be blessed by the God of truth.
- John 17:17 - "Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth.
- Acts 26:25 - Paul said, "I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I utter words of sober truth.
- Rom. 1:18-21
- 2 Cor. 4:2 - we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.
- 2 Cor. 7:14 - if in anything I have boasted to him about you, I was not put to shame; but as we spoke all things to you in truth.
- 2 Tim. 2:15 - Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.

## Universal

- Matt. 28:19-20 -"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."
- Acts 1:8 - you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth."
- Rom. 1:13-16
- Rom. 2:12-16
- Rom. 3:9-10 - What then? Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin; 10 as it is written, "THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE;
- Rom. 3:19 - Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God.

## Eternal

- Ps. 119:89 - Forever, O LORD, Your word is settled in heaven.
- Ps. 119:152 - Of old I have known from Your testimonies That You have founded them forever.
- Ps. 119:160 - The sum of Your word is truth, And every one of Your righteous ordinances is everlasting.
- Matt. 24:35 - "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away.
- 1 Pet. 1:25 - BUT THE WORD OF THE LORD ENDURES FOREVER." And this is the word which was preached to you.

## Propositional

- A proposition is "an idea framed as a logical statement that affirms or denies something, and it is expressed in such a way that it must be either true or false."
- "We know that..."

## Propositional

- Rom. 3:19 - Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God;
- Rom. 7:14 - we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin.
- Rom. 8:28 - we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose.
- 1 Cor. 8:4 - Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one.
- 2 Cor. 5:1 - we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

## Certainty!

- Luke 1:3-4 - it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write *it* out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; 4 so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.
- Eph. 5:5 - For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.
- 1 Tim. 4:3 - *men* who forbid marriage *and* *advocate* abstaining from foods which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth.

## Certainty!

- 1 Pet. 1:18-19 - knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, 19 but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, *the blood of Christ*.
- 1 John 2:3 - By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments.
- 1 John 3:2 - Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is.
- 1 John 5:13 - These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.

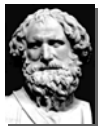
## How Should we Respond?

- Romans 12:1-2
- 2 Cor. 10:4-5

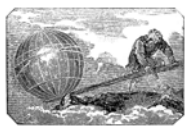
## G.K. Chesterton

- "What we suffer from today is humility in the wrong place. Modesty has moved from the organ of ambition...and settled upon the organ of conviction, where it was never meant to be. A man was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth; this has been exactly reversed. We are on the road to producing a race of men too mentally modest to believe in the multiplication table."

## Archimedes



- The simplest machine: the lever
- "Give me a place where I may stand, and I will move the world."
- In Greek, Archimedes words "[a place] where I may stand" are  $\pi\omicron\upsilon\ \sigma\tau\omega$ .
- The Bible is our  $\pi\omicron\upsilon\ \sigma\tau\omega$ .



## Every Truth Claim

- Behind every truth-claim is a foundational authority.
  - $\alpha\ \pi\omicron\upsilon\ \sigma\tau\omega$
  - a place where they stand
- Examples
  - Mormonism - the Book of Mormon; ultimately Joseph Smith
  - Empiricism: the human senses are the foundational authority.
  - Rationalism: human reason.
  - Postmodernism
    - One's own mind
    - Or a consensus of community opinion

### The Bible as our Που Στω

- The Bible
- Jesus Christ
- The Resurrection
  - John 2:13-22 (especially 18-22)
  - If Jesus was raised from the dead, then everything He taught is to be embraced as the truth.
  - So to determine what we should believe about truth, we need to see what Jesus Himself taught about the truth.
- Because our ultimate που στω is Jesus Christ.

### A Brief History of Ideas

- In the world
  - Pre-modern
    - Knowledge or truth was based on the authority of God's revelation.
  - Modern
    - Truth exists and the only reliable way to know it is through the scientific method—the use of reason and the senses.

### A Brief History of Ideas

- Post-modern
  - Postmodernism is essentially the embrace of two simple beliefs:
    - 1) You can never be certain of the truth, if truth exists at all.
    - 2) There is no universal explanation or metanarrative of meaning.
  - At its heart postmodernism is a rejection of certainty about anything.
- In the church
  - Academically
  - Popularly

### The Tragic Consequences of Ideas

- Truth is not absolute.
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### The Biblical Argument for Truth

- Truth is objective.
- Truth is universal.
- Truth is eternal.
- Truth is propositional.

### The Testimony of Jesus Christ

- John 1:14 - the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.
- John 14:6 - Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.

### The Testimony of Jesus Christ

- Jesus affirmed the basic reliability of sense perception and the foundational laws of logic.
- The basic reliability of sense perception.
  - Luke 24:36-43
  - John 20:20 - when He had said this, He showed them both His hands and His side. The disciples then rejoiced when they saw the Lord.
  - John 20:27 - He said to Thomas, "Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing."

### The Testimony of Jesus Christ

- The foundational laws of logic:
  - The law of identity - a thing is what it is (A = A).
    - John 8:58 - Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am."
    - Cf. Ex. 3:14 - God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM".
  - The law of non-contradiction - a proposition and its denial cannot both be true. (A cannot be A and non-A at the same time and same relationship)
    - John 14:6 - Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life: no one comes to the Father but through Me.
    - Cf. 1 John 2:21 - no lie is of the truth.
  - The law of the excluded middle - a proposition must be either true or false.
    - John 8:44 - "You are of *your* father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own *nature*, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

### The Testimony of Jesus Christ

- Language is fully capable of expressing truth from one mind to another.
- John 8:26 - "I have many things to speak and to judge concerning you, but He who sent Me is true; and the things which I heard from Him, these I speak to the world."
- John 12:49 - "For I did not speak on My own initiative, but the Father Himself who sent Me has given Me a commandment *as to* what to say and what to speak.

### The Testimony of Jesus Christ

- God has revealed His absolute truth to us through human agents, language, and propositions.
- In the OT Scriptures
  - Matt. 5:17-18 - "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. 18 "For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished.
  - Luke 24:44 - He said to them, "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled."
  - 24x in the Gospels we read something like this: "it is written...", followed by an OT quotation.

### The Testimony of Jesus Christ

- In the OT Scriptures
- In Jesus' own Teaching
  - Matt. 24:34-35 - "Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. 35 "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away.
  - John 3:11 - "Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony.
  - John 7:16 - Jesus answered them and said, "My teaching is not Mine, but His who sent Me.
  - John 8:40 - "But as it is, you are seeking to kill Me, a man who has told you the truth, which I heard from God; this Abraham did not do.

### The Testimony of Jesus Christ

- In His Own Teaching
  - John 8:45-46 - "Because I speak the truth, you do not believe Me. 46 "Which one of you convicts Me of sin? If I speak truth, why do you not believe Me?"
  - John 15:15 - "all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you.
  - John 17:14 - "I have given them Your word.
  - John 18:37 - For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice."

### The Testimony of Jesus Christ

- In the OT Scriptures
- In Jesus Own Teaching
- In the writings of His Apostles
  - John 14:26 - "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.
  - John 16:12-15
    - Cf. John 21:24 - This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and wrote these things, and we know that his testimony is true.

### The Testimony of Jesus Christ

- Truth can be rationally comprehended by the mind.
  - Matt. 12:3, 5—"Have you not read".
    - Christ uses the same expression 7x in Gospels in rebuking the religious readers.
  - Luke 24:25 - He said to them, "O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken!
  - John 3:11 - "Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony.

### The Testimony of Jesus Christ

- The truth propositions revealed in Scripture have only one meaning—the author's.
  - Matt. 22:29 - Jesus answered and said to them, "You are mistaken, not understanding the Scriptures nor the power of God.
  - John 5:39 - "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me;
  - John 20:30-31 - Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; 31 but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.

### The Testimony of Jesus Christ

- The truth propositions revealed in Scripture have only one meaning—the author's.
  - Acts 17:11 - Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily *to see* whether these things were so.
  - Gal. 1:8-9 - But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! 9 As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!

### The Testimony of Jesus Christ

- The truth propositions revealed in Scripture have only one meaning—the author's.
  - 2 Pet. 3:15-16 - regard the patience of our Lord *as* salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, as also in all *his* letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as *they do* also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction.

### The Testimony of Jesus Christ

- We can be certain of the one, true meaning God intended to communicate.
  - John 12:50 - "I know that His commandment is eternal life; therefore the things I speak, I speak just as the Father has told Me."
  - John 7:14-17
  - John 8:43-47
  - John 17:8 - the words which You gave Me I have given to them; and they received them and truly understood that I came forth from You, and they believed that You sent Me.



## Conclusions

- Postmodernism's approach to truth has four huge problems...
  - (a) It runs contrary to the clear teaching of Christ, as well as to the rest of Scripture.
  - (b) Postmodernists have to use propositional truth-statements to argue for their position.
  - (c) The argument that there is no metanarrative is in itself a metanarrative (an overarching explanation of reality).
  - (d) Postmodernism cannot be consistently practiced in the real world.

## Conclusions

- In dealing with a postmodern, start with Jesus Christ and His claims.
  - Explain what Jesus taught about truth.
    - Start with John 14:6
  - Show the postmodernist he is setting either his own mind or the community's view of truth over that of Jesus Christ.
  - I.e., you are showing him his  $\pi\omicron\upsilon\ \sigma\tau\omega$  — where he stands.

## Conclusions

- When you believe what Jesus taught about the truth, you will believe that...
  - Truth is absolute.
  - The Bible is filled with truth-propositions.
  - We can be certain about the interpretation of essential truths.
  - Sin is objective.
  - There is a distinct body of necessary doctrine...
  - That must be taught, believed, defended, and passed on to the next generation.
  - Jude 3-4