

# SCRIPTURE, CULTURE, AND MISSIONS



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## *Proclaiming the Changeless Truth in These Changing Times*

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### **Introduction**

The problem the evangelical church faces today is that we are proclaiming a premodern message in postmodern times. This is true in three crucial areas: absolutism, exclusivism, and supernaturalism. Evangelicals believe in absolute truth. We also hold that Christianity is exclusively true and that the gospel involves a supernatural act in the physical resurrection of Christ. The problem, then, is threefold: First, we are preaching an absolutistic message in a relativistic age. Second, we are preaching an exclusivistic message in pluralistic times. Third, we are affirming a supernatural world in a naturalistic world. To explain this thesis, we must first focus the problem. First, we will briefly state the central beliefs of both sides.

### **The Problem: Opposing Beliefs in Three Crucial Areas**

It is widely acknowledged that evangelicals believe that 1) truth is absolute, 2) truth is exclusivistic, and 3) that the truth of the gospel involves belief in the supernatural. Likewise, it is generally acknowledged that the postmodern world rejects absolutism, exclusivism, and supernaturalism. Given this, we are attempting to proclaim absolutistic truth in a relativistic age, an exclusivistic worldview in a pluralistic world, and a supernatural message to a naturalistic mindset. Let us discuss each one of these.

### **The Church Affirms an Absolutistic Message in a Relativistic Milieu**

By absolute truth we mean something that is true for all persons, at all times, and in all places. Indeed, we are commissioned to preach the gospel everywhere (Matt 28:18-20) to “all nations” and to “every tribe, kindred, and tongue” (Rev 7:9). In short, we believe the gospel is true for everyone, everywhere, and always, not just for some people, somewhere, and sometimes.

However, one of the dominant characteristics of postmodern cultures is relativism. The slogan, “What is true for you is not true for me,” is widely heralded. “Your truth is not my truth” is another cliché of our culture. Both truth and meaning are thought to be culturally relative. Ironically put, the

absolutes of the Bible are considered relative, and the relativity of Einstein is considered absolute.

This clearly poses a problem: How can we proclaim the absolute truth in such relativistic times? Does not such an antiquated message disqualify itself? Does it not become some kind of archaeological curiosity or a dinosaurically outdated proclamation? What is more, even if our message is proclaimed as absolute by the speaker, it will be taken as relative by the hearer. For often it is the hearer's worldview that determines what the hearer hears, not the speaker's worldview. So, even the absolute truth spoken through a relativistic cultural filter will be heard as a relativistic message. In short, we may be *preaching* that Jesus is "the truth" but they may be *hearing* that he is only the truth "for me" but not necessarily for everyone.

Indeed, in a relativistic scenario, someone may adopt Christianity but still believe it is not true for everyone, even though they have accepted it as true "for them." This raises a thorny problem of whether someone can be absolutely saved by believing the gospel in a relativistic way. If so, what does this do to our absolutism? If not, what does this do to our allegedly "regenerate" church roles, since Barna surveys indicate that only ten percent of born-again teenagers believe that truth is absolute. It suffices to say that we have a serious problem, maybe even more serious than we think.

### **The Church Affirms an Exclusivistic Message to Pluralistic People**

While we are pondering that problem, consider another one: we are declaring an exclusivistic message to a pluralistic people. Evangelical Christianity holds that there is only one way of salvation. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (Jn 14:6). He adds elsewhere that anyone who attempts to come any other way than through "the door" is a "thief and a robber" (Jn 10:1, 9-10). Jesus says flatly, "If you believe not that I am he, you shall die in your sins" (Jn 8:24). He adds, "Whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him" (Jn 3:36). His Spirit prompted an apostle to add that "there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Paul adds, "There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim 2:5).

Unfortunately, this exclusivistic message is falling on deaf pluralistic ears. It is seen by our culture as narrow, intolerant, and even imperialistic. After all, do not all roads lead to heaven? As the great Texas theologian Willie Nelson has said, "I believe all roads lead to the same place. We're taking different ways to get there, but we all end up in the same place. It's kind of like Kinky Friedman's statement, 'May the God of your choice bless you.' That's the main thoughts that I have about life."<sup>1</sup> Likewise, the most influential female—and formerly Baptist—lay theologian Oprah Winfrey declared,

<sup>1</sup>Clayton Neuman, "10 Questions for Willie Nelson," *Time*, 7 August 2006, 6.

"I am a Christian who believes that there are certainly many more paths to God other than Christianity."<sup>2</sup> Of course, there are more scholarly representatives of this view such as John Hick.<sup>3</sup> George Willis Cooke puts it this way: "Religion, wherever manifest, answers to the same human demands; and it reaches the responding satisfaction, by quite similar methods and to the same primary end."<sup>4</sup> So, any religion achieving this goal is considered true. In brief, we are not only proclaiming the absolute truth to our relativistic times, but we are preaching an exclusivistic message in a pluralistic milieu. How, then, shall we preach? Usually, the very implication of exclusivism turns off a pluralistic hearer, for the message seems so narrow, intolerant, and bigoted.

### **The Church Affirms a Supernatural Message in a Naturalistic Mindset**

Another postmodern characteristic of our culture is naturalism—the belief that everything can be explained by natural laws, that nature is “the whole show.” Miracles either cannot or at least do not occur. Long ago, Benedict Spinoza and later David Hume sought to demonstrate that miracles are not credible. Spinoza wrote, “Nothing . . . comes to pass in nature in contravention to her universal laws . . . for she keeps a fixed and immutable order.” So, “we may, then, be absolutely certain that every event which is truly described in Scripture necessarily happened, like everything else, according to natural laws.”<sup>5</sup> Almost a century later David Hume added, “A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature [and] firm and unalterable experience has established these laws.”<sup>6</sup> And since “a uniform experience amounts to a proof, there is here a direct and full proof, from the nature of the fact, against the existence of any miracle.”<sup>7</sup> This anti-supernaturalism spread into science via Hume’s friend James Hutton and into theology through Levi Strauss who wrote the first anti-supernatural life of Christ. More recently, Rudolph Bultmann, with his massive influence on New Testament Scholarship adds, “the only relevant . . . assumption is the view of the world which has been molded by modern science and the modern conception of human nature as a subsistent unity immune from the interference of supernatural powers.”<sup>8</sup> This, he declares, includes the resurrection of Jesus.

<sup>2</sup>See Oprah Winfrey, Transcript of the first “A New Earth” web seminar dated March 3, 2008. Online: [http://images.oprah.com/images/obc\\_classic/book/2008/anewearth/ane\\_chapter1\\_transcript.pdf](http://images.oprah.com/images/obc_classic/book/2008/anewearth/ane_chapter1_transcript.pdf).

<sup>3</sup>See John Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralistic Age* (Louisville: WJK, 1993).

<sup>4</sup>George Willis Cooke, *The Social Evolution of Religion* (Boston: Stratford Publishers, 1920), xviii.

<sup>5</sup>Benedict Spinoza, *A Theological–Political Treatise*, trans. R. H. M. Elwes (New York: Dover, 1951), 1:83, 87, 92. This volume was originally published in 1670.

<sup>6</sup>David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Charles William Hendel (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1955), 122. This volume was originally published in 1750.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup>Rudolph Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, trans. by Reginald Fuller (London: Billings & Sons, 1954), 5–8.

Clearly, this leaves the evangelical in a difficult position, for the gospel itself, to say nothing of the rest of the miraculous life of Christ, necessarily involves a miracle—the bodily resurrection of Christ. The resurrection is part and parcel of the gospel which the apostle Paul defines as a belief in the fact that “Christ dies for our sins in accordance with the Scripture, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day, and that he appeared” to many witnesses (1 Cor 15:3-5). Indeed, he says further that without the resurrection “your faith is futile and you are still in your sins” (1 Cor 15:17). In short, we are not only proclaiming the absolute truth to our relativistic times and an exclusivistic message in a pluralistic context, but we are preaching a supernatural message in a naturalistic milieu. If ever there were a clash between Christ and culture, this is it.

### **Facing the Alternatives**

Given the collision between evangelical Christianity and our postmodern culture, the alternatives for evangelicals are clear: 1) change the message to fit the milieu, 2) change the milieu to fit the message, or 3) defend the absolute truth to our relativistic times. In short, we either ignore our culture (and become irrelevant), give in to culture (and become liberals), or else we do apologetics in our culture.

#### **Changing the Message to Fit the Milieu**

Changing the message to fit the milieu is the fatal mistake of liberalism. It loses the life-transforming power of the gospel and turns the church into a hymn-singing Rotary Club. It is an accommodation of the message of Christ to the culture, not a communication of Christ to the culture. It turns a living church into a dead one, a missionary church into a church needing a missionary, and a biblical church into a social experiment. Modern history is replete with tragic examples of this mistake. Looking back on forty years of ministry, the famous liberal preacher, Harry Emerson Fosdick, declared, “What man in his senses can now call our modern civilization standard? . . . It is not Christ’s message that needs to be accommodated to this mad scene; it is this mad scene into which our civilization has collapsed that needs to be judged and saved by Christ’s message.”<sup>9</sup> Space does not permit more elaboration, but the “emergent church” is an example of this unfolding before our very eyes.<sup>10</sup>

#### **Changing the Milieu to Fit the Message**

Changing the milieu to fit the message is the fatal mistake of extreme fundamentalism. It is manifest among the “King James only” crowd that per-

<sup>9</sup>Harry Emerson Fosdick, *A Great Time to be Alive* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944), 201-02.

<sup>10</sup>For a good critique of the emergent church, see Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck, *Why We’re not Emergent (By Two Guys Who Should Be)* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2008).

manentizes one cultural manifestation of Christianity of one time into the only one for all time. They take one translation for one time and makes it the original by which even the original Greek must be corrected. In so doing, they unwittingly change the meaning of Scripture and undermine its divine authority. A classic example of this is the insistence of the word “let” (in 2 Thess 2:7), which in 1611 meant to hinder and now means to permit, thus reversing rather than preserving the original meaning. This is not only a fatal error on understanding Scripture, but the same is done with regard to other elements of the Christian faith. Music is another example. Modes of music are largely culturally relative. In spite of its Christian roots in the New Orleans funeral services, jazz was considered the music of the devil in fundamentalist churches in the early and mid-1900s. Also, formerly bar room tunes later became acceptable gospel songs. I will never forget my shock when I discovered that my favorite pre-Christ dance tune “Now is the Hour” was a gospel song called “Cleanse Me” that was being sung in the little fundamentalist church in which I was raised!

For over two decades I taught classes at the Cornerstone Music Festival in Western Illinois. When asked on the Moody Bible network why a conservative like me participated in a Christian Rock Music festival, I replied, “When I go fishing, I do not put strawberries on my hook (my favorite desert). Rather, I use worms because the fish like them better. The contemporary kids like rock music better. So, we are using it to try to hook them for Jesus.” Acceptable forms of music change with the times, and so do modes of communication. When I began preaching sixty years ago, we did not even have white boards, let alone overhead projectors, PowerPoint, or smart boards. Now I hardly know how to communicate without some recent technology. While liberals tend to relativize the absolute message, fundamentalists tend to absolutize the relative mode in which it is expressed. To re-coin an old motto used in the 1950s, “We need to be anchored to the Rock, but geared to the times.” We need to learn how to proclaim the unchanging truth in the changing terms of our time.

### **Defending the Absolute Truth in a Relativistic World**

Given what we and the contrasting culture believe, there are limited options for evangelicals to communicate Christ to the culture. First, we could change the message to fit the milieu. Second, we could change the milieu to fit the message. Or, third, we can defend the absolute truth to our relativistic times. We choose the latter for reasons that will become obvious. But how do we do this without compromising our message? In a word, by apologetics. Whose apologetics? you may ask. The apologetics of Jesus, I reply. He was not only a master teacher, but he was a master apologist. In a chapter on parabolic apologetics in our recent book, *The Apologetics of Jesus*, we note that Jesus was able to use the stories by which people lived to illustrate the truths

he wanted to convey.<sup>11</sup> Let me illustrate how to pre-evangelize relativists and pluralists so they can understand the absolute and exclusive nature of truth in which alone the true gospel makes sense.

If the evangelical church is going to survive it must overcome its aversion to apologetics and take the Scriptures seriously when they declare, “I am set for the defense of the gospel” (Phil 1:17). “Know how you ought to answer each one” (Col 4:6). “Give a reason for the hope within you” (1 Pet 3:15). “Contend for the Faith once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). Indeed, the apostle Paul was a master apologist in his Mars Hill encounter (Acts 17) and with the heathen at Lystra (Acts 14). He appealed to general revelation available to all men who know from creation that there is an invisible creator and “so they are without excuse” (Rom 1:20). He also appealed, as did C. S. Lewis so masterfully in *Mere Christianity*, to the moral “law written on their hearts” (Rom 2:15) that points to a moral lawgiver.<sup>12</sup>

For the skeptic who thinks that apologetics does not work in pre-evangelism to point people to Christ, I note several things briefly. First, it worked for Paul on Mars Hill. After his message we read: “But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them” (Acts 17:34). Second, St. Augustine was pre-evangelized for some time before he came under the preaching of St. Ambrose and had his garden experience. For one thing, he reasoned his way out of skepticism.<sup>13</sup> For another, the reading of the philosopher Plotinus helped deliver him from his materialistic understanding of reality. Finally, only after being impressed that Christianity had answers to tough questions by listening to a debate between a Christian and a Manichean was he pre-evangelized enough to be able to understand and believe the gospel. Third, for the clichéd argument that the Bible is like a lion that does not need to be defended, it only needs to be proclaimed, I respond with a question: Would this naked fideist accept the *Quran* (or *The Book of Mormon*) if they claimed that “The *Quran* (or *The Book of Mormon*) does not need to be defended; it simply needs to be expounded?!” No, they would rightfully ask for evidence that it is actually the Word of God. We should be willing to do no less for the Bible.

Fourth, of course, the Word of God comes to us with self-vindicating authority, but it is not self-evident that the Bible (rather than the *Quran* or the *Gita*) is the Word of God. One needs to provide evidence for that. Finally, it is charged that only the Holy Spirit can bring persons to Christ, not apologetics. While this is true, it is also true that the Holy Spirit can and often does bring people to Christ by the use of apologetics. I have a file of examples where this happened. Let me share one with you: “For several

<sup>11</sup>See Norman Geisler and David Geisler, *The Apologetics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009).

<sup>12</sup>See part one of C. S. Lewis’ *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).

<sup>13</sup>See John J. O’Meara, *St. Augustine: Against the Academics* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1950).

[years] we've prayed for my son-in-law, an avowed Atheist. After reading your book . . . here is his note: 'I thought I'd drop you a line and let you know that I finished the book yesterday, and as I was sitting at my desk at work that morning, I came to realize that even if I didn't have every answer to every question, I at least had a preponderance of evidence in my hands, which has finally tipped the scales in God's direction again. So I said a prayer and accepted Jesus.'<sup>14</sup>

### **Defending the Truth through Apologetic Pre-Evangelism**

As Francis Schaeffer taught us a generation ago, we must do "pre-evangelism" before we can do evangelism.<sup>15</sup> It makes no sense to speak to someone about the Word of God, if they do not believe there is a God who can speak. Nor is it a meaningful exercise to talk about the Son of God, unless there is a God who has a Son. To claim there is absolute and exclusivistic truth of God, someone must first believe there is a God of truth. The simple fact of the matter is that our old evangelistic methods are outdated and ineffective since they do not start where people are.

Let me illustrate. A generation ago I was using what was generally a good evangelistic method at the time devised by D. James Kennedy called "Evangelism Explosion." My friend and I were doing door-to-door evangelism with it when even then we ran into a brick wall. The gentleman who answered the door did not have one of the two standard answers to the question: "If you were to die and stand before God and He would say, 'Why should I let you into my heaven?' What would you say?" His answer was, "I would say to God, 'Why shouldn't you let me in?'" I had no clue what to say next. The book did not say. So, I ushered up a quick prayer, and God helped me out my dilemma. I said to the gentleman at the door, "Sir, if we knocked on your door and you did not want to let us into your house, and I said, 'Why shouldn't you let me in?' then what would you say?" He said, "I would tell you where to go!" I replied, "That is exactly what God would say to you!" With that, our evangelistic prospect suddenly became serious and said, "To tell you the truth, I am an atheist, and I don't believe in God." Now what do we do? We do pre-evangelism. If he does not believe in God, then it will make no sense to talk to him about a Son of God who died for our sins and rose from the dead by an act of God as He said in the Word of God.

What did I do? I pre-evangelized him. By asking crucial questions, I got him to move from atheism, to hard agnosticism, and then to open-minded agnosticism (in which he was willing to look at the evidence). First, I asked him if he was absolutely sure there was no God. He was not (and few are). Then I asked him if it was possible that God existed. He said it was possible but did not think that he did. Then I said, You are not really an atheist who says I know there is not a God. Rather, you are really an agnostic who

<sup>14</sup>Personal correspondence from Bernard LaTour (4 June 2005).

<sup>15</sup>See Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who is There* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1968), 137.



claims he does not know if there is a God. When he agreed, I asked if he was a soft or hard agnostic. I explained that the hard agnostic says he knows that you cannot know if there is a God, and the soft one claims only that he does not know if there is a God. Since he claimed to be a hard agnostic, I asked him if he knew for sure that he could not know anything for sure. He seemed a bit stunned. After I pointed out that if he did, then he was not a hard agnostic since he knew something for sure. Once he agreed that he was a soft agnostic (who did not know, but could know), I asked if he *wanted* to know. What could he say? When he said Yes, I gave him a book by a skeptic who set out to disprove Christianity and was converted after looking at the evidence.<sup>16</sup> After he agreed to read it, we returned later and found him convinced by the evidence and open to the gospel. We shared the plan of salvation with him and had the privilege to lead him to Christ.

In light of this discussion, there are three main tasks for pre-evangelism in this postmodern world: 1) To defend the absolute nature of truth, 2) To defend the exclusivistic nature of truth, and 3) To defend the credibility of miracles.

### 1. To Defend the Absolute Nature of Truth

In order to defend absolute truth we must first define it. Truth is what corresponds to reality. A true statement matches its object. It tells it like it is. While there are other aspects of the term “truth,” as used in the Bible, such as reliability or faithfulness, correspondence is the key element, and it is clearly implied in the biblical text. This is supported by the use of the term in everyday discourse (as indicated by dictionaries), courts, and by great philosophers. Further, this definition of truth is undeniable.

*Truth as Correspondence in the Bible.* For our purposes, this point is crucial. There are numerous places in which the Bible implies a correspondence view of truth.<sup>17</sup>

1. The command not to bear false witness is based upon a correspondence view of truth. The command implies that any statement that does not correspond to the facts is false.
2. Satan is called a liar (Jn 8:44) because his statement to Eve, “You will not surely die” (Gen 3:4), did not correspond to what God really said, namely, “You will surely die” (Gen 2:17).
3. Ananias and Sapphira “lied” to the apostles by misrepresenting the factual state of affairs about their finances (Acts 5:1-4).
4. Joseph’s statement to his brothers implies a correspondence view of truth: “Send one of your number to get your brother;

<sup>16</sup>The book was Frank Morrison, *Who Moved the Stone?* (London: Faber & Faber, 1958). Morrison was a lawyer and skeptic who set out to disprove Christianity but was converted after seeing that the evidence favored Christianity. The first chapter of his book is titled, “The Book that Refused to be Written.”

<sup>17</sup>See Robert Preus, *Inspiration of Scripture* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1955), 24.

- the rest of you will be kept in prison, so that your words may be tested to see if you are telling the truth” (Gen 42:16).
5. Moses commanded that false prophets be tested on the grounds that “if what a prophet proclaims . . . does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken” (Deut 18:22). This too implies correspondence to reality is what is meant by “true.”
  6. The prayer that Solomon prays at the dedication of the temple entails a correspondence view of truth: “And now, O God of Israel, let your word that you promised your servant David my father (that there would be a temple) come true” (1 Kgs 8:26).
  7. The prophecies of Micaiah were considered “true” and the false prophets’ false words “lies” because the former corresponded with the facts of reality (1 Kgs 22:16-22).
  8. According to the psalmist, something was considered a “falsehood” if it did not correspond to God’s law (truth) (Ps 119:163).
  9. Proverbs states, “A truthful witness saves lives, but a false witness is deceitful” (14:25), which implies that truth is factually correct.
  10. Nebuchadnezzar demanded of his wise men to know the facts and he considered anything else “misleading” (Dan 2:9).
  11. Jesus’ statement in John 5:33 entails a correspondence view of truth: “You have sent to John and he has testified to the truth.”
  12. In Acts 24, Paul says, “By examining him you yourself will be able to learn the truth about all these charges we are bringing against him” (24:8). They continued, “You can easily verify [the facts]” (24:11).
  13. Paul clearly implies a correspondence view of truth when he writes, “Each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor” (Eph 4:25).
  14. The biblical use of the word “err” supports a correspondence view of truth, since it is used of unintentional “errors” (cf. Lev 4:2, 27). Certain acts were wrong, whether the trespassers intended to commit them or not, and hence a guilt offering was called for to atone for their “error.”

*Truth as Correspondence in Everyday Discourse.* Everyday usage of the term truth also implies correspondence with the facts. Consider these phrases: “That’s not true,” or “Tell me the truth,” or “Don’t hide the truth from me.” These all imply a correspondence view of truth. This is supported by *Webster’s Dictionary’s* definition of “truth,” which is based on ordinary usage of the word.<sup>18</sup> The very first definition of “truth” regarding an utterance is:

<sup>18</sup>See *Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster Inc., 1985). Of course, truth can also be used in the sense of fidelity or trust, but we use truth statements because they correspond with the facts, not the reverse.

“(1) the state of being the case: FACT.” Likewise, under “true,” Webster says, “(1): being in accordance with the actual state of affairs. (2) conformable to an essential reality.” Certainly, we do not accept as true something simply because one intended it to be true. A trusted friend, with all good intentions, may give us false directions, but we still consider the directions false because they did not correspond with the facts. Neither sincerity nor good intentions are sufficient to determine truth. The truth is that people can be sincerely wrong.

*Truth as Correspondence in the Courts.* Likewise, no court in the land would accept as truth anything but what corresponds to the facts. Swearing to tell the expedient, the whole expedient, and nothing but the expedient, so help me future experience would never be accepted by a judge or jury. Only “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth” is accepted because only it corresponds to reality. It does not matter whether one replaces the word “expedient” with the words “relevant,” or “well-intended,” or “personally satisfying,” or “what feels good,” it would still not be acceptable by the general public or our legal institutions as “true.” The correspondence view of truth is nearly universally understood in common discourse as what is meant by truth.

*Truth as Correspondence According to Great Philosophers.* Many great philosophers also defined truth as correspondence to reality. Consider the following:

- Aristotle (4th century B.C.). Aristotle writes, “To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while *to say of what is that it is*, and of what is not that it is not, is true; so that he who says of anything that it is or that it is not, will say either what is true of what is false”<sup>19</sup> In short, truth is telling it like it is, and falsity is not telling like it is.
- Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109). In his work on *Truth, Freedom, and Evil*, Anselm defines truth as follows: “All I know is that when a *proposition signifies* that what is the case *is the case*, then it is true and there is truth in it.”<sup>20</sup> In short, truth is what corresponds to “what is the case” or what “exists.”
- Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). According to Aquinas, “Truth is defined by the *conformity* of intellect and thing; and hence to know this *conformity* is to know truth.”<sup>21</sup> Elsewhere he adds, “For all understanding is achieved by way of some assimilation of the knower to the thing known—a harmony we call the *matching* of understand-

<sup>19</sup>Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 4.7.1011b 25-30. Emphasis added.

<sup>20</sup>St. Anselm, *Truth, Freedom, and Evil: Three Philosophical Dialogues* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967). See chapter two.

<sup>21</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.16.2.

ing and thing.”<sup>22</sup> So the notion of truth is “first found in understanding . . . which *corresponds to* the thing and can be expected *to match* it.”<sup>23</sup>

- Mortimer Adler (1902-2001). General Editor of the Great Books series, Mortimer Adler, also defines truth as correspondence. He affirms that “the truth of thought consists in *the agreement or correspondence* between what one thinks, believes, or opines and what actually exists or does not exist in reality that is independent of our minds.”<sup>24</sup>

*Truth as Correspondence is Undeniable.* Finally, not only is the correspondence view of truth used in the Bible, in everyday speech, in the courts, and by great philosophers, it is undeniable. The statement, “Truth is not telling it like it is,” itself claims to be telling it like it is. The very claim, “Truth is not what corresponds to reality,” itself makes an implicit claim that it corresponds to reality. Truth is found in expressions or propositions, not in persons. We say someone is a “truthful person” only because he tells the truth. Jesus was the “truth” (Jn 14:6) because he not only always told the truth but because he perfectly expressed or corresponded to the father (Jn 1:14; 14:9). Thus, “personal truth” is a misnomer. There are truths about persons and truths from persons, but contrary to Emil Brunner and other Neo-orthodox thinkers, there are no personal truths.<sup>25</sup> If it is true, then it is an accurate proposition or expression about reality. Neither is it proper to speak of truth being “based” in personal relations as some do. Personal relations are subjective, and truth is made based in the subject. Truth is a statement or expression about what is objective. The *appeal* and acceptability of truth can be enhanced by loving relations and we are exhorted to “speak the truth in love” (Eph 4:15), but the *nature* of truth is not personal.

*Truth as Absolute.* Truth is not only correspondence with reality, but it is objective and absolute. By that is meant that a true statement is true for everyone, everywhere, and always. A true statement does not change. The truth of a statement remains the same, if it is one which corresponds with its object. Of course, the object may change, but when it does the previous statement was not false when it was made. The new (and different) statement is true only if it corresponds with the new object or reality. As Aristotle noted, “Statements and beliefs . . . themselves remain complete unchangeable in every way; it is because the actual thing changes that the contrary come to belong to them. For the statement that somebody is sitting remains the same; it is because of change in the actual thing that it comes to be true at one time and false at another time [e.g., when he stands up].”<sup>26</sup> In short,

<sup>22</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Disputed Questions on Truth*, 1.1.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 1.3. Emphasis added.

<sup>24</sup>Mortimer J. Adler, *Six Great Ideas* (New York: Macmillan, 1981), 34. Emphasis added.

<sup>25</sup>Cf. Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason: The Christian Doctrine of Faith and Knowledge* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1946).

<sup>26</sup>Aristotle, *Categories*, 5 4a35-4b12.

truth statements do not change, but a new statement about a new state of affairs can be contradictory to another statement about it at another time. So-called relative truths seem to be such only because of confusion. For example, “I feel warm” and “you feel cold” in the same room at the same temperature. But these are first of all statements about different feelings and about different persons. But if “the temperature in the room is 70 degrees Fahrenheit,” then that is objectively true no matter how different people feel in that same room at the same time.

Truth does not change with the times since each true statement corresponds to a given object at a given time and place. A true statement (made about a given object at a given time) is true for all time and in all places. For example, the statement that “There is ice at the South Pole (right now)” is objectively and absolutely true no matter who or where it is made or by whom. A true statement is true at all times, everywhere, and in all places. So, all true statements about the universe are absolute since they are about something at a given time and place. Thus, they are objectively true for everyone.

## **2. To Defend the Exclusivistic Nature of Truth**

Once truth is defined as correspondence and known to be objective or absolute, we can address the pluralistic objection of postmodern thought, namely, can opposing views both be truth? The answer to this is easy, since the undeniable law of non-contradiction demands that opposites cannot both be true at the same time and in the same sense. In short, the opposite of true cannot be true. It must be false.

It is important to note in this connection that Aristotle did not invent this logic, nor is it a uniquely “Western” logic. Even in Hindu refrigerators there cannot both be a bottle of milk and not be a bottle of milk at the same time in the same sense. Even the Zen Buddhist who insists that ultimate reality—the Tao—goes beyond logic (i.e., beyond the law of non-contradiction) does not believe that the Tao is the same as the non-Tao. Nor if Taoism or Zen Buddhism claims to be true, do they believe that the opposite of their view is also true. The law of non-contradiction transcends geography and culture. It applies to all reality. To claim that “logic does not apply to reality” applies logic to that reality in that very statement.

The famous Muslim philosopher Avicenna had a sure-fire way to demonstrate the law of non-contradiction. He insisted that anyone who denies it should be beaten and burned until he agrees that to be beaten is not the same as not to be beaten, and to be burned is not the same as not to be burned! Actually, there is a more philosophical way to demonstrate the validity of the law of non-contradiction. It is to show that it is undeniable, for any attempt to deny that the opposite of true is false assumes that the opposite of that statement is not true but false. One has to use the law on non-contradiction to affirm it and also to deny it. It is literally inescapable for all rational beings.

The implications for pluralism are fatal. If the opposite of true is false, and if there are opposing truth claims in various religions, then all

religions cannot be true. While this could be done with any religion, the several crucial doctrines in the top two religions illustrate the point:

<b>Islam Affirms</b>	<b>Christianity Affirms</b>
God is only one Person	God is not only one Person (He is three)
Jesus is only Human	Jesus is not only human (He is also God)
Jesus did not die on the Cross	Jesus did die on the Cross
Jesus did not rise three days later	Jesus did rise three days later
Salvation is not by Faith Alone	Salvation is by Faith Alone
The Quran is God's Word	The Quran is not God's Word
The Bible is Corrupted	The Bible is not Corrupted

It is clear that if Islam is right on any or all of these, then Christianity is wrong on them. They are opposites, and opposites cannot both be true. Since these are crucial doctrines, then if the Islamic view is true, then the Christian view is false. Further, if the Christian view is true, then the Islamic view is false. Both religions cannot be true on these essential doctrines (and on many more).

Pluralists often use the parable of the six blind men and an elephant to make their point. One blind man feeling the ear of the elephant says it is a fan. Another who touches the elephant's side affirms that it is a wall. Still another, holding the tail thinks it is a robe. The one with his arms around a leg believes it is a tree. Still another blind man, feeling the end of the tusk, is convinced that it is a spear. And the last blind man who has a hold of the trunk is sure it is a large snake. So, we are told that all religions are true but that each one sees thing a little differently. The problem with the parable for the pluralist is that it actually illustrates just the opposite, namely, the exclusivist view. For all these blind men were wrong; none had the truth. The only one with the truth, the exclusive truth, was the man telling the parable who alone knew the absolute truth, namely, that it was an elephant! All the rest were blind to the truth.

### **3. To Defend the Credibility of Miracles**

Finally, Christianity is a supernatural religion. At the heart of the gospel is a supernatural event—the bodily resurrection of Christ (1 Cor 15:1-6;

Rom 10:9). Without miracles, Christianity is false and futile. As the apostle Paul puts it, if Christ did not rise from the dead, then “your faith is futile and you are still in your sins” (1 Cor 15:17). But strong arguments have been posed against miracles.

David Hume offers perhaps the best and most enduring argument against miracles. He argued that 1) a natural law is by definition a regular event, 2) a miracle by definition is a rare event, 3) but the evidence for the regular is always greater than the evidence for the rare, 4) a wise person should always base his belief on the greater evidence, and therefore 5) a wise person should never believe in miracles. It should be noted that this is a valid argument. That is, if the premises are true, then so is the conclusion. Stated this way, the false premise is number three, which states that “the evidence for the regular is always greater than the evidence for the rare.” This is a false premise for many reasons. If true, then one should not believe an improbable event did happen, even if it did happen. Clearly, there is something wrong with a method that says you should not believe in a fact, even if it has occurred.

Hume’s argument also confuses probability and evidence. Just because it is improbable that it *would* happen, based on past regular experience, does not mean that this improbability should override actual evidence that it *did* occur. There are several counter-examples from Hume’s own naturalistic worldview.

1. First, Big Bang cosmology shows that the origin of the space-time universe is a rare event, but nevertheless the evidence is so strong that it has convinced most astrophysicists. One agnostic scientist, Robert Jastrow, puts it this way: “Now we see how the astronomical evidence leads to a biblical view of the origin of the world.”<sup>27</sup> He adds, “The scientist’s pursuit of the past ends in the moment of creation. . . . This is an exceedingly strange development, unexpected by all but theologians. They have always accepted the word of the Bible: ‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.’”<sup>28</sup>
2. Second, all anti-supernaturalist scientists believe in the spontaneous generation of first life somewhere in the universe, and so far as we know, it is not being repeated regularly (or at all) in the present.
3. Third, the same is true of macro-evolution. It is a one-time past occurrence that is not being repeated in the present. Yet some evolutionists are so convinced that it has occurred that they even call it a “fact.”<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup>Robert Jastrow, *God and the Astronomers* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 14.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>29</sup>Carl Sagan said clearly, “Evolution is a fact, not a theory” (*Cosmos* [New York: Random House, 1980], 27).

In short, Hume's anti-miracles argument collapses because there is good evidence that some things occur in spite of their rarity.

The simple fact of the matter is that if God exists, then miracles are possible since the biggest miracle of all (creation) has already occurred. Former atheist, C. S. Lewis wisely observed that "if we admit God, must we admit Miracle? Indeed, indeed, you have no security against it. That is the bargain."<sup>30</sup> Actually, to prove miracles are impossible, one would have to prove that it is impossible that God existed. Few have ever tried this, and no one has ever succeeded.<sup>31</sup> In fact, the evidence has been mounting that God does exist. Even agnostic astronomer Jastrow says, "That there are what I or anyone would call supernatural forces at work is now, I think, a scientifically proven fact."<sup>32</sup> This means that the foundations of anti-supernaturalism have crumbled. With it, the third pillar of postmodernism is gone.

### Summary and Conclusion

The problem facing the evangelical church today is that we are proclaiming a premodern truth in these postmodern times. This is true in three crucial areas: absolutism, exclusivism, and supernaturalism. Evangelicals believe in absolute truth. We also hold that Christianity is exclusively true, and that the gospel involves a supernatural act in the physical resurrection of Christ. The problem is that the postmodern culture is relativistic, pluralistic, and naturalistic. Thus, we are preaching an absolutistic message in a relativistic age, an exclusivistic message in pluralistic times, and we are affirming a supernatural message in a naturalistic era.

How, then, shall we preach? As Francis Schaeffer taught us a generation ago, we must do pre-evangelism before we can do evangelism, for it makes no sense to speak to people about the Word of God if they do not believe there is a God who can speak a Word. Nor is it a meaningful exercise to talk about the Son of God unless there is a God who has a Son. And it makes no sense to proclaim that there are supernatural acts of God (like the resurrection of Christ) unless there is a supernatural being who can act. In short, we must preach apologetically. Otherwise, we need to apologize for our preaching. C. S. Lewis states this need when he says, "To be ignorant and simple now—not to be able to meet the enemies on their ground—would be to throw down our weapons, and to betray our uneducated brethren who have, under God, no defense but us against the intellectual attacks of the heathen. Good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered."<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup>C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 109.

<sup>31</sup>See Norman L. Geisler. "God, Alleged Disproofs of," in *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 275.

<sup>32</sup>See "A Scientist Caught Between Two Faiths: Interview with Robert Jastrow," *Christianity Today* (6 August 1982).

<sup>33</sup>C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: Macmillan, 1980), 50. In "Christian Apologetics," Lewis adds that "a century ago our task was to edify those who had been