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WHATEVER HAPPENED TO

TRUTH

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*Whatever Happened to Truth?*

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# INTRODUCTION

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Truth is not what it used to be. In days past, telling the truth meant to represent the facts accurately. It was presupposed that truth corresponded to a reality to be known, and that not telling the truth was morally wrong. To tell a lie, then, was a misrepresentation of a given matter. When former President Bill Clinton claimed, “There is no relationship,” in reference to his adulterous affair with a White House intern, was he telling the truth? The well-known response, of course, is that it depends on what the definition of “is” is, as well as on Mr. Clinton’s definition of “relationship.” Our world has gotten accustomed to Orwellian doublespeak, and with moral absolutes largely considered a thing of the past, language has become a pliable tool in the hands of ideologues.

Feminists have long understood the power of naming and renaming in order to reimagine our world in keeping with their notion of gender equality. But what is considerably more troubling than the tendentious, manipulative use of language by those pursuing sociopolitical agendas is the fact that the very notion of truth has largely become a casualty of postmodern thought and discourse. Truth is no longer “the” truth, in Jesus’ terms who claimed to be “the truth” (John 14:6). Rather, it is conceived of as “your” truth or “my” truth—that is, differing yet equally legitimate ways of perceiving reality. Hence truth is simply one’s preferred, culturally conditioned, socially constructed version of reality.

Whatever happened to truth?<sup>1</sup> A generation ago Francis Schaeffer coined the phrase “true truth,” not in distinction from “false truth,” but in recognition of the fact that the very notion of “truth” was under siege already in his day.<sup>2</sup> According to Schaeffer, Christians were to emphatically affirm the possibility and reality of truth by claiming to know “true truth,” not merely subjective, relative “truth.” As Schaeffer lamented, for modern man, “truth as truth is gone, and . . . relativism reigns.”<sup>3</sup> And Schaeffer understood that once truth is torn down in our institutions of higher learning, it is only a matter of time before this will trickle down into our everyday lives.<sup>4</sup>

In his final work, *The Great Evangelical Disaster*, writing in 1984, Schaeffer urged, “Where is the clear voice speaking to the critical issues of the day with distinctively biblical, Christian answers? With tears we must say . . . a large segment of the evangelical world has become seduced by the world . . . we can expect the future to be a further disaster if the evangelical world does not take a stand for biblical truth and morality in the full spectrum of life.”<sup>5</sup> Schaeffer’s clarion call must be heeded.<sup>6</sup> And yet, it is not sufficient merely to repeat Schaeffer’s arguments; a new generation must rise to the challenge of making a case for truth.<sup>7</sup>

In the present work, Albert Mohler, J. P. Moreland, Kevin Vanhoozer, and I join forces to address the issue of truth from a cultural, philosophical, hermeneutical-theological, and biblical perspective respectively. While these essays (first presented as plenary addresses at the 56th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society) represent a diversity of viewpoints, which at least in part is a function of the authors’ different areas of expertise, they are all written from an evangelical, inerrantist perspective and in the conviction that *there is truth*, and that *truth can be known*, in God’s *written* word, the Bible, and in God’s *incarnate* Word, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The first essay, “‘What Is Truth?’ Pilate’s Question in Its Johannine and Larger Biblical Context,” takes up Pilate’s well-known question to Jesus on the nature of truth in John 18:38. It is shown that for John, truth is a theological and, in fact, Christological concept that is inextricably tied to the person of Jesus Christ (John 14:6). God is truth, and his Word is truth (John 17:17), and since Jesus is the Word-become-flesh, the One-of-a-kind Son from the Father, the only way for us to know the truth is to know God through Jesus Christ (John 8:31; 14:6; 17:3).

A defense of the historicity of John’s account of Jesus’ trial before Pilate and a discussion of this account in light of major Johannine themes is followed by a discussion of the three major characters in Jesus’ trial before Pilate: the Jewish leaders, Pilate, and Jesus. The Jewish leaders are shown to bear primary responsibility for Jesus’ crucifixion owing to their rejection of truth; Pilate is found to be a perennial reminder of the impossibility of maintaining neutrality in the face of truth; and Jesus, despite the crucifixion, “has in fact not yielded anything, has ultimately lost nothing, and gained everything” as he served as a witness to God’s truth before his Roman interrogator.

The study of Jesus’ trial before Pilate issues in six important observations concerning truth:

(1) Pilate’s question, “What is truth?” masks thick irony, indicating that Jesus’ trial before Pilate represented a travesty of justice. If the judge cares nothing about the truth, what does that say about the role of truth in Jesus’ trial and the verdict against him?

(2) Pilate’s role in fact paralleled that of the Jewish high priest, Caiaphas, so that Jews and Gentiles are shown to unite in an unholy alliance against the Lord’s true Anointed.

(3) Truth is not primarily an abstract notion or set of propositions but, Christologically and salvation-historically, inextricably

cably tied to the cross (quite literally so). The truth is Jesus *himself*, and the gospel is about his crucifixion and resurrection. This gospel is what people are called to believe, not some detached statement about reality in general.

(4) The Jewish leaders and Jesus, not Pilate, are the major characters in the trial narrative. Jesus' escalating series of signs in John 1—12 is paralleled by the corresponding groundswell of rejection of Jesus by the Jewish leaders representing the Jewish nation. The major battle for truth is between Jesus and the Jewish leaders and concerns the all-important question of whether or not Jesus is the Messiah he claims to be. While Pilate seeks to *evade* the question of truth, the Jews *reject* the truth outright.

(5) Pilate's question, "What is truth?" far from constituting a sincere inquiry as to the nature of truth, had the mere function of cutting off discussion in order to get on with the business at hand.

(6) Jesus' standing before Pilate pitted truth against power, and in the end the latter was no match for the former. The "power of truth" is infinitely greater than the "truth of power." Hence Jesus gives hope to those who are powerless but who represent the truth.

The essay concludes with a penetrating story told by Václav Havel, writer and long-time dissident and later president of the Czech Republic, that takes its inspiration from the portrayal of truth in John's Gospel.

Albert Mohler's "What Is Truth? Truth and Contemporary Culture" represents a wide-ranging, far-reaching assessment of the state of truth in our postmodern public discourse. As Mohler points out, recent debates over issues such as embryonic stem cell research, human cloning, and same-sex marriage are ultimately arguments about the nature of truth itself, and jurists increasingly view truth not as a matter to be decided but rather

to be discovered. However, Mohler observes that postmodernism confronts Christians with a unique set of challenges.

(1) The *deconstruction of truth* means that truth is no longer considered to be universal in scope, but rather relative and subjective. Truth is not absolute or objectively real, but rather socially constructed, a mere human convention subject to change.

(2) The *death of the meta-narrative* ensues in the notion that all comprehensive accounts of truth, meaning, and existence, equally binding for everyone, are cast aside. Not only is all politics local, but all truth is local too. Thus truth is localized. Truth in Los Angeles is different from truth in New Orleans. Truth has no global reach or validity.

(3) The *demise of the text*, including the text of Scripture, follows. If all truth is local, and all meaning is subjective, no text can claim absolute authority or command universal acceptance. Hermeneutics dissolves into cynicism toward the powerful who use texts to control and manipulate others.

(4) Another result of the demise of the notion of absolute truth is what Mohler calls “the *dominion of therapy*.” Once the notion of objective, absolute truth has been abandoned, all that remains is fulfilling the desire to be as comfortable as possible. In fact, even theology is reduced to therapy (reminiscent of Paul’s reference to people wanting to have “their ears tickled,” 2 Tim. 4:3, NASB).

(5) There is a commensurate *decline in authority*, not merely of biblical authority, but of any authority and the notion of authority itself.

(6) The final result is the *displacement of morality*. If there is no absolute truth, there is no firm basis for morality, and prevailing notions of morality become nothing but a person’s or group’s oppressive exercise of his or her personal beliefs to dominate others.

In the reminder of Mohler's essay, he follows up on this penetrating analysis of postmodern culture, hermeneutics, and morality with an equally compelling call for evangelicals to hold fast to a robust understanding of biblical truth, or else "Christ will not in fact be glorified, the Bible will not be obeyed, the gospel will not be preached, and the Kingdom will not be extended."

In the third major essay, J. P. Moreland, Professor of Philosophy of Religion at Biola University, discusses "Truth, Contemporary Philosophy, and the Postmodern Turn." Moreland contends that postmodernism is "an immoral and cowardly viewpoint" that those who love truth should endeavor to heal. Over against those who would replace the classic correspondence theory of truth—the notion that truth corresponds to reality—with a neo-pragmatic or non-realist model, Moreland identifies himself at the very outset as "an unrepentant correspondence advocate who eschews the various anti-realist views of truth."

Moreland's essay is given to a no-holds-barred, frontal assault on postmodernism and its relativistic understanding of knowledge and truth. According to postmodernism, truth is nothing but the linguistic expression of a socially constructed notion of customs and values characterizing a particular community. Yet, as Moreland contends, postmodernism is plagued by at least five types of confusion:

(1) The notion that truth is a product of Cartesian anxiety, created out of fear of what would result if there were no absolute truth.

(2) A confusion of psychological and rational objectivity: the latter is possible even if the former is not.

(3) An improper disallowance of modest foundationalism—that is, the notion that a proper belief structure is foundational, consisting of properly basic beliefs.

(4) Confusion about truth being found on the sentence level while it is in fact embedded in pre-linguistic structures.

(5) Confusions about perception and intentionality, particularly a rejection of a critical realistic understanding that holds that direct perception is possible.

In the end, Moreland unmasks postmodernism as “a form of intellectual pacifism that, at the end of the day, recommends backgammon while the barbarians are at the gate.” It is “the cure that kills the patient, the military strategy that concedes defeat before the first shot is fired, the ideology that undermines its own claims to allegiance.”

Following the biblical investigation, cultural analysis, and philosophical critique of postmodernism in the first three essays is Kevin Vanhoozer’s creative and brilliant treatise, “Lost in Interpretation? Truth, Scripture, and Hermeneutics.” According to Vanhoozer, much recent biblical interpretation has suffered the loss of the author, the interpreter, the subject matter, and, ultimately, the truth. There are four major hermeneutical options (only the last of which is satisfactory): (1) hermeneutical relativism; (2) taking the road to Rome into the bosom of the Roman Catholic Church; (3) joining an independent church; and (4) like Bunyan’s Pilgrim, becoming pilgrims on the way, armed with humility, illumined by the Spirit, and in the company of fellow pilgrims following the text.

In discussing the relationship between biblical interpretation and doctrinal truth, Vanhoozer first considers the Hodge-Henry hypothesis, which views doctrine as the result of biblical induction and deduction. In this propositionalist approach to theology, revelation is seen as conveying information that must be processed in order to distill a set of propositional statements. Yet, Vanhoozer contends, this method is inadequate for interpreting textual meaning, because textual meaning cannot be reduced to a set of propositions. According to Vanhoozer,

inerrancy by itself does not amount to a full-fledged hermeneutic. A given interpreter's stated belief in inerrancy does not necessarily guarantee an accurate or valid interpretation (though, one might add, neither does the *lack* of an inerrantist position!).

Vanhoozer proceeds to present his own proposal for dealing with the question, What kind of truth does Scripture have, and how does it speak truth? First, he reiterates his opposition to a propositionalist approach that "reduce[s] the truth of Scripture to a set of propositions." We must beware of making the mistake of unduly emphasizing the *content* of Scripture at the expense of its *form*. What gets lost in such a "cheap inerrancy," propositionalist approach is the circumstances underlying a given text as well as its poetic and affective aspects and hence a dimension of the truth conveyed by it.

Second, Vanhoozer sets forth what he considers to be a better way for understanding scriptural truth. He contends that biblical interpretation must begin with an appreciation of the fact that *truth is expressed in the interface between an author's discourse (interpreted in context) and the way things are*. What, then, is the primary subject matter of scriptural truth? Vanhoozer's answer is, "the creative and redemptive work of the triune God," to be understood in the context of a true catholicity that serves as an antidote to interpretive tribalism and parochialism.

According to Vanhoozer, the Bible sets forth *theodrama*—the words and acts of God in the course of history climaxing in Jesus Christ, and truth is to be conceived as *theodramatic correspondence*. Scripture is the *script* to this theodrama, and we are all *participants* receiving "performance knowledge" and doctrinal direction. "Truth is the fit between text and reality," and the task of interpretation is to learn to read the map of the biblical text in its various genres and literary forms of expression.

Finally, what about the process of finding truth in and through interpretation? First, we must rightly assess the *historical* dimension of Scripture. History is so tightly wedded to biblical literature and narrative that the two cannot truly be separated. Second, we must move beyond understanding *words* to understanding *discourse*; “hermeneutics is the art of discerning the discourse in written works.” This, third, must take place within the context of an appreciation of the importance of literary *genres* for proper interpretation. As Vanhoozer contends, “the *literal* [not literalistic] sense is the *literary* sense.”<sup>8</sup>

“The literal sense of Scripture as a whole,” in turn, “is the theodramatic sense.” Discerning this theodramatic sense, says Vanhoozer, requires imagination, “the power of synoptic vision”: “the purpose of exegesis is not to excavate but to explore canonically-embodied truth by becoming apprentices to the literary forms, and this involves more than mastering the propositional content. By learning imaginatively to follow and indwell the biblical texts, we see through them to reality as it really is ‘in Christ.’”

Enjoy, then, fellow pilgrim, the trek from exploring the meaning of Pilate’s question to Jesus, “What is truth?” to engaging in analysis of twenty-first-century culture to navigating the labyrinth of postmodern confusion to venturing on the arduous yet rewarding path toward accurate “literal” biblical interpretation. Let’s debrief together at the end of our journey for some moments of recommissioning and farewell.

Andreas J. Köstenberger  
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# NOTES

## INTRODUCTION

1. Cf. Francis Schaeffer, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* in *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer*, Vol. 5 (Wheaton: Crossway, 1982), co-written with C. Everett Koop, in which Schaeffer deals with scourges such as abortion and euthanasia.
2. E.g., Francis Schaeffer, *Escape from Reason*, in *Complete Works*, Vol. 1, 218-219, where Schaeffer writes, "It is an important principle to remember . . . that . . . though we do not have exhaustive truth, we have from the Bible what I term 'true truth.' In this way we know true truth about God, true truth about man and something truly about nature. Thus on the basis of the Scriptures, while we do not have exhaustive knowledge, we have true and unified knowledge."
3. *Ibid.*, 233. For an assessment of Schaeffer's work, see the theme issue, "The Legacy of Francis Schaeffer," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 6 (Summer 2002).
4. Francis Schaeffer, *Death in the City*, in *Complete Works*, Vol. 4, 230.
5. Francis Schaeffer, *The Great Evangelical Disaster*, in *Complete Works*, Vol. 4, 401.
6. See also the comparable challenges issued by Carl F. H. Henry in many of his works, including *Twilight of a Great Civilization: The Drift Toward Paganism* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1988) and *Toward a Recovery of Christian Belief* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1990); and by Charles Colson, with Nancy Pearcey, *How Now Shall We Live?* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1999, alluding to Schaeffer's *How Shall We Then Live?*) and with Ellen Santilli Vaughn, *Against the Night: Living in the New Dark Ages* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant, 1989). But note the critique of Schaeffer, Henry, and Colson as engaging in "cultural pessimism" by James A. Patterson, "Cultural Pessimism in Modern Evangelical Thought: Francis Schaeffer, Carl Henry, and Charles Colson," *JETS* (forthcoming).
7. For good examples, see David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) and *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994); and Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay:*

*Defending Christianity against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000).

8. Emphasis added.

#### CHAPTER ONE: "WHAT IS TRUTH?" PILATE'S QUESTION IN ITS JOHANNINE AND LARGER BIBLICAL CONTEXT

1. Or, perhaps, with George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (WBC 36; rev. ed.; Waco, TX: Word, 1999), 332: "Truth—what is that?!" As Ernst Haenchen, *A Commentary on the Gospel of John* (trans. Robert W. Funk; ed. Robert W. Funk with Ulrich Busse; Hermeneia Commentary Series [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984], 2:180 (cited in *ibid.*) observes, "If Pilate now asks, when face to face with this truth, the truth that stands before him, 'What is truth?,' it is clear that Pilate does not belong among those whom 'the Father has given to Jesus.'" There is a good possibility that Pilate and Jesus discoursed in Greek, the *lingua franca* of the day, which would have provided common ground between Pilate, who spoke Latin, and Jesus, who spoke Aramaic. Cf. Craig L. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendricksen, 2003), 2:1113: "Presumably Jesus and Pilate converse in Greek, the *lingua franca* of the Eastern empire, known to all educated Romans."
2. The Scripture quotations in this chapter are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.
3. Darrell L. Bock, *Jesus According to Scripture: Restoring the Portrait from the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 525, reflects the scholarly consensus, dividing John 18—19 as follows: (1) Jesus' arrest and appearance before Annas, with Peter's denials (18:1-27); (2) Jesus' trial before Pilate (18:28—19:16a); and (3) Jesus' crucifixion, death, and burial (19:16b-42).
4. E.g., Gen. 24:27, 48; 32:10; 47:29; Exod. 28:26; Deut. 22:20; 33:8; Josh. 2:14; Judg. 9:15; etc. Keener, *John*, 1:418, notes that 90 percent of the instances of *alētheia* in the LXX translate the Hebrew 'emeth and concludes that "'truth' often includes the sense of 'covenant faithfulness' in the Fourth Gospel."
5. E.g., Marcus Aurelius 9.1.2. See the discussion in Keener, *John*, 1:417-419.
6. E.g., Cicero, *Inv.* 2.53.161. A possible parallel to the present passage is Cicero, *Nat. Deor.* 1.67: *sed ubi est veritas?* ("But where is truth?"). Cited in *Neuer Wettstein: Texte zum Neuen Testament aus Griechenland und Hellenismus*, Band I/2: *Texte zum Johannesevangelium* (ed. Udo Schnelle; Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2001), 795.
7. On "truth" in the OT, see the paper on this topic presented by Ronald Youngblood at the 2004 ETS annual meeting in San Antonio, Texas. There is some debate as to whether 'emeth and 'emunah are both to be construed as conveying the notion of faithfulness. Some equate the meaning of these expressions (e.g., R. W. L. Moberly, "אֱמֶת," *NIDOTTE*, 1:427-433; Willem