



# A word on the Word

A monthly series on the Bible by Carrie Boren, Missioner for Evangelism

*Your truth, my truth — is there absolute Truth?*

## *“Modern” philosophical thought*

The “Modern” age thrived between 1789 and the 1900s. Its roots were embedded in 18th century Enlightenment, which emphasized rational thought and scientific inquiry.<sup>5</sup> In his pivotal work *Discourse of Method* published in 1637, Descartes attempted to ground all knowledge in infallible reason. His formulation began with the “I,” the knower, the subject whose very existence is predicated on the mere fact that the subject thinks. Out of this line of thought came some distinct characteristics of modernity:

- 1) All persons can know truth by using logical reasoning. Locke said: “Reason must be our last judge and guide in everything.”<sup>6</sup>
- 2) Truth can be found through study, provided the proper foundations and methods are in place.
- 3) Scientific knowledge is the model for all knowledge. Only data obtained through empirical means can proven something to be true. This applies to soft as well as hard sciences.
- 4) Naturalism gains prominence. Hume and others lead a movement to debunk all things supernatural, especially miracles.
- 5) Locke, Kant, Hegel, and others assume certainty is not only desirable but also attainable.<sup>7</sup> A profound sense of optimism prevails as civilization uncovers truth and advances society.
- 6) What modernity judges to be truth works for everyone at all times and in the same way.

## *Modernism*

Modernism’s view of absolute universal truth influenced society on every level. Marxism, fascism, capitalism, and American democracy all embraced the notion that humans could solve all social ills by assigning universal truth across cultural, economic, religious, racial, and ethnic lines.<sup>8</sup> Modernism’s conquest tendencies fueled Western imperialism, replicative architecture, and universal welfare, health care, and education policies. Modern thought viewed religion as mere opinion based on faith, and since faith was a private matter, it became less and less a part of public discourse.

## *Postmodern philosophical thought*

Postmodernism was born out of disillusionment with modernism. Friedrich Nietzsche’s (1844 – 1900) ideas devastated Enlightenment paradigms in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, decades before culture moved in that direction.<sup>9</sup> He argued that universal truths were not actual truths but only that which a particular group established in order to dominate others. Truth was formed by a “language of interpretation,”<sup>10</sup> — *i.e.*, the language a given culture used shaped its understanding of truth. Therefore, truth was merely a statement about human subjectivity and nothing more.

Nietzsche, however, offered no alternative to the modernist social construct. He believed the powers in

authority would continue to dominate societies’ beliefs about truth. As a result, he “brought Western philosophy face to face with the knotty issues of the nature of interpretation. He articulated the question and left other thinkers to seek the answers.”<sup>11</sup> In addition, Nietzsche declared that Christian theologians “improperly” claimed, “that their own beliefs are rational, universal, and axiomatic,”<sup>12</sup> and he proudly heralded the “death of God.”

Michael Foucault (1926 – 1984) is “Nietzsche’s truest twentieth century successor” and “epitomizes the post-modern scholar.” Foucault referred to himself as an “archaeologist of knowledge” — which he defined as an amorphous construct created by a subjective belief system and a particular groups’ desire for power.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, it contained no objective truths because whichever group was in power defined it for the rest of society.

Foucault did not search history to discover what had actually occurred because he believed history was nothing more than an interpretation of what took place between power relationships. It had no intrinsic meaning because it represented only what people in power had contracted as truth. Therefore, history was not something to be discovered; it was created and biased. Foucault encouraged members of society to question any notions of truth and be wary of those in power. All modern constructs of authority, institution, centralization, and hierarchy that once represented progress should be subjected to scrutiny.

Philosophers like Nietzsche and Foucault weren’t the only ones to bring down modernism. Art, architecture, television, film, fiction, and voices of traditionally marginalized ethnic, religious, racial, and economic groups did their part. Modernism’s demise occurred because of its failure to heal social ills combined with an increasingly pluralistic society.

## *Postmodernism*

Postmodernism was born in St. Louis on July 15, 1972. Many considered the St. Louis Pruitt-Igoe housing project for those on welfare to be an archetype of modernity with its goal of employing “technology to create a utopian society for the benefit of all.”<sup>14</sup> After Pruitt-Igoe’s inhabitants had repeatedly vandalized the building and the government had renovated it many times, dynamite finally brought the building down in a cloud of dust.<sup>15</sup> The embodiment of modernism had failed.

Postmodernism is not necessarily anti-modernism, but it does diametrically oppose modernism’s fundamental principles about truth and methods of belief, and it marks the “end of a single, universal worldview.”<sup>16</sup> It regards universal truth as a tool of oppression and pluralism as a vehicle of tolerance and peace. Anyone can operate under any belief system as long as it doesn’t harm others. Truth is a matter of personal taste, and therefore, no one can dictate to another person what is true because absolute objective truths do not exist. “Truth is simply what we, as individuals and communities, make it to be and nothing more.”<sup>17</sup>

In conversations with friends about my faith, I have discovered many of them have embraced an increasingly accepted worldview that absolute truth does not exist.

For example, when I’ve shared with a friend that the foundation of Christianity is revealed truth and Jesus is uniquely “the way, the truth, and the life,” I’ve encountered the following responses.

1) “I am so glad that Christianity is working for you. Good for you for finding something that brings you happiness!” My friend exhibits no concern whether or not Christianity is true but simply rejoices that I have found something to bring me peace.

2) “How wonderful that we have both found our way. You have Christianity, and I have my new religion. They are both true.”

3) My friend scowls and accuses me of being intolerant and rude.

The “new” relativistic worldview assumes that all “truth” is based on personal experience. “If it works for you, then it is true.” It has no sense of absolute right or wrong. “Anything goes. If it feels good, do it.” Therefore, it considers any claim to absolute truth to be oppressive, presumptuous, naive, and arrogant. On the other hand, pluralism and relativism, are compassionate, tolerant, and empowering.<sup>1</sup>

The good news is that Christianity has challenged every worldview and prevailed. Jesus calls all Christians to share our faith with others. The apostle Peter wrote, “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect” (1 Pet. 3:15). In order to affirm and defend Christianity, we must understand what truth is and why the current pluralistic belief system has come to deny it.

## *Background*

Grappling with the notion of truth is nothing new. Aristotle understood truth to mean “the agreement or correspondence between a proposition and an existing state of affairs.”<sup>2</sup> That is, if someone says it is raining outside and observation or inquiry shows that this is indeed the case, then it is true. “But there are a great many instances where we claim to be speaking truths that are not simple propositions of this kind and that demand different criteria for judging their truth or falsity.”<sup>3</sup>

In the past one hundred years, a steady shift has occurred from recognition of universal absolute truths to a denial of those concepts and an affirmation that all “truth” is relative and subjective.<sup>4</sup> Social scientists describe this transformation as a movement from modernity to post modernity.