Jerry L. Walls

*Can Postmodernism Handle the Truth?*
A Review Essay

**Truth and the New Kind of Christian**
*R. Scott Smith*
Wheaton: Crossway

**Whatever Happened to Truth?**
*Andreas Kostenberger, ed.*
Wheaton: Crossway

**But Is It All True?: The Bible and The Question of Truth**
*Alan G. Padgett and Patrick R. Keifert*
Grand Rapids: Eerdmans
2006, 187 pp. paper, $16.00

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Truth has had a remarkably distinguished career. Along with goodness and beauty, it has enjoyed the rare status of being ranked among those things that are absolutely essential for a meaningful life. Countless people have died in its name rather than deny it or compromise it or dishonor it. In Western culture, the supreme value of truth has been largely due to the Christian faith and its conviction that God exists and is a God of truth. He has revealed truth about himself and about us and this truth is essential for us to experience salvation, the ultimate meaning of life.

This commitment to the value of truth carried over into the modern period, even when belief in Christianity, and even God himself, began to wane in intellectual circles. Indeed, the leaders of the so-called enlightenment waged the battle for what they believed was the truth. Under the banner of reason, they aspired to throw off the shackles of tradition and authority and what they viewed as superstitions that were holding mankind back from true progress. The truth as they saw it was less comforting than Christianity because it was confined to naturalistic resources and thus had to sacrifice the hope for eternal life and ultimate meaning. But they claimed the moral highroad in being faithful to the truth that modern science disclosed even when it did not match our deepest hopes and highest aspirations.

The centuries long status that truth has enjoyed is now in jeopardy, at least in much of Western culture. The amorphous worldview known as postmodernism rejects the sort of grand meta-narratives that the Christian account of revelation represents and is equally suspicious of objective truth claims generated by reason. Christians, one might think, would not be kindly disposed to the ideology of postmodernism.

Curiously, however, many Christian spokespersons and theologians have in fact greeted the ascendancy of postmodernism with nearly unbridled enthusiasm. They see in postmodernism new opportunities for evangelism and powerful new expressions of Christian faith. Brian McLaren’s book A New Kind of Christian is only the best known of a number of works that hail the wonderful new version of Christianity emerging in postmodern times. Despite all the gushing enthusiasm, there is considerable doubt that postmodernism represents the wonderful new opportunity its proponents insist it is precisely because it is not clear that it can handle the truth.

It is just this concern for the truth that animates the volumes currently
under review, as is evident from their titles. *Truth & The New Kind of Christian* by R. Scott Smith is obviously directed at popular authors such as McLaren and Tony Jones, but it also critiques more scholarly versions of postmodern theology, including such writers as John Franke, Stanley Grenz, Stanley Hauerwas, and Brad Kallenberg. Much of this book describes, in introductory fashion, just what postmodernism is and how it has shaped the emerging church movement. The more interesting parts of the volume come in the chapters devoted to criticism. In chapter six, “Critiquing the Emerging Church,” Smith shows that McLaren and Jones not only operate with a simplistic understanding of modernity, but also have a superficial and misinformed grasp of some of the key notions they inveigh against, such as foundationalism.

The chapter concludes with a couple of case studies in which the author compares his own story with that of McLaren. Both came out of narrow legalistic backgrounds which they had to deal with in order to experience Christianity as healing and liberating. Smith came to experience healing in a context of academic and church communities that emphasized not only objective truth but the reality of grace. In analyzing all this, it was clear that the things stifling him spiritually had nothing to do with foundationalism or objective truth. Smith suggests that McLaren has made the mistake not only of misdiagnosing his own problems in tracing them to modernity, but has also overreacted to his conservative background by projecting his personal experience on the whole church in the West.

In subsequent chapters, Smith argues that postmodern views of epistemology are relativistic and therefore hostile to traditional Christian truth claims and practices of ministry. In his final chapter he defends not only the reality of objective truth, but also the possibility of knowing it. This chapter is not only more intellectually demanding of readers than previous ones, but is also unclear in places. For example, the discussion of intentionality and intensional qualities is likely to be lost on the philosophically untrained.

*Whatever Happened to Truth?* is a collection of four plenary addresses that were delivered to the 56th annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in 2004 in San Antonio, Texas. The first paper is by volume editor Andreas Kostenberger, who teaches New Testament at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and also edits the *Journal of The Evangelical Theological Society*. Kostenberger’s paper examines Pilate’s famous question, “What is truth?” in the larger contexts of the Gospel of John and the Bible as a whole. He argues that what the question represents is an encounter between political power and the ultimately greater power of truth. This truth for John is not located in God generically, but specifically in Jesus.
The second essay, by Baptist leader Albert Mohler, is a broad critique of how truth has been devalued in contemporary culture. The strength of this essay is the big picture it paints and its challenge to evangelicals to take the doctrine of revelation seriously as the basis of an epistemology that has the resources to avoid the nihilism and relativism that characterize so much postmodern thought. In some of its details, however, it is a bit careless. For instance, William Abraham is listed among evangelical thinkers who encourage us to embrace postmodernism, which surely misrepresents his position. Also, Mohler refers to Robert Alston’s defense of realism but he presumably meant to refer to William Alston.

The third essay, by philosopher J. P. Moreland, entitled “Truth, Contemporary Culture, and the Postmodern Turn” is a wonderfully concise defense of the traditional but much-despised among postmoderns correspondence theory of truth. His section on “Five Confusions that Plague Postmodernism” would be a very valuable dose of clarity for anyone who has trouble sorting out postmodern rhetoric but senses that something is deeply awry in much of it. Indeed, Moreland’s essay discusses more concisely and clearly some of the issues that Smith is less clear on, as noted above. His essay concludes with the pointed charges that it is “irresponsible” and “cowardly” for Christian leaders to embrace postmodernism and, moreover, that it represents “a form of intellectual pacifism that, at the end of the day, recommends backgammon while the barbarians are at the gate.”

The final essay in the volume, “Lost in Interpretation? Truth, Scripture and Hermeneutics” by theologian Kevin Vanhoozer, is also a very insightful overview of a set of complex issues. His essay begins with these lines, which pointedly sum up what is at stake in hermeneutics: “Biblical interpretation is the soul of theology. Truth is the ultimate accolade that we accord an interpretation. Christian theology therefore succeeds or fails in direct proportion to its ability to render true interpretations of the word of God written.” Of course, much contemporary hermeneutical theory denies that there are any such privileged interpretations that can be recognized as true ones, or doubts if we could ever determine what they are. After describing the contemporary emphasis on the “situated” interpreter as well as the standard conservative picture of truth in interpretation, Vanhoozer offers his own proposal that attempts to do justice to both of these concerns. Vanhoozer takes seriously the evangelical doctrine of biblical inerrancy but rejects what he calls a “cheap inerrancy” that would use the doctrine to sidestep legitimate issues of interpretation.

The third book, *But Is It All True? The Bible and the Question of Truth* grew out of a colloquium funded by the Lilly Foundation, entitled “The Bible and Truth.” Like the previous volume, it is composed of papers from
various disciplines, including biblical theology, systematic theology, philosophy, and preaching. Unlike the previous volume, all of whose authors shared a commitment to biblical inerrancy, this one is more theologically diverse.

A major point of discussion in the book is Nicholas Wolterstorff’s influential volume *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (1995). Ben Ollenberger’s entire essay is a critical reflection on Wolterstorff’s book, and Mark Wallace and Stephen Davis also offer significant comment on it. Moreover, Wolterstorff himself contributes a brief essay entitled “True Words,” in which he points out that the word “true” is regularly attributed to things other than assertions. While not in any way downplaying the importance of true assertions in scripture, Wolterstorff attempts to arrive at a way of understanding the word in its other uses as well. The suggestion he offers is that “the root notion of truth is that of something’s measuring up—that is, measuring up in being or excellence.”

The essay in the volume that orthodox Christians will likely disagree with most is the one by Mark Wallace entitled “The Rule of Love and the Testimony of the Spirit in Contemporary Biblical Hermeneutics.” Wallace’s attempt to make sense of scripture has led him to the conviction that “discerning the theological truth of the Bible is largely a constructive rather than a descriptive enterprise.” The thesis that he defends is “that biblical truth is the ethical performance of what the Spirit’s interior testimony is prompting the reader to do in the light of her encounter with scriptural texts.” As a practical example of his method of interpretation, he offers as a case study an examination of the “pressing” issues of the ordination of homosexual persons and the blessing of the union of homosexual couples. He suggests that if we take the “Spirit-inspired ideal of love and hospitality toward others as the hermeneutical lodestar” that should guide us in our encounters with scripture, then we will be inclined to accept practicing homosexuals as ministers and bless their unions.

A very different view is defended in the essays by Stephen Davis and Alan Padgett. Davis’ excellent essay answers the question “What Do We Mean When We Say ‘The Bible is True’”? His answer is that

we mean that our attitude toward the Bible is such that we believe what it says, we trust it, we lay ourselves open to it. We allow our rational structures and beliefs to be influenced by it. ..In short, we submit to the Bible and we place ourselves under its theological authority.

In explaining what he means by these claims, Davis makes clear that he is “miles apart” from Wallace on several important philosophical issues,
including the crucial point that he sees “the act of interpretation primarily (not entirely) as the discovery of something that is there in the text rather than the creation of something new.” Padgett’s brief essay seeks to discover an understanding of truth “that is adequate to the confession of the crucified Messiah as Lord and Savior—as the way, the truth and the life.” Beginning with the broad notion that truth is “the mediated disclosure of being,” Christ is the truth because he is the incarnation of God’s very being, and the Bible is true because it mediates Christ to us through its texts.

Ellen Charry’s stimulating essay commends a “sapiential theology” that rests on an epistemology that joins knowledge of God with right living. She traces a number of epistemological crises that undermined this understanding of truth and argues that the current crisis represents an opportunity to recover this vision of theology since at least some streams of postmodernism are concerned to connect the knower with truth and goodness. Her essay has the unfortunate tendency at times to put at odds concerns that should be seen as complementary. For instance, she poses what she calls the “fundamental sapiential question” thus: “Is theology a technique for promoting orthodoxy against challenge or is it the formation of the soul for the enjoyment of God?”

Well, I would not choose to call theology a “technique” but I would argue that theology is properly concerned with promoting orthodoxy against challenge, just as it is concerned with forming the soul for the enjoyment of God. Indeed, concern for orthodoxy is essential for rightly forming the soul to “glorify God and enjoy him forever” as one classic doctrinal standard famously puts it.

David Bartlett begins his essay “Preaching the Truth,” with a quotation from Frederick Buechner’s novel The Final Beast. Distracted church attender Rooney Vail says to her minister: “‘There’s just one reason, you know, why I come dragging in there every Sunday. I want to find out if the whole thing’s true. Just true’ she said. ‘That’s all. Either it is, or it isn’t, and that’s the one question you avoid like death.’” While Bartlett concedes the ambiguities and complexities of truthful preaching, he leaves no doubt that preachers should not leave the Rooney Vails in their congregations forever frustrated.

The appearance of these volumes is one of a number of signals that the issue of truth is emerging afresh in a way that will demand deliberate and thoughtful attention from the pulpit as well as the academic lectern. Christian preachers and leaders need to articulate with care whether and in what sense they believe the claims of their faith are true. Both those who have embraced postmodernism and those who have not have some explaining to do, although of a very different sort.
This was demonstrated vividly in a fascinating and rather vigorous debate that was carried out recently (mostly by email) on the campus of Asbury Theological Seminary. The debate was precipitated by an article by an Asbury faculty member entitled “Knowing and Truth,” which began by asking: “Why argue that certain kind of truth claims must be held to express absolute truths?” After raising a number of stock objections to the notion of absolute truth, including the observation that “the world in which we find ourselves is complex and populated by different cultures, some of which make moral judgments rather differently,” he went on to suggest that “the notion of absolute truth is of minimal consequence for theological purposes, and ought simply to be dismissed forthwith from theological debate.”

While a number of faculty members took strong exception to this suggestion, others were more sympathetic, and argued that notions of absolute truth, objective truth, and universal truth were more the product of modernity than biblical theology. They alleged that claims of absolute truth were imperialistic and impersonal and detracted from the relational nature of Christian faith. Defenders of objective, universal truth replied that that understanding of truth was in currency long before the modern period, and indeed, that such an understanding of truth is inherent in the very doctrine of revelation. God has revealed certain truths about himself, truths that would surely qualify as absolute on even a very stringent understanding of that term.

The doctrine of revelation, moreover, has traditionally been taken to give believers warrant in claiming to know the truths that God has revealed. Now many postmoderns find the claim to knowledge itself disconcerting, and contend that any such claims bespeak a level of certainty that no one is entitled to hold. The practical implications of these disputes are large, the example of homosexual ordination, cited above, being only the most currently explosive. Larger, more fundamental issues yet are at stake. For instance, do we know the gospel is true? Is the truth of the gospel something that holds altogether independently of us and what we believe? Do we even know that God exists? If he does, is he a doubtful communicator? Is the gospel some sort of social construction that has arisen from the Christian community or communities? Does its truth consist finally in the fact that it is an expression of what we believe and have found true in our experience or in our communities of faith?

No doubt it seems more humble and authentic to many postmoderns to cast the gospel in such tentative terms, but the question remains of whether we are being true to the gospel when we do so. Moreover, is this really humility? In his Introduction to Christianity, the newly elected Pope observed that “it is nothing short of a fundamental certainty” for
contemporary people that we cannot know God himself, which contemporary people somehow understand as “humility in the presence of the infinite.” The irony here is not merely in the inversion of what we can take as certain, but also in the ground of humility. Whereas classical Christianity would say humility is required precisely because of what we know about God and ourselves through revelation, humility now is understood as a concession that we cannot really know anything about God.

Some of the most pervasive confusions in these debates concern the notion that all claims to knowledge of objective truth as well as claims to certainty have their roots in Cartesian doubts and the quest for absolute certainty of the Cartesian variety, a point made by both Smith and Moreland. This has also been an important emphasis in Alvin Plantinga’s magisterial work in epistemology. As Plantinga points out, the Cartesian standard for certainty and knowledge is an unrealistic one, and many people have made the unfortunate mistake of throwing out claims to knowledge and certainty because they cannot meet this standard.

None of the volumes currently under review are at the level of Plantinga’s rigorously detailed work in epistemology. However, they are serious works that make more broadly accessible some of the key insights of more technical philosophical and theological literature. They are an excellent place to start for anyone who faces the task of proclaiming Christian truth in today’s world, where the very notion of truth itself is a coin of dubious worth.