

Can We Know the Truth?

The Gospel Coalition Booklets

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Can We Know the Truth?

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The well-known Bible teacher James Montgomery Boice was once traveling by plane when the woman seated next to him discovered that he was a Christian minister. She responded by bringing out all of her objections to the Christian faith. First, she spoke against original sin, how it made no sense and how she would not accept it. Boice listened to her and then replied, “I see, but is it true?”

Next, she went on to the idea of judgment and hell, saying how uncivilized and amoral all of it was. “I see how you feel,” Boice answered, “but is it true?”

Finally, she erupted with her great distaste for virtually everything taught in the Bible, how it wasn’t modern or appealing to her way of thinking. As Boice began to open his mouth one last time, she interrupted, “Oh, I know, I know, none of that matters! ‘Is it true?’ you are going to say!”

That conversation took place around the year 1990. I suspect that had it taken place in the year 2010, the ending might well have been somewhat different. Instead of the woman conceding the point that truth is what matters, she likely would have taken the conversation in another direction: “How can you claim that your beliefs are true? No one can really know the truth, so what I feel about it is really all that matters.”

The point is that if Christians are to communicate the gospel truth to today’s postmodern generations, we will likely have to do more than simply state the truth. In many cases, it will not suffice to hold forth our Bible and walk friends down the famous “Romans Road” series of evangelistic verses. In addition, and often beforehand, we will need to answer questions such as, “Why should I accept that the Bible is true?” and, “That may be true for you, but why should it be true for anyone else?” These are questions concerning *epistemology*, that is, our beliefs and assumptions about knowledge and truth. Prior to giving our witness to Christian truth, we will often have to present clear Christian views about truth itself.

Richard D. Phillips

An evangelical approach to the knowledge of truth will need to incorporate our biblical convictions regarding God, mankind, sin, salvation, and more. Some might object that beginning with our beliefs injects subjectivity into the question, since our theory of truth presupposes certain truths. Our answer is that as Christians we cannot avoid the realities of who and what we are through our relationship to Jesus Christ.

The purpose of this booklet, then, is not to present an objective epistemology that anyone—Christian or not—would adopt. Rather, this presents a stance toward the knowledge of truth that reflects the core beliefs of our gospel faith and validates our experience as Christian believers. In other words, this chapter presents how we *as Christians* answer questions regarding the knowledge of truth.

Wouldn't it be better, some will ask, to meet our unbelieving neighbors on an objective epistemological common ground? The answer is that no such objective common ground exists that does not require Christians to ignore the lordship of Jesus. This we cannot honestly do. So are we left with nothing to say except the missionally frustrating, "You have to be born again to understand"? Not at all! Just as Christians have a gospel message to share with the world, we also have a God- and Christ-centered answer to important questions about knowing and truth.

Today's Crisis of Truth

We happen to be living in a historical moment of tension between two models or theories regarding the knowledge of truth: the *modern* and the *postmodern*. Modernity advanced for generations on the unshakable conviction that unaided human reason would successfully expand knowledge and apply truth. In the same way that Isaac Newton's physics produced knowledge about the truth of gravity, modernity believed in a rational advance toward truth in virtually every domain of life.

This continued until the realities of the twentieth century shook that unshakable conviction. Unaided reason did not turn out so well in the "truths" of Nazi Germany, post-World War II Communism, or Western imperialism. Nor did the science of unaided reason treat the Bible and its gospel very favorably; the rationalist dogma replaced the biblical version of Jesus with various portraits in its own image.