



# How Can There Be Truth That Is True for Everyone?

By Owen Strachan

## DIFFICULT Issues

Our discussion of truth begins, as many things could, with *Star Wars*. In the third installment of the series, the virtuous Jedi master Obi-Wan Kenobi battles his protégé, Anakin Skywalker, in a sad fight to the death. At one point in the epic duel, Kenobi shouts to Anakin, who has become something of an evil demi-god on the side of the Siths (the bad guys), that “only a Sith speaks in absolutes.” This comment, made without irony in the middle of a light-saber duel, of all things, captures very nicely what many people in the broader culture think about truth. Only evil, repressive, hostile people believe that truth and statements about truth are binding upon everyone.

This mindset diverges radically from the biblical worldview most Christians are familiar with, the worldview that predominated in the West for many centuries. How and why, then, have things changed? In this very brief essay, we’ll **first** take a historical look at shifting currents of thought on truth in the West over the last several centuries; **second**, we’ll examine the cur-

rent state of cultural thought regarding truth with a particular emphasis on postmodernism, critique postmodernism, and present the biblical perspective on truth; and **third**, we’ll conclude with some broader points to remember concerning Christians and truth.

### **I. From Pre-modernists to Obi-Wan: A Historical Overview of Western Thought on Truth**

In this section, we’ll broadly and briefly sketch the way that people in the European (and later American) world have understood truth. Here, then, are six eras we can identify as possessing a certain approach to the nature of truth:

**1. Premodern**—In the premodern era comprising the sixth through the fourteenth centuries, Western people (Europeans) believed in the concept of absolute truth. They accepted the reality of hierarchical structures. Their view of the world was Word- and text-shaped. Truth and any sense of meaning, purpose, and moral imperative

derived from the Bible. These assumptions were largely unquestioned. From the sixth through the fourteenth centuries, the Catholic Church dominated the West; its authority was absolute, and it derived this authority (so it taught) from God and the Bible.

**2. Renaissance**—Occurring in the fourteenth through the sixteenth centuries, the thinkers of the Renaissance had one foot in the world of hierarchy and biblical authority, and another in the world of humanist exploration and man-centered inquiry. Many intellectual leaders of the day believed that absolute truth could be found, but they began to root the source of this reality in themselves, not the Bible or the Church. The most famous example of such thinking: Rene Descartes, who famously declared “I think, therefore I am.”

**3. Reformation**—Spanning the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Reformation was a positive theological development, but it exerted some dubious cultural effects on European society. Though the great reformer Martin Luther did not desire it, rebellion broke out across post-1521 Germany. Some who rebelled did so for theological reasons; others simply seized the moment and fought against established authority. Here were the seeds of the Enlightenment rebellion against absolute truth.

**4. Enlightenment**—Rising in the eighteenth and stretching into the nineteenth century, the essence of the Enlightenment was free, nonreligious inquiry into matters of truth without reference to Scripture, the church, or other hierarchical figures. Not all Enlightenment thinkers were atheists; many, however, were. Intellectuals like Voltaire, Montesquieu, and Rousseau anchored truth not in the mind of God, and the Word of God, but in the mind of man and the realm of logic. Most famously, the French *philosophes* deified “Reason” as a goddess in one pagan temple.

**5. Nihilism and Existentialism**—Influential in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries as the seeds of atheism sprouted in Europe, these groups

believed that since God was no longer a valid concept and was, in fact, dead, it was up to them to create their own meaning. The most famous nihilist, German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, famously proclaimed the death of God in this era in his book *The Gay Science*: The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. “Whither is God?” he cried. “I will tell you. *We have killed him*—you and I!” Alongside Nietzsche and the nihilists came the existentialists. Camus, a famous writer in this movement, affirmed the nothingness and purposelessness of life and sought to create his own meaning in life. With the path lost in the dark, one was left to make his own way.

**6. Postmodernism**—A twentieth and twenty-first century movement, this group, popular in the current day (though waning), rejects modernism as encapsulated in the Enlightenment. They question the ability of autonomous human reason to find truth and meaning. They believe that truth claims are power games, language that people use to manipulate one another. They emphasize the many perspectives of given events rather than one interpretation of it, though they still sometimes speak in absolutes without intending to, just as Obi-Wan did.

## II. Refuting the Jedi: What Postmodernists Say and How Christians Can Respond

We now have a road map for the western journey from the land of absolute to the terrain of personal determinism. In this section, we look more closely at what postmodernists actually say, critique these statements, and provide a biblical understanding of true truth.

### A. What Postmodernists Say (Sometimes) and How to Respond

- There is no objective view of reality. **This is an objective view of reality.**
- Because we are cultural, we cannot judge another culture. **This is a cultural judgment.**
- There are no facts, only interpretations. (Nietzsche) **This is stated as a fact.**

- History is fiction...written from the bias of the writer. (Foucault) **So this statement is fiction, too?**
- Knowledge is power. Truth-bearers want to further their own interests. (Foucault) **So you, Mr. Foucault, are furthering your own interests in this statement.**
- Ethical claims are mere sentiment. (Rorty) **We'll be sure to note this the next time Mr. Rorty makes an ethical claim.**
- Deconstruction is justice. We explore contradictions in everything to fight injustice. (Derrida) **Let's then deconstruct this statement in order to fight Mr. Derrida's unjust ways.**
- Whoever spins best wins. (Fish) **You are spinning right now, Mr. Fish!**
- Incredulity toward metanarratives. Lyotard: "Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodernism as incredulity toward metanarratives." **This is a metanarrative.**
- All language is just word games. (Wittgenstein) **So is this statement, then.**

(Material derived from Art Lindsley, *True Truth*, 61)

As one can see, postmodernism is doomed to intellectual self-destruction. Its central principles cannot be consistently and logically applied. Here, then, is where we can offer a comprehensive, coherent, symphonically aligned worldview to our postmodern friends.

## **B. How a Christian Can Guide Postmodernists to Discover "True Truth"**

*Help them to understand that truth must have a foundation.* If it does not, the postmodernists are right—truth has no basis.

*Note that this foundation must be absolute and totally trustworthy.* If the foundation is anything less than transcendent and normative, truth cannot be true for everyone.

*Find the location for the wisdom and direction of this foundation.* So you've got a foundation—great! Now, what is it? What does it say? Christians find their source for truth not in

themselves, but in the Word of God.

*Discover the truth laid out by this source.* This must be done by trusting the evaluation of literal statements. You can't pick and choose what you like and do not like.

*Point out that people cannot be the source of absolute truth.* People are not absolute and transcendent; they are contradictory and finite.

*Point them to the truth of God's Word.* Unlike postmodernists, who have no ground for truth and life and ethics and hope, we have a sure ground, for we trust in the God who has spoken and whose very Word is life.

Here are some verses that teach us about truth in the biblical sense:

1. **Isaiah 45:19** "I did not speak in secret, in a land of darkness; I did not say to the offspring of Jacob, 'Seek me in vain.' I the LORD speak the truth; I declare what is right."

2. **John 14:5-6** Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

3. **Romans 1:18-20** For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

4. **2 Timothy 2:24-26** And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.

*See also Psalm 119:160; John 8:31-32; John 17:17; Romans 1:24-25; Hebrews 10:26; 1 John 5:6, among others.*

To summarize these verses, the Lord speaks the truth; what He says is right. He has most fully revealed truth in the person of His Son. Jesus Christ is the very flesh and bones of truth. People, however, deny this truth in both an intellectual and a moral sense. Repentance, then, involves a total transformation of heart and mind. Thus we see that the Bible speaks clearly and helpfully about truth and its relation to our lives.

### **III. Sword Beats Lightsaber: Points to Remember**

We need to tie all that we have studied together. Here are some overarching matters to keep in mind as you answer this question in real life.

Realize that there's probably a lot more behind the question, "How can there be truth that's true for everyone?" than you can see—ethical issues, the desire to stick with a sinful lifestyle, and so on. Often, people who say that they don't believe in truth have moral and ethical reasons for not doing so. They *want* to sleep around. Morality often drives philosophy.

Share the gospel. Communicate that questioning God's truth is a sin, even if not done so out of a hostile mindset. Remember that even if you cannot convince someone intellectually of the power and coherence of the Christian worldview, it is not your words that save lost sinners, but the gospel. You don't need a PhD to be a fruitful Christian—you need the Holy Spirit, and you need only speak the words of God to see the Spirit move and convert a hell-bound sinner, whether they are smarter, wittier, or better educated than you are. At the end of the day, it's all about the gospel!

Also, speak, think, and live in confi-

dent terms: not "I believe" but "God says." This will get attention and, more importantly, honor God's true Word. I have found, interestingly, that since preparing this presentation, I have been far more bold about sharing the truth of Scripture than I formerly was. This is because this study has driven me to the essential matter of whether the Word is truth or not. Because I know that the Word is truth, I am freed up to speak the gospel boldly. As Christians, we possess rock-solid ground from which to evangelize. Know the Word, study it, and watch your faith increase and your evangelism grow in boldness and clarity.

Finally, know that truth is not meant to be lived out by just one person. It is meant to drive and shape the life of the Christian community, who together stands as a shining city on a hill, a light in the dark. The Christian community gathered in the form of the local church is the chief way that Christians testify to absolute truth. We are not "lone rangers" sent out in isolation; we are meant to be a body that together speaks and demonstrates and *proves* the truth of God's Word.

### **Conclusion**

We have surveyed Western thought on truth, postmodern approaches to truth, and the Christian perspective on God and His truth. We close by suggesting an amendment to the statement of Obi-Wan Kenobi, who made an excellent swordsman but a poor philosopher. It is clear that we all speak in absolutes, whether we believe in God or not. Only a Christian, though, speaks God's absolutes, the truths of God's holy Word. As the author of Hebrews makes clear, the Word is a sharp sword, an instrument of righteousness no light-saber can touch.

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