

## BOOK REVIEW

of

D.A. Carson (general editor),  
*Telling the Truth: Evangelizing Postmoderns*,  
Zondervan, 2000.

This book is in the Evangel Library,  
and this review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

I generally do not care for books with many authors, as this one has, and the book is also not exactly hot off the press. However, I only recently read it, and the topic is timely. Hence this review. Just how does one present Jesus Christ to those who hold a Postmodernist worldview? Jesus said “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” But, as it says on the back cover of the book, “How do you communicate truth to a world that isn’t sure what truth is – or even if truth is? How do you commend spiritual absolutes to people who insist there are none?” The book *Telling the Truth* is one of the outcomes of a conference held at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School May 13 – 15, 1998. Around nine hundred people attended the conference, and this book is the papers presented by twenty nine authors. Along with Trinity, cosponsors were InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Campus Crusade for Christ, the Navigators, the Billy Graham Center Institute of Evangelism, and the Bannockburn Institute for Christianity and Contemporary Culture. To save space, I will not list all twenty nine authors, but a few of the more well-known were as follows: Walter Bradley, D.A. Carson, James Sire, and Ravi Zacharias. With such a wide variety of presenters, quite a wide range of perspectives is represented, all of which could be labeled evangelical. Some of the perspectives we may question, but it is valuable to know what people are thinking on this vital topic.

The book is divided into 8 parts and 28 chapters. Part 1 is titled Opening Plenaries and contains two chapters: 1. *An Ancient Message, through Modern Means, to a Postmodern Mind*, and 2. *The Touch of Truth*. Part 2 is titled The Challenge and contains two chapters: 3. *Why is Religious Pluralism Fun – and Dangerous?*, and 4. *Epistemology at the Core of Postmodernism: Rorty, Foucault, and the Gospel*. Part 3 is titled Critical Topics and contains six chapters: 5. *Why Should Anyone Believe Anything at All?*, 6. *Two Ways to Live – and Biblical Theology*, 7. *Keeping Christ Central in Preaching*, 8. *The Uniqueness of Jesus Christ*, 9. *Communicating Sin to a Postmodern World*, and 10. *Turning to God: Conversion beyond Mere Religious Preference*. Part 4 is titled Critical Passages and contains two chapters: 11. *The Gospel Paradox: Declaring Sinners Righteous*, and 12. *The Ambassador’s Job Description*. Part 5 is titled Church, Campus, Ethnicity and contains four chapters: 13. *Church/Campus Connections: Model 1*, 14. *Church/Campus Connections: Model 2*, 15. *Penetrating Ethnic Pluralism: African-Americans*, and 16. *Reaching Out to Postmodern Asian-Americans*. Part 6 is titled This Relational Age and contains three chapters: 17. *Faithfully Relating to Unbelievers in a Relational Age*, 18. *The Lifestyle of the Great Commission*, and 19. *Authentic Church-Based Evangelism in a Relational Age*. Part 7 is titled Experiences and Strategies and contains seven chapters: 20. *Finding God at Harvard: Reaching the Post-Christian University*, 21. *Ministering in the Postmodern Academy*, 22. *Examples of Effective Evangelism*, 23. *Generating Hope: A Strategy for Reaching the Postmodern Generation*, 24. *William Carey Revisited: Going after Every College Student*, 25. *Evangelizing Postmoderns Using a Mission Outpost Strategy*, and 26. *The Gospel for a New Generation*. Part 8 is titled Closing Plenaries and contains two chapters: 27. *The Urgency of the Gospel*, and 28. *Athens Revisited*.

In the notes that follow are some gleanings from the book that bear especially on the topic of postmodernism, a topic of special interest to the current FLOCKS study of Nancy Pearcey’s book *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity*, Crossway Books, 2004. In chapter 3, authored by Harold A. Netland and Keith E. Johnson, the two-storied approach to truth is discussed: “One of the central issues in the pluralism debate concerns the nature of religious truth. What kind of claims do religions make? Is religious truth different from truth in science or history? One cannot respond to pluralism – informal or academic – without addressing these questions. . . . This discussion of the nature of religious truth enables us to answer three of the common assumptions of pluralists: that religion exists merely to meet psychological needs, that sincerity is more important than truth, and that religious beliefs should be interpreted metaphorically. . . . The fact is that each religion makes statements about the nature of reality, and the truth or falsity of those statements does matter. . . . Finally, for those who suggest that we have no basis on which to evaluate truth-claims, it may be helpful to point out the consequences of this line of thinking. An interesting example is the recent denial of the Holocaust. Although it is one of the best-documented examples of mass genocide in recent history, a very small but vocal group of Holocaust deniers maintain that the Holocaust is a hoax. Emory professor Deborah E. Lipstadt carefully documents their activities in her book *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (1993). Professor Lipstadt suggests that one reason deniers have gained a hearing on university campuses is because of the relativistic thinking that permeates the academy. One cannot have it both ways. One cannot affirm the historicity of an event like the Holocaust and insist, at the same time, that there are *no criteria* by which to make historical judgments.”

In chapter 27, authored by Ajith Fernando, it is noted how postmodernism undermines the ability to communicate: “As we with urgency pursue the ministry of the Word in this postmodern generation, we are faced with a problem that is related to postmodernism’s loss of confidence in the value of truth. This is the fact that words have lost their value in both the church and society. Carl F.H. Henry begins his massive six-volume work on *God, Revelation and Authority* with a chapter titled, ‘The Crisis of Truth and Word.’ In it he says, ‘The breakdown of confidence in verbal communication is a feature of our times.’ He points out that ‘preference for the nonverbal is especially conspicuous among the younger generation who increasingly surmise that words are a cover-up rather than a revelation of truth; that is, words are used to conceal, distort and deceive’.”

There are many books that can potentially help us understand the postmodern world we live in. While this one may not necessarily be the best available, it does offer many good insights.