

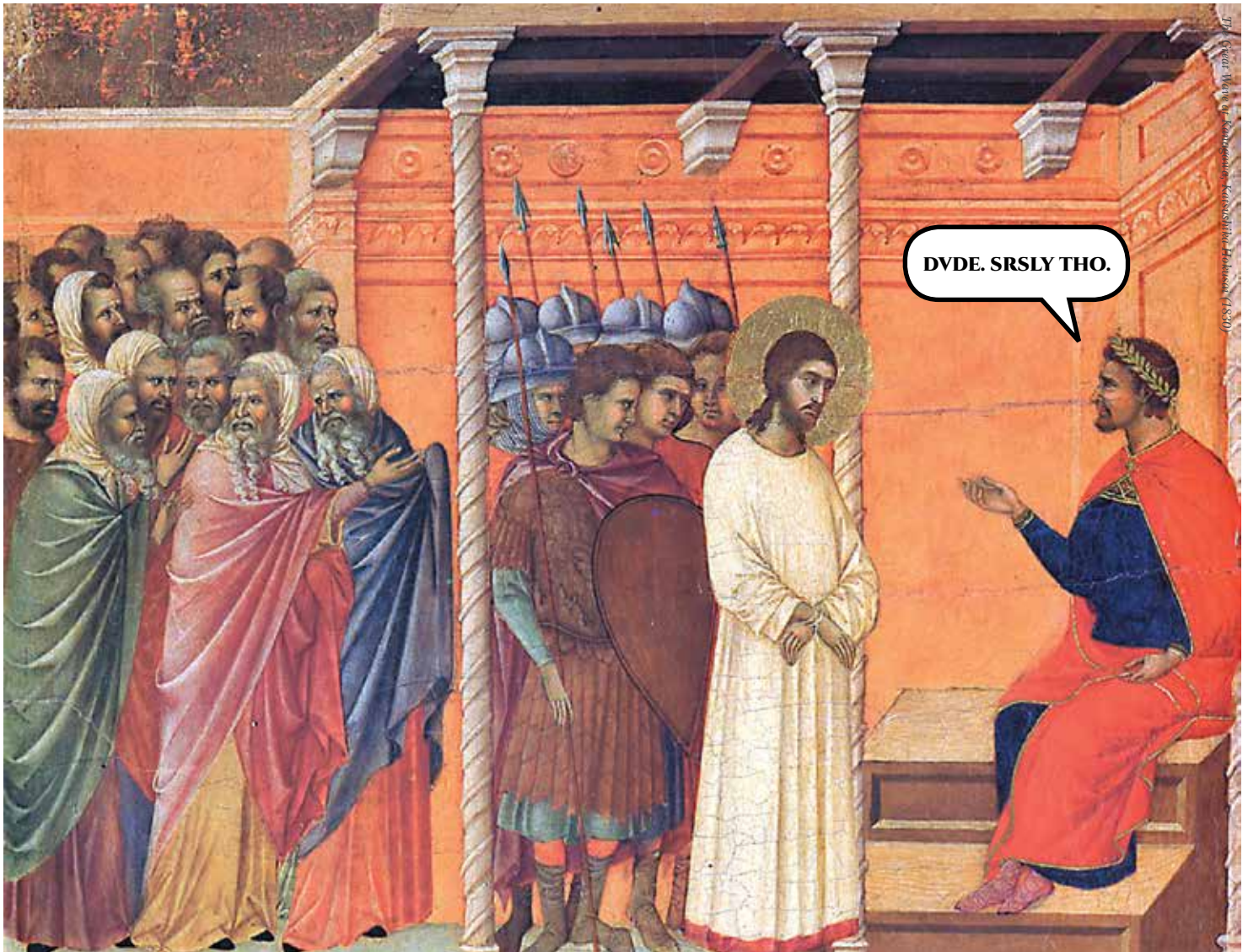


MISSION

ISSUE 3 2017

# CATALYST

Intelligent comment on faith and culture



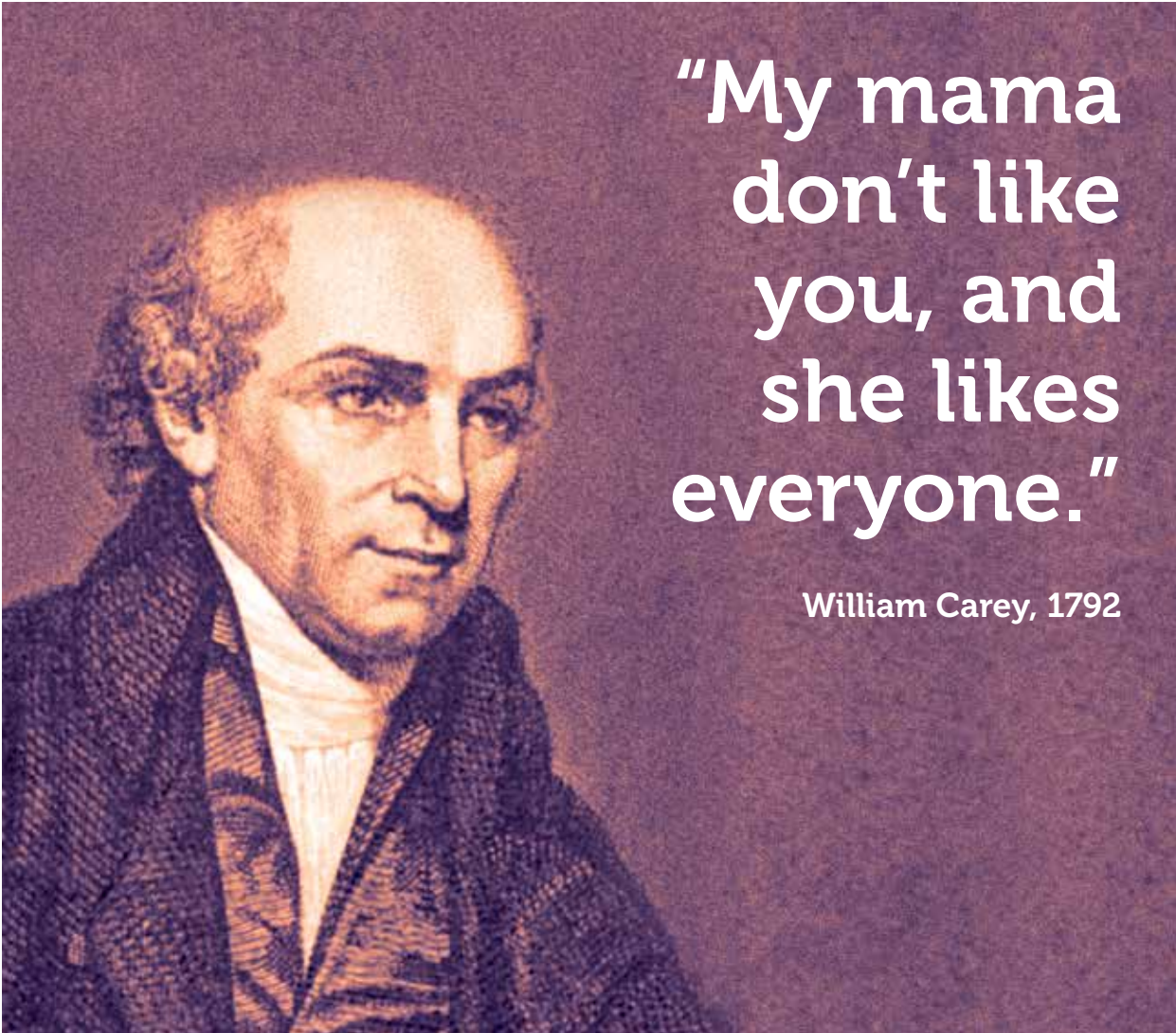
## TRUTH

Good news in an era of fake news

JAMES KA  
SMITH

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island discs*

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**"My mama  
don't like  
you, and  
she likes  
everyone."**

William Carey, 1792



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# ARE WE ON AUTO-PILATE?



## CHRISTIANS FIND OURSELVES IN AN AGE OF TRUTH-DECAY.

“**Y**ou’re not one of these people who believes the Bible is literally true, are you?” one of the contributors to this issue of *Catalyst* asked me almost a decade ago. It was a formative moment for me.

“Yes,” I said proudly. “Every bit of it, literally true, from Genesis to the maps.”

“So, the Psalms...?” they asked.

“Well, they are still true, it’s just that they are poet— oh, I see.”

I still believe the Bible is true. I think, though, that I understand a little better the depth and richness of what truth can mean. And as an evangelical, I know that truth is also a person. And Spirit. And Father.

Truth is a complicated thing. And it seems to be getting more complicated. We are living not so much in the atomic, space or information age as in the

Photoshop age. A time when seeing is in no way believing and the democratisation of knowledge, for all its benefits, has left us in a crisis of trust. We are admonished by memes like the one on this page to check facts before sharing stories that confirm our biases, but with invaluable hoax-busting sites like snopes.com under threat and traditional journalism in financial decline, this will only get harder.

The process of de-legitimising authority, accelerated most effectively by postmodernism decades ago, has left us with a billion citizen journalists and a negligible number of Editors. Where do we go for information we can trust rather than merely enjoy? Where can we find truth? Not in the traditional places.

Even *Mission Catalyst*, once a bastion of trustworthy fact, has (for just this one issue) succumbed. You’ll be surprised to learn, for instance, that BMS World Mission’s most famous father, William Carey, did not in fact pen the words attributed to him opposite on page 2 (though there’s a prize for the first sensible letter we get that also identifies the true author). But had they been less obviously wrong, would you have checked their provenance? So, as a reminder to always be vigilant and never fall prey to fake news, this issue of *Catalyst* contains a few intentional inaccuracies to keep you on your toes. But don’t be too alarmed: we’ve limited ourselves to one alternative fact in each author biography and the occasional pull-quote that may not be entirely representative of the article in which it sits. Spotting

these will be good practice for navigating the world outside, where truth seems to have taken a few knocks of late.

In the public sphere, we’ve moved on from *realpolitik* (which was bad enough) to ‘post-truth’ politics, where the followers of the most powerful man in the world seem immunised against facts. In the Church, the voices of identity politics on the left and conservative dogmatism on the right seem to place more importance on litmus tests and shibboleths for debaters than on the strength of their arguments. One side calls for the body of Christ to ‘move with the times’ and ignore truths that don’t fit in. The other clings to a handful of verses and proof texts and performs its own mental gymnastic exercises in ignoring facts, verses and experiences that fail to confirm their traditional beliefs. Most of us find ourselves somewhere between the two.

So, does truth really matter? Certainly, truth spoken without love damages our witness and damages people. But is that a reason to abandon that truth? Is it, as some would contend, a reason among many to change our concept of truth itself from something propositional to something lived? And, if so, what core remains of our belief that makes it in any recognisable way distinctively Christian?

If truth sets us free, then we all find ourselves sitting beside Pontius Pilate (pictured on the cover), not only asking with him: “What is truth?”, but face to face with Jesus, who claimed that title for himself. Whether we think the answer is absolute or relativist – traditional, Enlightenment or postmodern – one thing is certain: we cannot in good conscience simply wash our hands.

**Jonathan Langley**  
Editor and part-time hand model



All letters to Mission Catalyst at PO Box 49, 129 Broadway, Didcot, OX11 8XA and emails to [catalyst@bmsworldmission.org](mailto:catalyst@bmsworldmission.org) will be considered for publication and may be edited for length and style if selected. Many letters are invited. Not all are chosen.

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Q&A

# JAMES KA SMITH

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## WHAT IS TRUTH, AND DO WE EVEN CARE ABOUT IT? A NOTED CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHER ANSWERS SOME FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS.

**At this point I feel like most people understand that fake news exists, and also that algorithms on social media are feeding us information that reinforces our preconceptions. But knowing that doesn't seem to have made a difference**

**to most of us. We carry on regardless, assuming we see the whole picture. Do you think people actually care about truth?**

[Laughs] Yeah, it's a great question. I have to confess that I feel sometimes

they do not, and that what they care about is self-interest and preservation. I think people are remarkably hungry for information. I think there is still a kind of status or authority that comes with knowing things and being in the know.

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But that does not necessarily equate with a deep interest in the truth. It's a curious thing. On the one hand, to live in an information society is to live in a society that is dominated by a hunger to be in the know but, because of the proliferation of channels and the segmentation of media and the internet, everybody can be in the know in a way that confirms their biases. So that you can both congratulate yourself on how knowledgeable you are and at the same time not ever be bothered by knowing something that might upset your worldview. That, I think, is the most frustrating and worrisome reality that we inhabit.

**The reality we inhabit features the official spokesman for the most powerful person in the world using phrases like 'alternative facts'. It's funny in a way, but is there a danger of that shifting the discourse to almost legitimise a disdain for truth?**

Absolutely. As a philosopher, one of the things that strikes me is actually how ancient this problem is. In a sense, to read Plato's *Republic* is to see people already entertaining – and Socrates refuting – this possibility that 'might is right', and then turning that into an epistemology, a philosophy of knowledge, where I get to make the truth because I'm the one with the biggest loudspeaker, or I'm the one with the bully pulpit. There's a long philosophical tradition of undercutting that, because that's sophistry, that's actually not interested in the truth. I think what probably worries me the most as a Christian – I'm a Canadian living in the US – is just how many Christians have been susceptible to playing this game. You start to realise they're less interested in truth and they're more interested in power. And the closer Christians get to power, the more they seem kind of intoxicated by that power and therefore are willing to wink at the truth. And that compromises our witness in incredibly demoralising ways.

**Postmodernism critiqued and undermined the ideas of the Enlightenment and was long seen as a bogeyman for the evangelical Church as a potential threat to the very concept of truth. Has anyone (who isn't a professional philosopher) ever actually held the kind of cartoon relativist position the Church sometimes fears?**

I'm not sure that they have. It was a bit of a caricature and a strawman,

I think, that people erected. And I think it is important to realise that the Enlightenment is not necessarily your friend. Christians should be more interested in postmodernism than they were or are because actually, at least as a serious philosophical conversation,

critique of the Enlightenment's narrow and stunted view of rationality is that it also opens up a path to recover and retrieve and renew premodern, and I would say more holistic, ways of knowing, which are deeply communal.

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**“ What we are seeing is the radical individualisation of truth ”**

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postmodernism represented a critique of some of the really foundational assumptions of the Enlightenment. It is intriguing that we associated the Enlightenment in this context as a champion of truth. In a way that was true, but it was actually a very scaled-down, narrow construal of rationality and what counted as rational. In fact, what that vision of rationality undercut and dismissed was any sort of knowledge that would come from revelation, trusting authority or belief. In a sense, the Enlightenment project was really directed at undercutting some of the key epistemic commitments of orthodox Christianity. So it's odd then that Christians would champion it against this bogey man of postmodernism.

I actually think there's an argument to be made that this epistemic situation we find ourselves in now, of alternative facts and echo chambers, is a kind of coming to fruition of an Enlightenment prioritisation of the individual. If autonomy is at the

**Are you saying that those premodern epistemological positions are more accessible to us from within a postmodern way of thinking?**

Yeah. There's not one postmodernism. And there are different paths out of or through the postmodern. One can really be just a type of hyper-modernism, and it really does get you a kind of sophomoric relativism. But there was another really serious trajectory within postmodern thought that, precisely because it went back to the foundations and root of the Enlightenment itself and was critical of those, in a sense opened a path back to the recovery of premodern ways of knowing and being.

On the one hand, people associate the *enfant terrible* of postmodernism and deconstruction, Jacques Derrida, with crazy relativism. But on the other hand, he had this enduring interest in St Augustine, and was constantly returning to Plato. I think people who don't know these thinkers would be surprised in how much

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**“ Christianity isn't an intellectual system to be distilled into propositions ”**

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heart of the Enlightenment project, in a way what we are seeing is the radical individualisation of truth, so that 'I get to decide what is true'. In that sense, I think premodern ways of knowing emphasised a kind of communal and traditioned aspect of what counted as truth that we would do well to recover.

What intrigues me about the postmodern

they spend time engaging premodern ways of knowing and being. And that's the space where I think Christians should be going back to ancient and medieval traditions of reflection on knowledge and truth, and actually find a much more robust, embodied, capacious understanding. I don't think we should have any investment in shoring up the Enlightenment model

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of truth. It was never a friend of faith to begin with.

**Do you think Christianity, even in that premodern sense, is actually compatible with the mainstream of postmodernism and its ‘radical incredulity towards metanarrative’?**

“Incredulity towards metanarratives” was the famous line of Jean François Lyotard. What you’ll notice, however, is when you really dive down into what he’s saying there, what counts as a metanarrative for Lyotard is not a big story, it’s not just a mega-narrative. For him a metanarrative is precisely an account of the world that justifies itself by Reason with a capital R. This myth of a kind of objective, neutral, unbiased rationality. In other words, the examples of metanarrative for Lyotard are precisely the products of the Enlightenment. Hegelianism, Marxism, Freudianism. These are the examples of the metanarratives that congratulate themselves as if they are enlightened, unbiased, objective, *capital R* Rational truth. And Lyotard says postmodernism is skeptical, it’s incredulous about that. Well I think Christian faith is equally skeptical and incredulous about that kind of claim.

The flip side of course is the irony that so much Christian apologetics has fallen prey to, or wedded itself to, a very Enlightenment model of rationality. And I don’t think that that actually helps the faith. Part of what has frustrated me is how deeply modern some renditions of Christianity have been, particularly in apologetics conversations where people take themselves to be defending the faith. I think the scandal of Christian truth is that it is a truth that is entirely rooted and founded in revelation, which means that you have to take authority seriously. It also means that you know this and understand it through your embeddedness in the community that is the Body of Christ.

**Some conservatives see progressive Christians’ attempts to move from orthodoxy to orthopraxy (and de-emphasising the propositional truth of Christianity) as a threat to the concept of truth itself and to our faith. Is that fair?**

What would frustrate me is someone setting it up as a dichotomy. I don’t think that Christianity is just an intellectual

system that you can distil in propositions and then analyse in terms of syllogisms. It’s not just something that you know cognitively or propositionally. It is an encounter that one understands on a deeper register. And I think that understanding is absorbed through the participation and the practices of worship and liturgy in the Body of Christ. And that that gives rise to, gives birth to a vision of what love looks like, of what charity looks like, of what loving your neighbour looks like. I would just want to emphasise that I think the two are in concert, and

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“ Roger Moore was the definitive Bond ”

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there’s sort of a feedback loop. Orthodoxy, I would say, is a way of distilling the grammar of the belief of the community that is following Jesus on that practical level. And so I would just want to refuse the dichotomy.

**Is there a place for propositional truth at the heart of Christianity? I think the fear of many people is that when you don’t hold onto that tightly, and perhaps they want to hold onto it *too* tightly, it can become anything that we want it to?**

I think that’s a legitimate concern. This is what happens if you set these up dichotomously, whereas obviously a commitment to Christ, a commitment to revelation, does entail and include cognitive commitments to propositional claims. I think that the trick is to not then imagine that the entirety of the gospel or the reality of what God is doing in the world is something that could be boiled down to just those propositional claims. I think there are all kinds of ways that we understand God that we can’t propositionalise. There are all kinds of ways that we encounter Christ that can’t be translated into a syllogism. And so it’s about refusing reductionism on both ends of that continuum.

**On the right you have the Trump administration talking about ‘alternative facts’ and on the left you have hierarchies of pain or victimhood in the identity politics movement, that have been criticised for placing the identity of the arguer above the strength or truth of the argument. Is that a danger?**

For sure. And I think in a sense this reflects the ‘cult of authenticity’. What happens is that my experience becomes ‘my truth’, and therefore that trumps all other criteria, standards, norms of knowledge and truth, and also becomes unassailable, so that you can’t criticise. There is a moral failing to criticise that standpoint. So no end of the political spectrum has a corner on this.

I think what’s worrisome is the extent to which our echo chambers are tied to capital. We just have to realise there is a lot of money to be made, everywhere on the political continuum, by telling people exactly what they want to hear. I don’t want to reduce it to just that, but in some sense we have to realise just how much this is driven by the possibility of people realising profits, by constantly tickling people’s ears and confirming their biases, wherever they might find themselves on the spectrum.

**What do Christians get wrong most about truth?**

One of the ways I think this conversation often gets side-tracked is that we imagine truth is a noun, that it’s this thing that is out there. I think we need to remember two important points. On the one hand, truth is a person – Jesus is the way the truth and the life, and your Enlightenment categories give you almost no resources to make sense of John 14. Secondly, I think we should recover the adverbial notion of ‘truly’ – so what does it mean to know truly, to follow truly? I’m always looking for ways to stretch our imagination so that we don’t reduce truth simply to a kind of correspondence theory, or make it about getting our i’s dotted and our t’s crossed propositionally, when clearly Jesus is pointing to something richer and fuller and maybe even more upsetting than that.

*James KA Smith was talking to Jonathan Langley*

# IS SCIENCE THE ONLY TRUTH?

## EMPIRICAL VERIFICATION IS JUST ONE TEST OF WHAT IS TRUE

When Jesus was standing before Pilate he stated, according to John, that the reason he had been born and came into the world was to testify to the truth (John 17: 37). In reply, Pilate retorted: "What is truth?" (John 17: 38). Truth is one of the most important topics in both philosophy and theology and has occupied some of the finest minds in human history. That it remains a hugely contested subject is testament to its enduring importance and relevance.

The quest to examine the subject of truth is a uniquely human endeavour. Humans are the only species that inherently crave meaning and, throughout our history, we have created stories that give shape and substance to this need for meaning. Implicit within this quest is a concept that many thinkers have held about the nature of truth: that truth corresponds to fact or reality (correspondence theory) and therefore possesses the quality of being true.

Of course it isn't as easy or straightforward as that. Facts can be complicated things. Simon Blackburn thinks of facts as structures or arrangements in the world. The Austrian-born philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein noted that structures are located in space and time, whereas facts are not. An illustration Blackburn uses to explain this is the Eiffel Tower. The tower can be dismantled and reassembled elsewhere but the fact that the Eiffel Tower is in Paris cannot. Although we recognise at an intuitive level that there must be some level of correspondence between truth and fact, it isn't that straightforward.

The American philosopher Alvin Plantinga describes the contemporary

western intellectual world as a battleground for men's souls. One example is the impact of scientific naturalism, often referred to as logical positivism, and its key principle of verificationism: the belief that facts must be verifiable using empirical evidence. Science became the arbiter of what could be legitimately called fact because it was believed to have the tools to offer objective proof. Philosophy and theology were immediately regarded as intellectual lepers, incapable of providing empirical evidence for their truth claims.

A modern example can be found in Stephen Hawking's book *The Grand Design*. When speaking about the nature of reality he says: "traditionally these are questions for philosophy, but philosophy is dead. Philosophy has not kept up with modern developments in science, particularly physics. Scientists have become the bearers of the torch of discovery in our quest for knowledge." The bizarre paradox is that,

our universe appears to be fine-tuned in order to support life on earth. Science can explain what something is but it struggles to explain *why* it is. If fine-tuning exists, and the evidence suggests that it does, how can this be explained? What is the truth behind the physical facts? The British physicist Fred Hoyle (no friend to Christianity), who explained the triple-alpha process which generates carbon from helium in stars, famously said that "a common-sense interpretation of the facts suggests that a super intellect has monkeyed with physics."

In a supposedly post-truth age, increasingly marked by radical scepticism, most people live their lives adopting a common-sense view that truth exists and that without truth life would be hugely difficult to live in a coherent manner. The Italian philosopher Maurizio Ferraris has championed the concept of positive realism. This idea is based upon the notion that reality is 'unamendable.' In other words, it is resistant to human will.

Some would have us believe that truth is socially constructed and culturally conditioned. A positive realist might respond by noting that the Alps will still

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“ Most people live their lives adopting the view that truth exists ”

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despite what he says, Hawking spends the majority of the book attempting to 'do philosophy'. John Lennox's well known response that "nonsense remains nonsense, even when talked by world-famous scientists" is entirely appropriate.

Today, logical positivism has all but disappeared as a credible academic position. While science has made breath-taking discoveries, its limitations in regard to truth are more readily understood. One example of this is located in the idea that

be an enormous mountain range long after any sceptic dies. There is a reality in the world that is unamendable to social constructs.

The ultimate answer to the question 'what is truth?' for the Christian, is God. He is the fine-tuner of the facts observable in the universe and the answer to the greater truth question underlying the facts. God will still be God long after every sceptic passes away.

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# IN DEFENSE OF 'POST-TRUTH'

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## *PREACHING CHRIST IN A WORLD OF TRUMP AND BREXIT: EASY AS PI*

Arguably, the whole 'post-truth' thing has had a bit of a bad press. It's supposed to be synonymous with 'lies', and it's associated above all with Donald Trump's approach to what a British politician once dismissively called the 'actualité'. If you abuse the truth-teller and shout your own version of reality loudly enough, you can create 'alternative

all voters supposed to inform themselves to postgraduate level on transport or healthcare policy or climate science? Of course not. Facts are part of how we reach our decisions, but they are not, as we've discovered now, decisive.

The difference today is that there is more information out there than ever before, and it's easier than ever before

would be financially better off within the EU. I thought by leaving we'd lose influence, in Europe and further afield, and that generally it's good that we have influence. I'm entirely comfortable with the idea of pooling sovereignty; I don't think our politicians and lawmakers are any more competent than European ones, and in general I think co-operation is better than competition.

But how much of this is logic, and how much is that gut feeling? Most of it, to be honest, is the latter. And while people I deeply respect voted Leave, I was repelled by many of the most strident advocates for that position. They represented a view of Britain, of Europe and of Europeans I find repugnant, and I couldn't associate myself with them.

That's not a deduction from facts, it's the response of a whole person. It takes a complex process involving data about trade and legal systems and the impact of immigration on deprived communities, my instincts about how we should talk about each other and treat each other, my sense of history, my Christian faith and how much I trust particular people. All of these factors combine in my mind, not necessarily harmoniously. They argue with each other, their influence ebbs and flows, they combine in different coalitions. I come, in the end – affected last of all perhaps by how well I have breakfasted – to the point of making a cross on a ballot paper. But what's brought me to mark that X *here* instead of *there* is much more complicated than the facts. It's about intangibles, what we call vision, or belief. It's not primarily about analysis; it's about imagination.

I believe the Church has particular lessons to learn from the last couple of

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*“ Wayne Grudem walks into a bar. What happens next will shock you ”*

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facts', which are just as good as the real ones. Better, even: you don't have to worry about that pesky actualité.

Post-truth was big last year, and even became Oxford Dictionaries' international word of the year. But it's worth looking at the definition: it's an adjective “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief”.

Looked at like that, it's hard to see what all the fuss was about. Reader, it was ever thus.

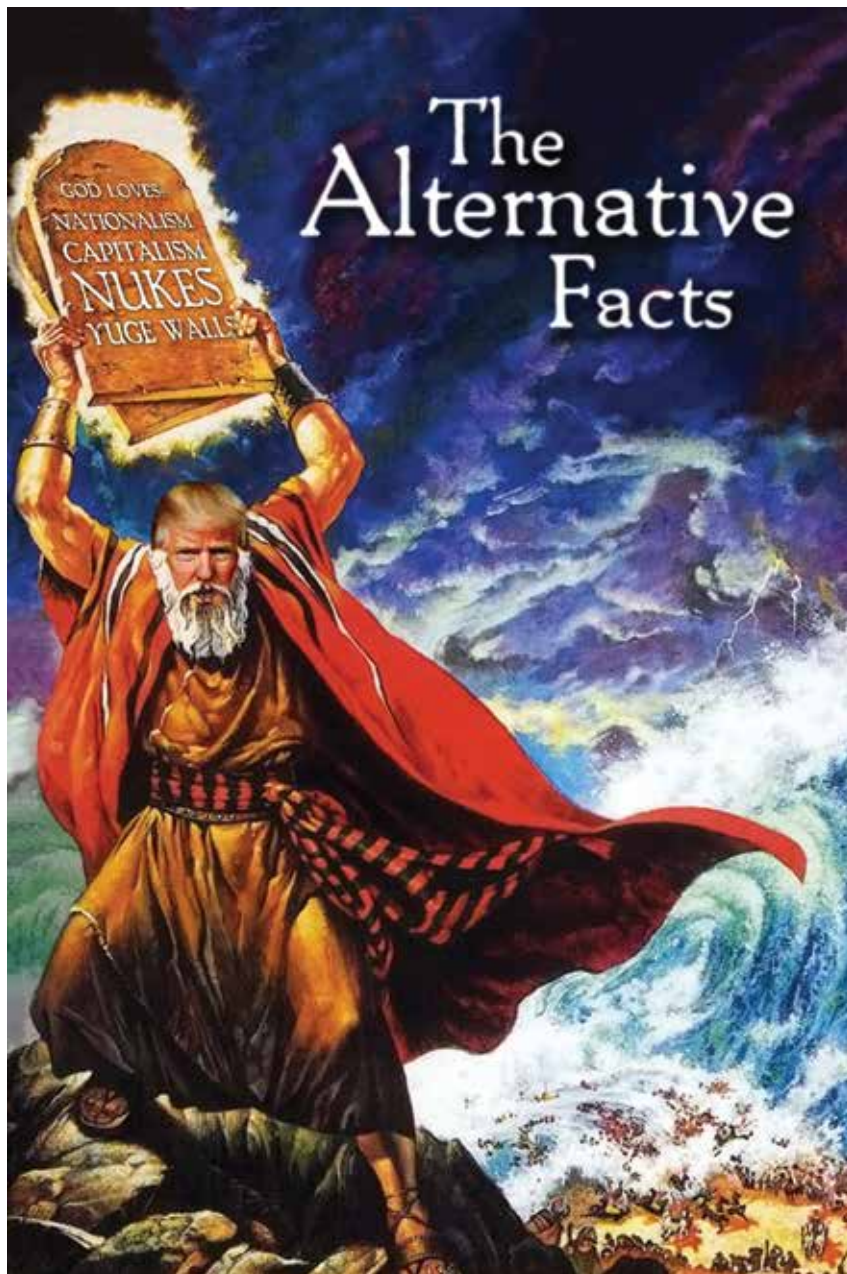
We do not make up our minds based on the facts, and we never have. Elections and referendums are not just about how we decide between competing accounts of how to solve complex problems. Experts who've dedicated their lives to these questions disagree about the answers. Are

to check whether something is true. Things were said during the Trump and EU referendum campaigns that were demonstrably false. But what became painfully clear during the course of the two campaigns was that proving that didn't change people's minds. They would simply find different reasons to believe, and the fact-checkers who had challenged them were seen as part of a media conspiracy. The real question was, “Whose side are you on?” Truth, as an impartial account of what actually happened, was not very important.

However, the idea that we are purely rational beings who make up our minds based on a dispassionate calculation of probable outcomes has always been a fantasy.

In last year's EU referendum, for instance, I voted Remain. I thought Britain





*“ Truth was not very important. The real question was ‘Whose side are you on?’ ”*

years, because we are in a precarious position regarding how the truths we have to tell are received.

How do we preach Christ in a post-truth world? How do we move from attempting to defend or recommend the faith to non-believers with intellectual arguments drawn from Bible proof-texts, to an attempt to speak to the whole person – to campaign for their hearts as well as

their minds, to help them see the whole world in a different way?

One book that’s helped me think about this is the Man Booker prize-winner from 2001, *Life of Pi*, by Yann Martel. (Note: spoilers ahead!)

The book tells of an Indian boy fascinated by religion and spirituality from an early age. He is aboard a ship that’s wrecked in a storm and survives in a

lifeboat. He shares the boat with a hyena, a zebra, an orangutan, and a Bengal tiger named Richard Parker. The hyena kills the zebra, the orangutan, the tiger kills the hyena and he and Pi are eventually washed up on a beach in Mexico.

It’s an odd story, but we learn in Part III that it might not be true, for a given value of truth. Insurance officials interview Pi, who tells them the story. They don’t believe it, and in exasperation he tells them another story – a baldly factual, horrifyingly sordid one. He is adrift not with animals, but with the ship’s cook, a sailor with a broken leg, and his own mother. The cook kills the sailor and Pi’s mother to eat them; Pi kills him and eats him.

He says to the officials: “I know what you want. You want a story that won’t surprise you. That will confirm what you already know. That won’t make you see higher or further or differently. You want a flat story. An immobile story. You want dry, yeastless factuality.” And the heart of the book lies in the profound question Pi asks them: “Which story do you prefer? Which is the better story, the story with animals or the story without animals?” They both opt for the one with the animals.

What we realise, when we hear the second story, is that the one with the animals is a different way of telling the same truth. The cook is the hyena, the sailor is the zebra, Pi’s mother is the orangutan, Pi himself is Richard Parker. If the whole episode had been filmed on CCTV, say, there would have been no animals, only starvation, murder and cannibalism – dry, yeastless factuality. Telling the truth in the way that he does makes them see higher, further and differently. It’s the difference between water and wine.

And Christians today need to find ways of telling the better story. We mustn’t ignore facts. Our faith is anchored in history, and if we let that anchor drag it will be shipwrecked. But what Trump and Brexit have shown us is that the actualité is not enough. If we want to convince people that we have something to offer them, we have to give them reasons that convince the heart as well as the mind. That does not mean tossing doctrine away, but it does mean venturing to the margins of belief and learning to be comfortable with fuzzy edges.

Post-truth? Not in the Trumpian sense, no. But in the sense that we learn a wider and deeper understanding of the word, yes.

# SINGING AND PRAYING OUR WAY THROUGH FAKE NEWS

## A COMMUNITY THEOLOGIAN REFLECTS ON SEEING CALAIS' TRUTH FOR HIMSELF, AND WHAT HOSPITALITY MEANS FOR STORYTELLING AND WORSHIP.

John Berger, the radical art critic who taught us all how to look at our representations of the world in the 1970s, wrote in 2006: "Misinformation is developing its techniques." The followers of Jesus have been onto this for a while – after all, Paul said that the god of this age had blinded the eyes of unbelievers – but it seems to have made little impact on our resilience in the face of fake news.

So, American Baptist Brett Younger, observing how so many of his fellow evangelicals opt for the politics of Trump over other possibilities, says, "When faced with the choice of following Christ by caring for the hungry or supporting a politician who promises to make the rich richer, my old church ignores the faith they profess. When given the opportunity to extend hospitality to refugees, my old church chooses bigotry. When responding to a dishonest president, my old church defends."

The enlightened English might snigger behind their hands at their American cousins, but we are guilty of exactly the same Janus faith. How can people familiar with the scriptures be prone to such error? Berger points to an obvious partial answer in an essay musing on the power of song published in 2016: "The media offer trivial immediate distraction to fill the silence which, if left empty, might otherwise prompt people to ask each other questions concerning the unjust world they are living in."

When our papers were full of lurid headlines about "swarms" of refugees

flowing into Europe and British lorry drivers being under constant assault in and around Calais because of the presence

A key feature of Peaceful Borders, the little group of co-conspirators, I worked with in Calais, was the almost perpetual

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“ *The Jungle was awash with fake news* ”

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of the so-called Jungle on the edge of that city, I decided to go and see for myself what was happening barely an hour and half from my front door. Many in my congregation supported the view that the residents of the migrant camp across the Channel spelled trouble for us and should be sent back whence they came. But this began to change as I told stories of what I encountered on my weekly visits.

I was trying to do what Berger had told an audience of eager, mainly young activists in London in 2014. Asked how Europe should respond to what was even then being called the refugee crisis, he paused for a long moment before saying, "I have been thinking about the storyteller's responsibility to be hospitable."

Hearing that, I began to ask myself how can we do theology of any kind without being hospitable storytellers. Key to this is to know for oneself what is happening. This is what it means to be a witness – looking, seeing, listening, understanding, welcoming the stories we gather. It is only then that we can begin to make sense of them, to turn snapshots and half-heard, partial snippets into some kind of coherent narrative. And this is best done with others.

telling of stories. And a question we frequently asked of each other was: "Who did you hear this from?" or "Did you see this yourself?" We were quickly alive to the generation of myth and rumour in the camp; the Jungle was frequently awash with fake news. Being hospitable storytellers means working as hard as possible to verify our facts – not fall hostage to 'alternative facts', airbrushed narratives in pursuit of some politician's agenda. We owed that both to the people whose stories we were telling and to our audiences.

As a community theologian (isn't that what Baptist ministers are?), I have a responsibility to the truth. But for Christians the truth has never been so much a set of propositions as a three-way relationship. We follow one who declared himself to be the "way the truth and the life", one who said: "you shall know the truth [him] and the truth will set you free", and whose followers will only grow up healthy as they speak the truth to each other and their neighbours in love.

So, as a leader, I will be learning as much as I will be teaching. Indeed, I will be modelling this so everyone in my orbit



An Orthodox church tent in the Jungle camp in Calais: pointing to the truth among the wreckage

gains confidence in seeing and speaking the truth. And that will happen in some decidedly unexpected ways. In the Jungle I saw Jesus in devout Muslims and committed Buddhist monks as much as I saw him in Christian brothers and sisters. I was witness to this truth and part of my role was to reflect on how this could be the case.

Mostly, though, I will be encountering the truth of God and his gospel in the Christian community in which I am embedded. This will happen in a variety of ways, formal and informal. Again, John Berger, not a noted theologian, points the way here. Reflecting on a song sung by a friend in a club in France, he notes, “songs can express the inner experience of being and becoming at this historic moment – even if they are old songs.” Most Christians learn what theology they have through what they sing. So, is it any wonder that so few are able to connect their faith to the world of economics and politics given the content of most of what passes for contemporary worship music?

Part of being a hospitable storyteller in these days of fake news is to contribute to the creation of worship songs that

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## “ We need more theologian musicians ”

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reflect the real experience of people in the world and capture the hope of the gospel for that world. We need more theologian musicians.

And above all, we need each other to challenge on one another’s lips the narratives our culture gives us. We live in days of deeply held dogmas about free markets and the universal good of choice, or in Milton Friedman’s words, days when “each man can vote for the colour of tie he wants.” In days when a US President talks of making America great again and politicians here speak of “taking back control” (with the subtext of putting the ‘great’ back into Great Britain), we need a bigger story, a different dogma (if you like), one of hope for a better world, where real choices exist for all people – wealthy westerners, fleeing refugees and poor

factory workers in Bangladesh alike.

We find such hope in the text of Scripture, truth that shapes the way we live as we hear it and sing it in community. It’s also the hope that inspires our prayers. Jesus taught us to pray: “your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” We can only pray that prayer if there is a better world than the one we’re in, straining to be born.

There is something profoundly, grubbily, troublingly earthy about our faith; it belongs in a world of fake news, propaganda and deceitful agendas because it is only there that it can be a light and a sign-post that points to something better, richer and more rewarding and fulfilling than anything the fake news merchants have to offer us.

# PREACH THE GOSPEL AT ALL TIMES...

## WHEN NECESSARY, USE PROPOSITION AND ARGUMENT

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### WHAT AN OLD-FASHIONED STREET PREACHER AND THE BIBLE CAN TEACH US ABOUT TRUTH.

**T**he other day I was walking along a busy shopping street in Glasgow, my home city, when I became aware of a voice raised above the noise of the crowd. There, standing on a low wall, was a man preaching. The speaker, impeccably dressed in an expensive suit and ministerial dog collar, was expounding John 14: 6, proclaiming that Jesus is “the way, the truth and the life”. If we want to come to God and have eternal life, he explained, we could only do this by believing in Jesus Christ. The preacher was confident of his material and of the righteousness of his cause – that much was evident. The problem was, not a soul was paying him any attention. Both he and his message were being met with complete indifference. I moved on quickly.

Later, I felt rather ashamed of myself. Instead of supporting a fellow Christian in his efforts to spread the gospel, I had felt a strong desire to dissociate myself from him. The trouble was it all seemed so old fashioned. The preacher looked as if he had stepped straight out of the 1960s, and I found his rather pompous ‘I know best’ manner off-putting. Not only that, since he had no means of amplification, his voice could not compete with mobile phones, summer sales, and the noise of the traffic. It was all so very embarrassing.

But there was more to my discomfort than embarrassment at his ineffective

presentation skills. As I reflected on the experience, I realised that I was embarrassed by his (apparently) naïve expectations. He was saying exactly the same things as I had heard many an open-air preacher say fifty years ago, and he seemed to be working on the assumption that the sheer power of the message would be enough to attract attention. But nobody else thought so. He wasn't even worth heckling.

Of course, for some the disinterest may have been due to overfamiliarity.

days, and the claim that Christ is the only way can seem disrespectful and even inflammatory.

Similarly, ideas of what truth means have changed. Indeed, the notion that we can talk about the truth at all has come under fire in postmodernist thinking: it is often said that we can no longer speak of one ultimate objective truth, but of many truths. Problems also arise when we speak of Jesus as “the life”. We can no longer count on the belief in life after death as an incentive for conversion or continued

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*“ We need to resist the temptation to reduce truth to a formula ”*

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Like me, they had heard it all before. But in a multicultural city like Glasgow, those people might well have been in the minority. For many more, I suspect, his message would simply be irrelevant, if not meaningless. In this secularised age, it can no longer be taken as read that people believe there is a God, let alone feel the need to find him. Further, many who do believe in God consider the suggestion that Jesus is the only way to find him incomprehensible. There are so many religions and worldviews claiming to have the answer to our questions these

belief. But even if we understand it to refer to life in the present, we run up against the problem that, in many people's eyes, Christianity is highly suspect, not least because of recent scandals regarding child abuse.

Of course, despite all these cultural changes and difficulties, we Christians still believe this statement holds a message that people need to hear. We do believe that Jesus embodies the truth and that he is the way to God the Father. But how are we to get this across in this postmodern, secular and relativist age? In fact, we can



*Don't be this guy..*

learn a great deal from the passage in which these words are to be found.

Jesus has informed his disciples that he will be leaving them soon, that one of them will betray him, and that Peter will deny him. He tells them that when he has prepared a place for them in his Father's house, he will come back for them and take them there. But when he says that they already know the way to the Father, Thomas disagrees. They do not have the required knowledge; no explicit instructions have been given. In order to help Thomas understand, Jesus says that he himself is the way to God. The difference between Jesus' words and Thomas' assumption is interesting. Thomas wants a statement, concrete knowledge. Jesus, on the other hand, resists the pressure to reduce truth to proposition or instruction. The way to God cannot be distilled into a method or programme. It can only be discovered and understood through a living relationship with a person – Jesus himself. Only in this way can God, and life in all its fullness, be found (John 10: 10).

The teaching that truth is to be found in the person of Christ has profound implications for the way we think about our faith and the way we communicate it to others. First, it means that our efforts



*...or these guys.*

to share our faith must be based on our relationship *with* him rather than mere intellectual knowledge about him. Our first priority must be to live as his disciples, constantly learning and growing. Only by wholly relying on Christ to change us can we be people whose lives are consistent with the message of truth we have to convey. Second, we need to resist the temptation to reduce truth to a formula, to something that we can apprehend solely by intellect. When we do this, we are trying to own the truth rather than allow truth (Jesus) to own us. We are trying

to reduce the way to God to a statement which we can grasp and control. As we have seen, this is what Thomas wanted and Jesus would not allow. Lastly, in this age of competing religious worldviews and claims, the realisation that truth is to be found in Christ himself relieves us of the responsibility of deciding who has access to God and who does not. Only Jesus himself has the authority to say who comes to the Father.

All this is not, of course, to say that preaching does not have a place. The minister's message to the crowd that day was as important as it ever has been. But Thomas' encounter with Christ in John 14 suggests that it is not so much our responsibility to teach people about where truth is to be found, but to point people to Jesus himself. As times change we must, of course, revise our strategies, and this can be an unnerving and risky business. How we do this will depend on our cultural context, personal circumstances, and the gifts we have been given. But in the uncertainty of change we can give thanks. In this age of so many competing ideologies, confused moralities and scepticism of religion, the never-changing fact that truth is to be found in a person, and not in any formulae of our own, is sheer divine grace.

# BEYOND THE SLIPPERY SLOPE

## EVANGELICALS AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF TRUTH

### OUR NOSTALGIA FOR THE DUBIOUS CERTAINTIES OF ENLIGHTENMENT-STYLE TRUTH MAY BE MISPLACED.

**H**ow can we be certain that truth is true, that we have got reality right? How can we demonstrate that the gospel has universal applicability? This is the kind of question that Christianity became preoccupied with during the period of the Enlightenment. Once Kant had confidently asserted that there was an exact correspondence between our forms of thought and the way things really are, the rules of the game seemed set. When Lessing mansplained that, “the accidental truths of history can never become the proof of the necessary truths of reason”, then the task too was fixed. The squabbles about the historicity of the Christian faith were not the real issue;

because the history, as history mostly does, “applied only to one man once, and that one dying”. There was a felt need to demonstrate that behind or beyond the particularity of the historical events on which faith rested were inner truths, eternal principles and universal values. Categories of this sort, it was confidently supposed, could be accepted as true by all people, in all places and at all times.

In this context, evangelicals developed an appetite for propositional truth, common sense realism and an unqualified, universal ethic; as well as an attachment to adjectives like ‘absolute’, ‘self-evident’ and ‘inerrant’. The taste for certainty was expressed evangelistically through the language of spiritual laws, evidence

demanding a verdict and the Evangelism Explosion insistence that anyone who wasn’t 100 per cent certain about their eternal destiny was fair game for a one-hundred-point gospel presentation. The feeling was that anybody in possession of common sense and good faith could perceive the gospel truth when it was plainly, and rationally, laid out for them. Such certainty was individualistic and context indifferent. One message fits all.

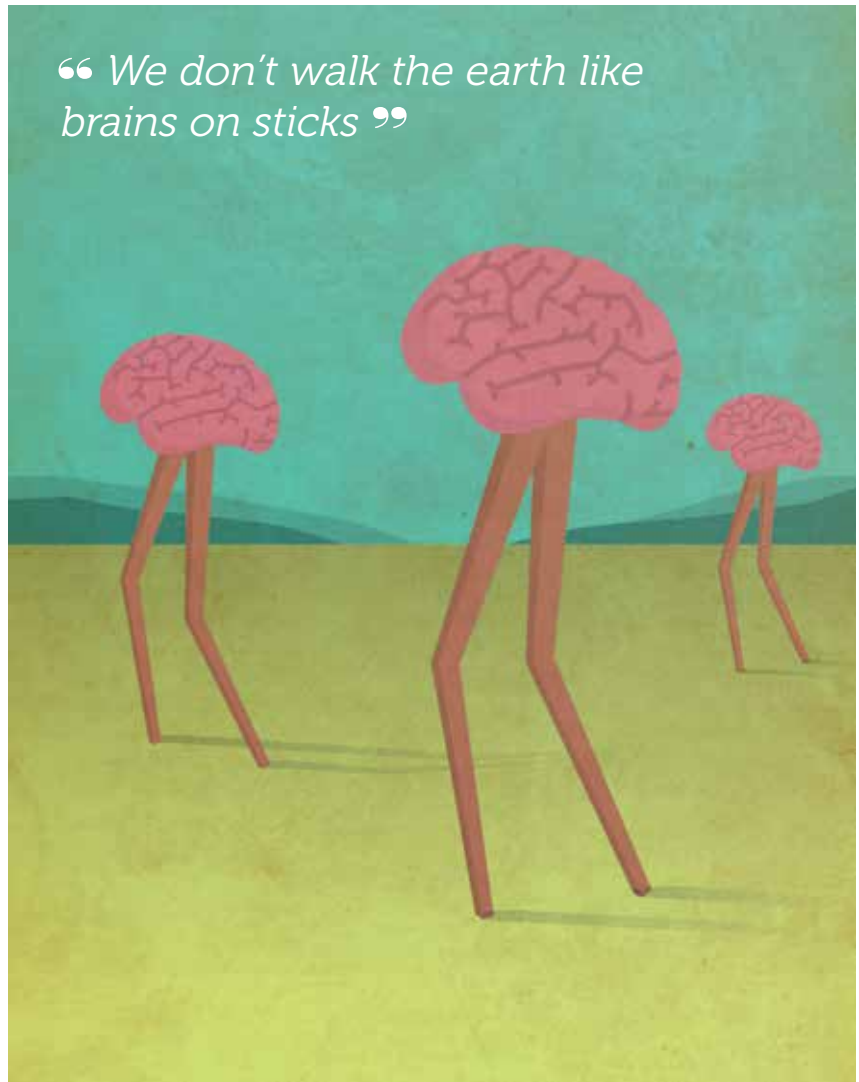
Then the world moved on. There was the growing awareness that we don’t walk the earth like brains on sticks; that knowledge eludes the objective-subjective binary and is personal and embodied, as well as rational. Perspective, context and the dynamics of reception became crucial considerations with regard to truth. Eventually Richard Rorty’s claim that we never meet reality, “except under a chosen description” seemed simply to state the obvious. Having played catch up

so energetically, and having learned the rules of modernity so enthusiastically, this was hard on evangelicals. Adjustments were made, modest proposals ventured, that conceded the place of perspective. Overall though, the evangelical conviction is that the Christian story (or even worldview) pictures the world rightly and enables us to get beneath perspective and preconceptions to decode reality rightly – in a way that should be demonstrable to reasonable people. Some form of realism, or foundationalism, continues to feel like the natural habitat for evangelicalism.

As we navigate the contemporary predicament about truth there is some ‘told you so’ finger wagging from within evangelicalism. We were warned that to step off the solid rock of self-evident truth meant putting a foot on the slippery slope that finishes with a splash and being cast adrift on Nietzsche’s sea of uncertainty. Today, perhaps, it does appear that once you take that step there is only a short stroll from absolute truth to fake news, from demonstrable facts to alternative facts.

In our nostalgia for certainty, it may be tempting to hark back to notions of truth that seemed at the time unproblematic. Concerns over the status of knowledge might lead us to look for new articulations of a realism that see our truth claims as corresponding to reality in ways that evade perspective, context and community. There are, though, evangelical reasons for judging these sites of certainty not to be our natural home. When it comes to truth, for example, we are called to witness, rather than demonstration. We meet the truth, or better, are encountered by truth, in ways that aren’t covered by mathematical certainty. Neither do they correspond to universal concepts. God is truth, known in Jesus, through the Spirit. This Trinitarian encounter is always expressed in embodied ways; through the Incarnation, through the Spirit falling on flesh, through the Church as the Body of Christ and a foretaste of the new creation. In place of a static, individualist, propositional notion of truth, we are pushed towards a dynamic, personal and communal experience of, and reflection on, truth.

It is, rightly, an evangelical impulse to resist the idea that we are the constructors of reality; that with our descriptions we have invented our world, our way. It doesn’t follow from this, though, that we simply receive reality, or even discover it. We also construe it. Faith is a particular take on the world. For example, it is not self-evident anymore (and really it



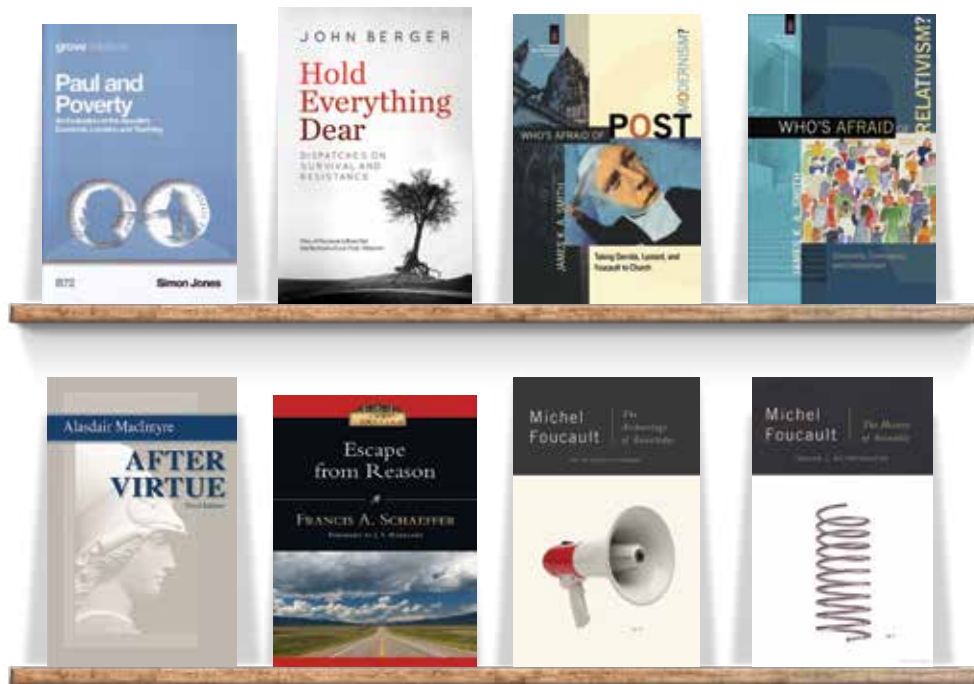
*“ Who put the ‘bomp’ in the bomp bah bomp bah bomp? Who put the ‘ram’ in the rama lama ding dong? ”*

never was) that the world is God’s good but distorted creation. This is, as Karl Barth reminded us, rather a “healthy supposition”; one that leads to a particular way of being in the world. It is, of course, accompanied by the sense that, “always underneath our feet there yawns the gulf of the possibility that our healthy opinion might be deceiving us.”

This doesn’t mean we have nothing to say and no way to judge between truth and falsehood. It means there are no short cuts to credibility, that fake news is countered by good news, that alternative facts are not countered simply by being in possession of ‘the facts’, but by an alternative story,

a different rendering of reality. One that witnesses to God’s grace as final and decisive reality, while aware that it waits for the fullness of what it announces. There is an understandable allure to being able to ground our truth claims in commonly accepted, rational criteria; to demonstrate that Christianity has got reality right. Again, it was Barth, living in critical times for truth and propaganda, who reminded the Church that the temptation to build on such foundations was to be “caught up in the attempt – the attempt of unbelief – to anchor in a safe harbour, whereas in faith it is a question of putting out to sea at Christ’s command.”

# Truth



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