

Representing Christ to a Postmodern World

By Michael Patton

Introduction

A Peanuts cartoon depicted a conversation between Linus and Charlie Brown. Charlie Brown was confused and disillusioned by his failing beliefs when Linus comforted him with these timely words: “It doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you are sincere.” I also recently heard a religious leader on television state that if the bones of Christ were to be discovered in Palestine today, this would not alter his *Christian* faith; his faith was not bound by objective truths.

Surveys are becoming emphatically more clear that the majority of our culture believes that truth is relative.¹ It has been clear for some time now that our world is going through a major cultural shift. The illustrations stated above are all too common in today’s postmodern² society. We have moved from a world of absolutes, objectivity, and dogmatism to one of relativism, subjectivism, and tolerance. The greatest commandment in this postmodern society is this, *THOU SHALT TOLERATE ONE ANOTHER*. Springing forth from this relativistic epistemology,³ tolerance has become preeminent. As one writer has put it, “Tolerance has become so important that no exception is tolerated.”⁴ A person may have his or her religion, and may believe it, but he or she has no right to try to persuade another of his or her belief. Why? Because what you are saying is that your belief is superior to their belief. This is the supreme act of intolerance, the primary postmodern taboo.

It is not my purpose here to outline and detail the rise of postmodernism as many others have sufficiently done.⁵ Neither it is my purpose to critique postmodernism as a movement. What I shall attempt to do is to give the Christian some practical direction on how to represent Christ in a postmodern world.

I shall deal with three primary issues with which the Christian needs to wrestle. The first of these is the issue of tolerance. This is the question: How are we to react to a culture whose battle cry is tolerance? Are we to join in? Does the Bible have anything to say about whether we are to tolerate each other and in what ways? Secondly, we need to briefly and practically tackle the postmodern idea that all truth is relative. Many churches are joining hands with our culture and embracing this view of relativity. Others compensate by rejecting any notion of relative truth whatsoever, claiming that *all* truth is objective. What does the Bible have to say about truth and relativity? Are there truths that are relative as the postmodern claims? Or is all truth absolute and objective? And third, among the truths that are objective (assuming that there is objective truth), what are the essentials and non-essentials? The early Church during the Diocletian persecutions (AD 302-305) was forced to begin to define the

¹ Subjective, pluralistic, and pragmatic also accurately describe our culture, but for this study we will primarily use the term relative and its cognates assuming a tight relationship between all the terms.

² This term will be further defined as we proceed in our study. Most briefly, “postmodern” describes a current trend within our culture that began in the late 20th century that is relativistic in its thinking concerning truth and knowledge.

³ Epistemology describes the way we understand the nature and grounds of knowledge.

⁴ Charles Colson, *How Now Shall We Live* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1999) p. 23.

⁵ See Millard Erickson, *Truth or Consequences* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001); Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000); J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996); J. Richard Middleton & Brian J. Walsh, *Truth is Stronger Than it Used To Be* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1995). Also see Walter Truitt Anderson, *Reality Isn’t What it Used to Be* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1990).

canon of Scripture.⁶ The Romans were arresting and killing Christians who possessed Scriptures. Nobody wanted to give up his life for a book that was not inspired; it was not worth dying for. In our postmodern age, it is more important than ever to define what truths are worth dying for. We need to be able to distinguish between what is essential for the Christian faith and what is non-essential.

Christian Tolerance?

Often when false claims are promoted, the reaction is to defend the truth by going to the opposite extreme. The early church, when battling with Pelagius' false view of anthropology, in order to defend the doctrine of depravity (as they should have done), went to the opposite extreme and promoted the doctrines of purgatory and limbo to account for the children who, although depraved, could not exercise faith.⁷ Many Calvinists in the 17th century countered the Arminians by emphasizing God's sovereignty to such an extent that they seemed to support the idea that God was the author of sin and evil. Often times it is human nature to counter false beliefs by promoting equally false beliefs of the opposite extreme. If you don't believe me, just think to the last argument you had with your spouse where he or she told you that you were overreacting to a situation. You respond by stating that you were NOT overreacting and that you NEVER overreact. It may have been true that you were not overreacting in that instance, but it is probably not true that you NEVER overreact. In order to prove what you believe to be a false statement to be false ("you are overreacting"), you offer an equally false statement in its place ("you NEVER overreact"). It is the classic pendulum effect. We all do this in many ways. But tragically, today this is often the result when Christians counter a postmodern relativistic epistemology. When we hear that the culture is stating that there are no absolute truths, it is our tendency to clench our fists and promote objectivity at all costs. When we find that tolerance has become the most important virtue of a godless society, it is our tendency to throw out tolerance all together.⁸ But what does the Bible have to say about tolerance? Are we to tolerate each other?

This question must be asked more exactly before its answer can benefit our present study. Two different groups of people need to be in focus: (1) those who are part of the body of Christ (the Church) and believe in absolute truth⁹ and (2) those who are outside the body of Christ and have bought into the postmodern fad of relativity. There is a difference between asking "Are we to tolerate the sin of a Christian?" and "Are we to tolerate the sin of a non-Christian?" We will meet the challenge of the non-Christian first; then we will move on to the Christian.

Tolerance of those outside the Church

Practically speaking, the only truth that the postmodern believes is that there is no truth, or at least no objective access to that truth. We are all confined to our own ideas of what is right or wrong, true or false. But whatever our conclusions may be, they are merely our opinions, and our opinions are no better than those of another. Therefore, to the postmodern, all of us are imprisoned behind the unbreakable walls of this subjective reality, and therefore we must all "tolerate" each other. It is not uncommon to hear statements like this: "If you

⁶John Hannah, *Our Legacy* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2001) p. 41.

⁷ See Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984) who states that Augustine was the "true father of purgatory" (p. 61).

⁸ Please understand that I am not demoting the Christian's need to stand for truth. Christianity is not a religion that can exist without the doctrine of absolute truth. I commend many within the Church today who have been equipping Christians to stand up for absolute truth. I am simply attempting to place a buffer between the extremes so that we can stay faithful to the truth of Scripture in a relevant way.

⁹ I am not implying that all Christians believe in absolute truth. In fact, I believe that there are a lot who don't. In my ministry to single adults, both young and old, I am having my eyes opened to the truth of Stanley Toussaint, a former professor of mine at Dallas Seminary, who taught me that "the sins of the culture become the sins of the Church." The postmodern philosophy of the culture is beginning to flood our pews.

believe that the Bible is God's Word, that is fine and good, but you must also tolerate the person who believes in the Quran or any other religious literature they may choose." But here is where the problem arises: What do the postmoderns mean by "tolerate"? Do they mean that we are simply to live together without killing each other? Do they mean the same as the *American Heritage Dictionary's* definition of what it means to tolerate: "To allow without prohibiting or opposing; permit"? Do they simply mean that if I have a neighbor who adheres to a belief system other than mine, that I am supposed to live at peace with him, not prohibiting or oppressing him? If this is the case, I agree. I am "tolerant" and should be. I concede that, at least in this case, the postmodern objective is good because I do not have the authority or power to prohibit anyone from believing whatever they choose. If this is the case, then all is well.

But in reality, this is not what typical postmoderns mean when they cry for "tolerance." They are not asking people to simply tolerate and get along with the opposing belief. The fact is that they are asking people to *compromise* their beliefs. They are asking me to concede that my neighbor's beliefs are just as true as mine, to forfeit my notion of objectivity, and to surrender my view of exclusivism. The result would accomplish nothing less than to render a death blow to my belief in the Scriptures. What they are implying when they push their definition of "tolerance" is that people should never stand up for their beliefs, if standing up for them means stating that their beliefs are the only true beliefs—that they are exclusive. They are not asking people to tolerate the homosexual, but to *change their belief* that homosexuality is wrong *for everyone*. But, again, this is not asking someone to be tolerant; it is asking someone to compromise his or her beliefs and convert to the postmodern faith. This is something that the Christian cannot do.

Christians should join hands with the postmodern in this cry for tolerance if tolerance means that we live at peace with those of other faiths, not *prohibiting* them from believing something unbiblical—that is God's job. But, of course, this is not what they are asking. By tolerance, the postmodern means that we compromise the objectivity of God's Word. By tolerance, the postmodern cries for us to stop reaching out to others with the Gospel. By tolerance, the postmodern demands that we approve of their lifestyles. By tolerance, the postmodern is essentially asking us to give up our faith. This we cannot do.

The first step in understanding and reaching out to the postmodern non-Christian is for us all to be able to understand and compellingly argue that it is not tolerance that they want, but compromise.

Tolerance of those Within the Church

As I stated earlier, it is important for us to separate what it means for us to be tolerant to those outside the Church from what it means to be tolerant to those within the Church. We have already concluded that we are to tolerate those outside the Church, as long as tolerance means that we live at peace with those of different beliefs than ours. But how is it different within the Church? Does the Bible have anything to say about tolerance among believers?

The answer is "yes." In chapter four of his epistle to the Ephesians, Paul begins to tell his readers how they are to live the Christian life. Speaking on the importance of unity, Paul states, "Therefore, I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, *showing tolerance for one another in love*, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:1-3, emphasis added). Here Paul tells us that one of the primary ways the Church preserves unity is by showing tolerance. The participle "avnecomenoi" here has the meaning "to endure, bear with, to put up with."¹⁰ The King James often translates it, "to suffer with." This word is used by Christ when He cries over Israel, "how long shall I *put up with you*" (Matt 17:17, emphasis added). It almost always carries a negative connotation. In 2 Maccabees 9:12, it is used of an unbearable stench; the smell was said to be intolerable. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul is telling the Church that it will sometimes be necessary to tolerate the "stench" of one another. This presupposes something negative about the ones we are to tolerate. Someone may have a repulsive personality—Paul tells us to endure them! Another has a bad temper—bear with them! Someone differs

¹⁰ BAGD, 65

with you in some non-essential doctrine—tolerate them! Let’s face it, when we all get to heaven we will all find out that we were wrong about a few things. Some more than others, but we will all have some surprises.

So, the question is not whether we, as Christians, are to show tolerance to fellow believers, but to what extent are we to be tolerant? Is there a difference in tolerating a Christian who smokes a pipe and tolerating a Christian who is involved in a homosexual relationship? Should we distinguish between tolerating one who is a non-cessationist and one who denies the Trinity? These are the issues that will inevitably arise when discussing the issue of tolerance in a postmodern society. The first thing that we, as Christians, need to establish is that *some type of tolerance is mandated* in Scripture. We will shortly decide what this tolerance looks like and how it plays out.

Christian Relativism?

Before we can begin to define the ways in which Christians are to be tolerant, we must first fit another piece into the puzzle. This piece is the issue of relativism. Again, relativism is at the heart of the postmodern epistemology. It is not uncommon to hear one say, “Christ is *my* way to God, but I don’t push *my* beliefs on others.” Or, “Western Christianity has no right to push its beliefs on others who are perfectly comfortable with their religion and have been for hundreds of years.” Relativism is the idea that truth is contained only in the eye of the beholder. Like the Peanuts cartoon I referred to earlier, “It doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you are sincere.” To the relative postmodern, all truth is contingent upon the situation, culture, or language of the person. With relativism, a moral truth can be true and binding for one person, while for another it is not. Having an abortion may be wrong for one person and right for another. Likewise, the true relativistic postmodern may claim that two conflicting statements can both be true at the same time. For example, one may claim that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and another could claim that He is not the Son of God. To the postmodern, both of these statements could be true at the same time. The law of non-contradiction is not binding to the relativist. A new law has taken its place, the law of relativism.

This proposal from the postmodern that all truth is relative has again caused the Church to be on the defensive. The tendency for the Christian is to fight absolute relativism with the opposite extreme, absolute objectivism. Absolute objectivism believes that *all* truths are objective in the same way absolute relativism believes that *all* truths are relative. Objective truths are just the opposite of relative truths. They *do not* depend upon the situation, culture, language, or any other variable. Objective truths are truths that exist in and of themselves. They are true even if nobody believes them to be true. An example of an objective truth may be the fact that I have daughters named Katelynn and Kylee or that the sun shines. These are truths that exist independently. They do not need anything to affirm them in order for them to be true. As Christians we emphatically affirm the existence of objective truths. It is one of the bedrocks of Christianity. It is because of the objective truth of the atonement that you and I can have access to God. It is because of the objective truth that God created us that we exist. There is no room for relativity in these matters. It is our job to defend many of these objective truths at all costs. But this is usually where we, and our extremist nature, often take things too far. While it is our job to defend *certain* truths at all costs, it is not our job to defend *all* truth at all costs. In order to counter the one who believes that all truth is relative, we may state that all truth is objective. But is that true? Is all truth objective?

Paul, writing to the Romans, deals with a situation that is relevant to our question. Young believers were often convinced that it was wrong to eat foods that were considered unclean. Paul emphatically states that all foods were clean: “I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself” (Rom. 14:14a). Paul was saying that it was OK to eat ham! This is the objective truth, right? Not quite. The objective reality was that all foods were clean, but there was a relative situation which determined whether or not it was right or wrong to eat these foods: “But to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean” (14:14b). Therefore, if someone thought that it was a sin to eat ham, but did it anyway, this was a sin to him. Not because God would be angry that the person ate what was unclean, but because he consciously believed it was wrong and therefore rebelled against his conscience and God. Not only this, but Paul goes on to state that whatever is done without full conviction that it is right is sin (v. 23). This means that if I believe that wearing brown slippers is a sin, but I do it anyway, it becomes sin for me. Not that wearing brown slippers is wrong, but because I am in conscious rebellion against God. Likewise, if I believe that listening to a certain type of music on the radio is wrong but I do it anyway, to me this is wrong. But while it is wrong for me, it may not be wrong for the person in the passenger seat next to me who has no conviction whatsoever that it is wrong. In this situation, the postmodern is correct—the truth, right or

wrong, *is* relative. It is relative upon whether or not the person was acting against their conscience. For one person it was wrong to listen to the music, for the other it was not. For one person it may have been wrong to eat ham, for another it was not. There are many other situations like that just described which occur in our lives everyday. The point that I am trying to make is that truth is *sometimes* relative. We as Christians need to realize this if we are to speak intelligently to a postmodern world.

But how does one tell which truths are relative and which are objective? It is not always easy. There are some things that are not clearly spoken of as right or wrong in Scripture. Therefore, the person must prayerfully revert to his or her own conscience for guidance. But the reality is that the Scriptures speak truthfully and objectively in the principles that they cover. All Christians are subject to the truth of God's Word—no exceptions.

Emphasizing the Essentials

Now we return to the question of tolerance within the Church. To what extent are we to tolerate the objective sinful behavior of a believer? What beliefs are the *sine qua non* (without which, not) of the true Christian? In other words, bare minimum, what does a person have to believe to be saved? This is one of the most important exercises that we can endeavor to accomplish in representing Christ to a postmodern world. We must recognize the difference between the essentials of the Christian faith and the non-essentials. Concerning salvation, we need to be able to state exactly what the Bible says is essential for salvation — *what exactly is the content of what a person needs to believe to be saved*. Does one simply have to “believe in the Lord Jesus” (Acts 16:31)? If so what does that entail? What does one have to know about Christ? Does he have to know that He is God? Does he have to believe that Christ vicariously took his place on the cross? Does he have to believe *and* turn from his sin? Or does he just have to believe, as the thief on the cross did, that Christ was the messianic King going to His Kingdom? What about the Holy Spirit? Must one believe in Him before he or she is born again? Do you have to believe in the Trinity, the virgin birth, the inspiration of Scripture, the Second Coming of Christ, or the existence of Hell? The list could go on and on. The question is this: Are these all doctrines that the unbeliever must accept *before* he or she is considered a believer? There is not time here to fully exhaust this vital study. I apologize, but it is not my intention to define exactly the essentials for salvation.¹¹ There are many, even within evangelicalism, who disagree as to what exactly is essential and what is not. My intention is to put forth the relevancy of this subject. It is extremely important that we categorize just exactly what the Bible says about salvation.

Likewise, it is also important for us to determine what is essential for sanctification. Is it essential that people hold to the correct eschatology (understanding of the future things) for them to grow in Christ-likeness? If so, how important is it? Is it essential that a believer be baptized? How essential is it if a believer continually neglects to share the Gospel? This list could also go on and on. And again, it is not my purpose to bring you to a conclusion on these matters. It is my purpose, however, to help you to understand the importance of struggling with these issues and to have a grid through which to filter them. It is to this we now turn.

Take a look at the attached quadrant chart. It is a key to understanding what we are talking about. I have found it to be very useful in many situations. It is very simple, yet extremely helpful in creating a mental grid through which one can filter many of these issues. It has two broad categories, each divided into two sections. Following are the category definitions. Observe the patterns on the chart as you read.

1. **True Relativity:** Everything that exists on the left side of the quadrant is truly relative. It is either completely independent of right or wrong, or the right or wrong is determined by the situation.
 - a. *Situational Relativity:* The right and the wrong of those in this category are dependent upon the culture, time, situation, or some other variable. Women not wearing a head covering (1 Cor. 11:5) is a good example. While the women who did not wear a head covering were expressing an underlying sinful principle, the

¹¹ Although it seems clear that the most vital of all the essentials is the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. Paul seems to have made that abundantly clear in 1 Corinthians 15, “For I delivered to you as of *first importance* what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3-4, emphasis added).

wearing of the head covering itself was not right or wrong. Its sinfulness was dependent upon the cultural expression. The same sin may be expressed in our culture but in a different way.

b. Autonomous Relativity: This category contains those that are truly relative. There is no right or wrong. This category is filled primarily with opinions and autonomous customs that are not related to right or wrong. One's opinion on the best song is an example of something that is autonomously relative. There is no one correct answer that exists by itself — it is always relative.

2. **True Objectivity:** All that is on the right side of the quadrant is the objective side. Everything on this side has a definite right or wrong. There is always an objective truth that is true no matter whether one believes it. It is not dependent upon time, culture, or any situation. It exists as true or false in and of itself. All biblical principles and doctrines belong on this side.

a. Essential Objectivity: In our current chart, this category contains only those that are essential for salvation.¹² This should contain only those truths which you believe a person must accept to be considered a true Christian.

b. Non-Essential Objectivity: This category contains both doctrinal and non-doctrinal issues which are not necessary for one's salvation. A good example might be whether one believes in the cessation of the gift of tongues. Tongues either ceased or they did not cease. The truth is objective. But at the same time, it is non-essential because it is not necessary to believe one way or the other as a prerequisite to salvation.

Read the categories carefully. After you have finished, construct your own chart. Keep it with you for a few weeks. When issues arise, decide the category in which you think they belong. Be critical of yourself. This chart is extremely valuable in understanding that these categories exist. It is not an ironclad never-fail chart that you can use in all situations. In fact, your chart will probably look different from mine in some areas. The value of this chart is to express the necessity of thinking about these areas more deeply. We live in a postmodern culture in which people live their lives on the left side of the quadrant (relativism). We have a Church that wants to counter by living on the right side (objectivism). By becoming familiar with the principles of this chart, we will be able to express truth in a more relevant fashion.

Another key value of this chart is to better place emphasis where emphasis is due. Many Christians overly stress their views (many of which are relative) on certain issues to an unbelieving postmodern, giving them the wrong impression. We express our opinions about having a glass of wine, rock-and-roll, or some other area just as emphatically as we would the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. We do so as if we believe that convincing someone that rock-and-roll is wrong is the same as convincing them of the Gospel. We must understand that convincing someone of any area outside of the objective essential will not save them. That is a big problem within the Church — we major in the minors. We will argue all day long with the unbeliever about the theory of evolution and never tell them about Christ. We never even give them a chance to believe what is most important. Let me make this clear: There is nothing wrong with discussing or even debating the non-essentials, but we must keep in mind that the non-essentials do not save. They can be used as primers and springboards for the Gospel, but they cannot replace it. We must get to the Gospel in every witnessing opportunity we have. Eleven of the twelve sermons in Acts contain the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. The only one that did not was Stephen's, and if it were not cut short, he surely would have presented the risen Christ to the Sanhedrin. It is imperative that we emphasize the Gospel; it is the only message that contains eternal life.

Look *and* see what is *the* matter with *this* paragraph. It is *taught* in writing class that *you* do not emphasize *too many* words. You save *your* emphasis for *times* that *really* matter. *If* you emphasize too much, *then* when you come to *a word* or *a statement* that you really want to stress, *you have no stronger way to express your emphasis*. All the emphases *will* look as if they carry the *same* importance.

This is precisely what the Church does with many issues and doctrines. We may emphasize some non-essential so much that when we come to the things that are really important, we have no more *stress* left—it is called

¹² This quadrant could also be used for the things that are essential for sanctification.

overstatement. Strunk and White, in their excellent book on writing, *The Elements of Style*, warn concerning overstatement:

“When you overstate, readers will be instantly on guard and everything that has preceded your overstatement as well as everything that follows it will be suspect in their minds because they have lost confidence in your judgment or your poise. Overstatement is one of the common faults. A single overstatement, wherever or however it occurs, diminishes the whole, and a single carefree superlative has the power to destroy, for readers, the object of your enthusiasm.”¹³

If too much emphasis is placed on the non-essentials, this does not make the non-essentials more important, but it makes the essentials less important. We end up destroying the “object of our enthusiasm”— the Gospel of Christ. Once this happens, the unbelieving postmodern may then accept the essentials only because they have taken on a lower status of relativity. We have to continually ask ourselves what things we have placed in italics in our lives and if they deserve to be there. Most people’s lives are filled with opinions, pet peeves, disputes, and hang-ups. When the unbelieving postmodern looks at you, what would he say that you have in italics in your life? We should have very few things that we greatly emphasize in order to save our stress for the things that really matter. We can give no greater honor to Christ than to emphasize the things that He emphasized.

Conclusion

Can we tolerate the postmodern? What are the issues which we are to tolerate? These are questions that have not yet been fully answered. Tolerance is a difficult issue, and interrogation of some of the more specific issues must be postponed for now. It is my prayer that interest in learning and teaching the essential fundamentals of the Faith has been stirred within. Progress has been made. We understand that tolerance is a mandate within the Church. We also understand that the Bible teaches that there are many situations in which truth is relative. These steps are vital to our witness to a postmodern culture. If we are to evangelize in the world today, we need to be relevant. We do not panic when someone says that truth is relative, we explain that they are right, but only *some* truth is relative. When they cry for tolerance, we cry with them, and explain to them the difference between tolerance and compromise.

Having done this, it is important to remember that we, as believers, will still be rejected. As Christ said, “Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A slave is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you;...” (John 15:20). What we, as Christians, need to make sure of is that we are being persecuted for the right thing. We do not want to give the unbeliever any more reason for rejecting Christ than he or she already has.

How do we represent Christ to the postmodern? We approach them like we do any other unbeliever of any time, or culture, or language — we hand them the crucified and risen Savior. We bring them the essential.

¹³ Strunk and White, *Elements of Style*, (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon), 7.

