

“True for You, but Not True for Me?”

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Sean McDowell

Imagine traveling back in time and hearing these very words come from the lips of Jesus: “I am one of the ways, one of the truths, and just one possible life. If you are basically a good person, you’re okay in my book. And if you choose to come to the Father (or Mother, if you prefer) through me, that’s cool. Now go forth to live according to whatever feels good to you.”¹ For those of us who work closely with young people today, we sense there is something different about the way they process truth. When I speak to my students about Jesus, I often wonder if my students really understand that I am talking about a real person in history who walked on the earth, did miracles, and rose from the grave.

This past summer I was the guest speaker at a youth Bible camp in Northern California. The theme throughout the week was Matthew 22:37—loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. At the end of the week when I asked the counselors for feedback the responses shocked me. One camper basically summed it up: “We like his stories, but that’s just *his* truth. I don’t want to judge him, but I have a different truth.”

Her response probably should not have shocked me so much, especially since the majority of our youth (81%) have adopted the view that, “all truth is relative to the individual and his/her circumstances.”² Alarming as it may seem, study after study seem to reveal that the majority of our youth would agree with this girl. When it comes to religion and morality, “Something may be true for you, but not true for me.” While many young people believe Christianity offers *a* truth, I can’t help but wonder how many truly understand that it is *the* truth, the *only* hope for salvation, and the *sole* opportunity for a relationship with the living God who created the universe.

What is Truth?

In a recent book *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, sociologist Christian Smith demonstrates that for youth today, “The very idea of religious truth is attenuated, shifted from older realist and universalist notions of convictions of objective Truth to more personalized and relative versions of ‘truth for me’ and ‘truth for you.’”³ Smith says we often hear youth proclaim, “Who am I to judge?” “If that’s what they choose, whatever,” “Each person decides for himself” and “If it works for them, fine.”

Rather than holding to the traditional definition of truth as correspondence to reality, youth today seem to have adopted a pragmatic approach to truth. In other words, many youth see truth as what “works” in their lives, rather than a belief that accurately reflects the world. A recent *Newsweek* article put it this way: “Even more than their baby-boomer parents, teenagers often pick and choose what works for them...”⁴ If Hugh Hefner’s motto, “If it feels good, do it,” characterized the sixties, today’s youth seem to buy the idea that “If it works, it’s right for you.”⁵

Divided Truth

Why do youth think they can pick and choose religious beliefs, as if they were merely choosing what movie to attend on a Friday night, or what color dress to buy? In her recent book, *Total Truth*, Nancy Pearcey explains that the very concept of truth is divided in our culture today. According to Pearcey, our culture has drawn a division between the secular and the sacred, limiting personal things such as religion and morality to a private and subjective realm, over against a secular realm dominated by science and other “public” knowledge.⁶ She explains, “In short, the private sphere is awash in moral relativism...Religion is not considered an objective truth to which we *submit*, but only a matter of personal taste which we choose...”⁷ In other words, religious claims are matters of personal preference rather than knowledge claims about the real world.

Missionary Lesslie Newbigin saw this reality with remarkable clarity. As a missionary in India for forty years, Lesslie Newbigin had a unique perspective regarding American culture. Upon his return to the states, he was struck by the way Christian truth had been marginalized. He warned that the divided concept of truth is the primary factor in “the cultural captivity of the gospel.” According to Newbigin, Christianity is trapped in the upper story of subjective values, which prevents it from having any effect on public life.⁸ Newbigin understood clearly the reality you and I see everyday when ministering to youth—that kids think religious claims can be, “true for you, but not for me” because they deal with personal preferences, not objective reality.

For most religions, this divided truth realm poses no problem. But for Christianity this cannot do—and I hope I can help my youth to see this. You see, what makes Christianity unique is that it is based on the life, character, and identity of Jesus Christ—a real person who walked on the earth 2,000 years ago. While most religions of the world are based on principles, Christianity is based on the historical life and work of Jesus of Nazareth. Paul made this clear in 1 Corinthians 15:14, 17, “And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain, your faith also is vain...and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins” (NASB). Remove the historical Jesus from Christianity and the faith is gutted.

Today one of the greatest obstacles we face in our ministry to youth is their distorted view of truth. In fact, Paul warned of this in his second letter to the church in Thessalonica when he said that people perish for not loving truth (2 Thessalonians 2:8-10). Unless we rebuild the foundations of truth among our youth, they will be “tossed and carried about” by all kinds of deceptive philosophies (Ephesians 4:14; 2 Corinthians 10:5). According to a recent study, young people who have distorted views of God and truth are twice as likely to feel pessimistic than those who possess a biblical worldview. They are 48 percent more likely to cheat on an exam, 200 percent more likely to physically hurt someone, and 300 percent more likely to use illegal drugs.⁹ While relationships and experience shape our kids behavior, so do their views of God and truth.

Come On, Do Youth Really Care About Truth?

Dr. Francis Beckwith, philosophy professor at Baylor University, had a very skeptical student in his ethics class who questioned him everyday. One day she said, with an air of smirckness, “Dr. Beckwith, why is truth *so* important?” After thinking for a moment he gave this witty reply, “Well, would you like the *true* answer or the *false* one?” In other words, her very question assumed the existence, knowability, and importance of truth. Deep-rooted in the hearts of young people is the awareness that truth is a necessary

bedrock for life. We often dismiss the fact that youth believe in truth, they want truth, and they organize their lives around what they believe is ultimately true.

Dan Kimball reinforced this truth in his book *The Emerging Church*: “I am finding that emerging generations really aren’t opposed to truth and biblical morals. When people sense that you aren’t just dogmatically opinionated due to blind faith and that you aren’t just attacking other people’s beliefs out of fear, they are remarkably open to intelligent and loving discussion about choice and truth.”¹⁰ While youth are clearly turned off by people who arrogantly think they have all the answers, I have found that students respond positively to someone who can lovingly lead them to truth.

If you are willing to ask, you may be surprised at the questions young people have about God and the world around them. Once I gave my students the following assignment, and I was amazed at what they came up with: “When you get home today, think about and write down a question that you would hope no one would ever ask you about your faith....a question that would make you break out in a cold sweat, just thinking about it.” They asked questions about the existence of evil, other religions, and how we knew that Christianity was actually the true way to God. I never realized the depth of my students’ questions about God and their desire for truth until I was willing to ask.

Clearing Up the Confusion about Truth

So, how do we help young people see that Jesus’ claims are about objective reality, and simply cannot be “true for you, but not for me”? I once performed the following experiment to help my students grasp the reality of Jesus’ claims. I placed a jar of marbles in front of them and asked, “How many marbles are in the jar?” They responded with different guesses, 221, 168, 149, and so on. Then after giving them the correct number of 188 I asked, “Which of you is closest to being right?” They all agreed that 168 was the closest guess. And they all agreed that the number of marbles was a matter of fact, not personal preference.

Then I passed out *Starburst* candies to each one of my students and asked, “Which flavor is right?” As you might expect, they all felt this was an unfair question because each person had a preference that was right for him or herself. “That is correct” I concluded, “the right flavor has to do with a person’s preferences. It is a matter of subjective opinion, not objective fact.”

Then I asked, “Is the resurrection of Jesus like the number of marbles in a jar, or is it a matter of personal opinion, like candy preference.” Although most of my students concluded that the question of the resurrection belonged in the category of candy preference, this opened the door for us to discuss the objective reality of the resurrection of Jesus. I concluded the experiment by talking about the nature of Jesus’ physical resurrection—that if we were present at the cross we could have felt the warm blood of Jesus trickling down the wooden planks, or even watch him take his last breath. And if we were at the tomb on that fateful Sunday morning, we would have seen the stone rolled away and the loincloth of Jesus sitting inside. I reminded them that while many people may reject the historical resurrection of Jesus, it is not the type of claim that can be “true for you, but not true for me.” The tomb was either empty on the third day, or it was occupied—there is no middle ground.

The Worldview Difference

For the past 10 years the Christian marketplace has been flooded with new books about how to do ministry in a postmodern world. While many cultural changes have rightly been pointed out, we often fail to realize how much has actually stayed the same. Sociologist Christian Smith points out that youth today don't need a "radically new 'postmodern' type of program or ministry."¹¹ In fact, Smith says, one of the key things our young people need is to be challenged to consider why they believe what they believe and to learn how to *articulate* their faith.

This is why Dan Kimball, pastor at X church said, "I must tell them why I choose to place my faith in Jesus and why I trust the Bible as being inspired. I need to teach them why I believe in one God and in Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life."¹² Peter put it this way: "...Always be prepared to give a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:15; NASB). We need to give our youth reasons—yes, reasons—why we believe Christianity is objectively true, why the Bible is God's word, and how we know Jesus rose from the dead 2,000 years ago. If we don't, we may lose our kids.

According to the 2005 report, "National Study of Youth and Religion," thousands of non-religious teenagers were interviewed who said they were raised to be religious but had become "non-religious." The teenagers were asked, "Why did you fall away from the faith in which you were raised?" They were given no set answers to pick from; it was simply an open-ended question. The most common answer (32%) was *intellectual skepticism*. Their answers included, "Some stuff was too far-fetched for me to believe in," "I think scientifically there is no proof," and "There were too many questions that can't be answered." The message is clear—many kids are leaving the faith because we are giving them a "heart" faith without an equally powerful "mind" faith.

But there is good news too. In his recent book, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*, Ron Sider demonstrates that the small circle of people with a biblical worldview demonstrate genuinely different behavior. They are nine times more likely to avoid "adult-only" material on the Internet, three times as likely not to use tobacco products, and twice as likely to volunteer to help the poor.¹³ Not only are kids with a biblical worldview *less* likely to leave the faith, they are *more* likely to practice it in their own lives.

It seems, then, that our students' beliefs about God, the world, and truth itself *do* make a difference in their practice of the Christian faith. Correct doctrine does matter. Mr. Sider put it this way, "Barna's findings on the different behavior of Christians with a biblical worldview underline the importance of theology. Biblical orthodoxy does matter. One important way to end the scandal of contemporary Christian behavior is to work and pray fervently for the growth of orthodox theological belief in our churches."¹⁴

In a recent *Time* magazine dedicated totally to happiness the authors demonstrate that "Teens who attend services, read the Bible and pray feel less sad or depressed, less alone, less misunderstood and guilty and more cared for than their nonreligious peers."¹⁵ But the key difference they cited was not merely behavior—it was *belief*. As the author stated, "Religious certainty—the sense of unshakable faith in God and the *truth* of one's beliefs—is most closely linked with life satisfaction."¹⁶ It is not enough to teach our students that Jesus is one truth that "works" in their lives. If we want to transform our kids' behavior, one thing we must teach them that Jesus is not one option among many, but that he is "*the way, the truth, and the life*" (John 14:6). And this is not merely a truth

they store away in their heads, but an invitation to a relationship with the God of the universe—the only one who can truly sustain and comfort them.

¹ Ryan Dobson, *Be Intolerant* (Sisters, Or: Multnomah, 2003), p. 13

² George Barna, *Third Millennium Teens* (Ventura, Ca.: The Barna Research Group, 1999), p. 43.

³ Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 144.

⁴ John Leland, “Searching for a Holy Spirit,” *Newsweek* (May 8, 2000): 61.

⁵ Josh McDowell, *Beyond Belief* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 2002), pp. 14-15.

⁶ Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2004), p. 20.

⁷ Pearcey, *Total Truth*, 20.

⁸ Lesslie Newbigin, *A Word in Season: Perspectives on Christian World Missions* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), see especially the essay titled, “The Cultural Captivity of Western Christianity as a Challenge to a Missionary Church.” This was brought to my attention by Nancy Pearcey in *Total Truth*.

⁹ Josh McDowell, *Beyond Belief* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 2002), pp. 5-18.

¹⁰ Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2003), p. 86.

¹¹ Christian Smith, *Soul Searching*, p. 266.

¹² Kimball, *The Emerging Church*, p. 72.

¹³ Ron Sider, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2005), 128.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 129-130.

¹⁵ Pamela Paul, “The Power to Uplift,” *Time* (January 17, 2005), p. A48.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. A46.