

Every leader in the new Emergent Movement will want to read this fascinating book. They simply will not find a more engaging, knowledgeable, balanced, and kind treatment of their concerns, ideas, and practices. R. Scott Smith is unique in his ability to see the Emergent Church in its broadest context and does a remarkable job of offering up key philosophical and theological insights that will help every follower of Christ live the Gospel.

—CRAIG J. HAZEN,
Professor of Comparative Religion, Biola University

The latest clarion call in the never-ending cavalcade of “what’s new” in the evangelical world is the confident assertion from some quarters that the church needs to embrace “postmodernism” if it is going to engage postmodernity and post-moderns effectively. For those mystified, miffed, intrigued, or attracted by these claims, R. Scott Smith has supplied a helpful introduction and antidote in *Truth and the New Kind of Christian*. Smith here provides a useful entry-level overview of the way some are attempting to appropriate postmodernism for the church, and adds his own thoughtful appreciations, applications, and warnings. Thinking Christians who have been irritated by facile “postmodern” critiques of foundationalism, modernity, and “the old way of doing church” will find much light and encouragement here. Pastors who are trying to break down the often indigestible subject matter of postmodernism into bite-size chunks in order to equip their people to engage it, and teachers who are aiming at giving their students a working knowledge of the way postmodernism is impacting the church will find a good deal of help from Smith, who is structured, clear, and practical throughout.

—J. LIGON DUNCAN III,
Senior Minister, First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Mississippi,
Adjunct Professor, Reformed Theological Seminary

Scott Smith and I agree on a lot. We share a deep commitment to Jesus Christ, a love of the Bible, and a passion for the church. We also agree that we’re currently living in a liminal time, and it’s those “boundary times” when people look most closely at the beliefs that underlie their practices. So, we’ve all got some things to figure out right now, including what we can really know and the certainty with which we can state our claims in a pluralistic society. I appreciate Scott’s voice in this conversation. He is a careful reader of my work, and he writes with a gracious and generous tone. Interlocutors like Scott will be a helpful challenge to all of us in the “emerging church.” I consider him a friendly critic and a brother in Christ.

—TONY JONES, author of *Postmodern Youth Ministry* and
National Director, Emergent

Scott Smith is uniquely suited to enter the Emergent conversation with this helpful volume, and I'm thankful that God has raised him up for such a time as this. Not only is he an analytic philosopher with a razor-sharp mind who has specialized in analyzing postmodernistic views on the relationship between language and the world, but he is also a man who cares for the lost, loves the church, and has an ability to communicate complex truths to people in the pew. I predict that Professor Smith's careful, patient, insightful interaction with Emergent presuppositions and arguments will gain him a wide hearing in this ongoing debate, for I am convinced that all of us—whatever our present opinion on the Emerging church—have something to learn from this wise and thoughtful book.

—JUSTIN TAYLOR, Executive Editor, *Desiring God*;
blogger (www.theologica.blogspot.com)

There is no more important issue facing the church than whether the message of the gospel corresponds to reality and therefore demands the attention of every single person. Scott Smith's study challenges us to take seriously the truth claim of the gospel both in how we proclaim it in words and in how we manifest it in our personal and community lives. I am grateful for this clarion call to maintain and proclaim with confidence the historic Christian gospel, which alone has saving power.

—GARY INRIG
Senior Pastor, Trinity Church, Redlands, California

the emerging effects of
postmodernism in the church

TRUTH
AND THE NEW KIND OF
CHRISTIAN

R. SCOTT SMITH

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FOREWORD

I have known Scott Smith for fifteen years, and that knowledge convinces me that God has raised him up uniquely for such a time as this. We live in desperate times, with cultural confusion abounding. Our universities have failed us where we need them most: to speak loudly and clearly about spiritual and moral knowledge apt for connecting people with reality and thereby producing men and women with well-developed character. Instead, by and large, our universities have continued to perpetuate the myth that only science gives us truth and knowledge, whereas religious and ethical beliefs are just personal preferences, private opinions, and personal (or social) values.

We also live in a time in which the church itself needs clear guidance, and one crucial area in which it needs such help is in regards to what to think about postmodernism. For many Christians, they have heard of postmodernism, and they may know something of its influence on their children. But they often know little about its specific ideas, or how it is being promoted by certain Christian thinkers. Other Christians, however, have become quite enamored with, and influenced by, postmodern thought and style, and these believers see much promise not only for reaching a postmodern culture with the gospel but also for rethinking the faith itself along postmodern lines.

Enter Scott Smith. With graduate training in metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of mind and language, and ethics, he brings a specialization in postmodern thought to the task of providing our community with the leadership necessary to guide us in responding to the postmodern turn in a Christ- and truth-honoring way. Make no mistake about it. This book is simply a must read for anyone with a heart for God, the teaching of the Bible, and the needs of a lost culture. Smith deftly takes us on a tour of postmodernism in general, and Christian postmodernism in particular. He then spells out in detail the impact of postmodernism on youth ministry, the university, and the church. Not

content to stop with analysis, he provides a clear assessment of crucial aspects of postmodernism *in* the church as well as its specific influence on the Emerging Church, as seen in the writings of Brian McLaren and Tony Jones. I wholeheartedly would encourage readers of all kinds (whether or not they have been strongly influenced by postmodern ideas) to dialogue with Scott Smith in response to his ideas.

I could not recommend this book more highly. Smith is to be thanked for writing this book, and God is to be thanked for raising him up for such a time as this.

—J. P. Moreland
Distinguished Professor of Philosophy
Talbot School of Theology
Biola University

PREFACE

This book is an outworking of my longstanding interest in understanding and addressing postmodernism. When I was explaining my dissertation to a fellow evangelical graduate student at the University of Southern California, he suggested that I should develop a version of the same project for a church audience. I also have been explaining postmodernism to classes at my church and at Biola University and have found myself becoming more and more interested in helping believers understand postmodernism and how it is at work in our churches.

Then, over the course of a few years, through presenting papers at the Evangelical Theological Society's national conferences, I saw that certain evangelicals were trying to influence their peers (and their students and fellow church members) to reconceive the faith along postmodern lines. While I saw them point out various strengths of postmodernism, their criticisms of "modernism" were far less than convincing. Indeed, I did not see them address (much less even recognize) what I think are the core issues involved with adopting a postmodern understanding of our faith.

It is one thing to write and lecture to graduate students about postmodernism; it is another to talk about it to church audiences. So, over time, I became convinced that I needed to do just that. I talked with various people at my church to get their feedback on my ideas, and I spoke to lay audiences at our apologetics lectures at Biola University. This book has grown out of those experiences and my study.

My hope and prayer in writing this book is that God will use it greatly to enable Christians to carefully understand both the strengths and the weaknesses of postmodernism—in particular Christian postmodernism and how that is being expressed in the Emerging Church—and in that understanding to see which aspects of it we should embrace and which ones we must resist and even reject.

My deep thanks go to several people. First, Rob Bleakney, a fellow

graduate student at the University of Southern California, first suggested to me that there was an additional market for the ideas I originally developed in my dissertation and subsequent book, *Virtue Ethics and Moral Knowledge: Philosophy of Language After MacIntyre and Hauerwas* (Ashgate, 2003). Second, I am indebted to J. P. Moreland and Dallas Willard for the model they gave me in their lives, for their love for Christ, and for their deep philosophical insights. Third, I am thankful for the encouragement and insights of my director at Biola, Craig Hazen, who has given me many opportunities to address this topic with our students. Fourth, I deeply appreciate my fellow members and pastors at Trinity Evangelical Free Church in Redlands, California. We are part of a church in which people really want to understand the faith and the reasons why we should believe it. I have been greatly encouraged by the rich teaching of our senior pastor, Gary Inrig, and our former senior associate pastor, Rick Langer.

Fifth, several of our graduate students at Biola have been most helpful in their encouragement, feedback on drafts of chapters, and enthusiasm for this topic. Thanks especially to Stan Jantz, Brad Fox, and Josh Shoemaker. Sixth, I have been helped in my understanding of postmodernism from conversations with and/or books by Tony Jones, Steve Sherman, Brad Kallenberg, and others. Thanks! Seventh, Justin Taylor of *Desiring God* has given me much helpful feedback and encouragement, for which I am most grateful. Eighth, Jim Weaver provided helpful chapter title suggestions. Ninth, I am deeply grateful for Bill Deckard's very helpful editorial suggestions, which have helped me express several ideas much more clearly than otherwise would have been the case. Thanks also to Noah Dennis, Bill's colleague at Crossway, for his editorial help.

Most of all, I want to express my deep, abiding love for my wife, Debbie, and our daughter, Anna. You are the two most precious people in my life!

—R. Scott Smith
Masters of Arts Program in Christian Apologetics
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INTRODUCTION

CHRISTIAN RELATIVISTS

It is obvious in Western society that many people think moral and religious truths are relative. Not only is this idea clearly taught in secular universities, our media also trumpet it. But it has not been the position of historic, orthodox Christianity. In that light, it is surprising how many Christians now think that way as well. For example, a Barna poll showed that, even after the terrorist attacks on September 11, only 32 percent of born-again Christian adults, and a mere 9 percent of born-again Christian teens, think that ethics are *not* relative.¹ Christians are increasingly accepting of ethical relativism, and in a climate that promotes pluralism, we are losing our understanding of Christian ethical and religious truths as being *objectively* true.

What do I mean by something being objectively true? Objective truths are true for all people, whether or not anyone accepts them as true or talks about them as such. Their status as being true (that is, corresponding with how things are in reality) is independent of our knowing them to be true. For example, $2+2=4$ is objectively true in that its truth value is independent of anyone's believing it or not. Similarly, murder is wrong even if someone happens to say otherwise.

Not surprisingly, the large decline in the percentage of Christians who hold to the objective character of morals mirrors what has been going on in our culture, and especially on our secular campuses, for some time now. When I first stepped onto the campus at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles as a graduate student, I sensed very clearly that the dominant view there was that all ethical and religious views are relative. As I both studied and taught there from 1995 to 2000, this impression was confirmed by repeated experiences with

¹ See "Americans Are Most Likely to Base Truth on Feelings," online, www.barna.org, February 12, 2002, accessed September 24, 2002.

professors, reading assignments, fellow graduate students, and my own first-year students.

The secular universities (and, to varying extents, some Christian ones too) have divided basically into two vastly different schools of thought. By and large, the humanities have accepted the idea that truth is up to us, while the hard sciences (and maybe still business, insofar as it tries to operate as a science) attempt to give us the objective truth about the world. According to this view, science gives us facts, but religion and morals, in particular, give us mere opinions, personal tastes, and values. This is evidence of what has been called the “fact-value dichotomy,” a view that has been with us at least since the time of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). In the face of the claims of modern science, especially those of atheistic evolution, society and academia have marginalized Christian truth claims as being just opinions. They are seen as nonscientific and therefore not on the same par as scientific claims.

I knew that my first-year students at USC would tend to assume that ethics are relative. In light of this mind-set, I deliberately challenged that belief. I would give them an assignment in which they had to argue to what extent ethical relativism is right. They would read an article written by a secular philosopher that exposes the many severe problems with relativism, which made it an excellent choice to use with a secular audience.² Then I would have them consult with me about their rough drafts. In reading their drafts, I often would discover which of the students were Christians, and even which of those had attended Christian high schools. Yet in four years of giving that assignment, I found only three such students who were prepared to challenge relativism. Only two could give philosophical reasons against relativism, of which there are many, and the other was able only to quote Scripture against it.

But among the other Christian students, I often found an attitude that while Christianity is true, who are we to impose our beliefs on

²I used the chapter titled “Ethical Relativism: Who’s to Say What’s Right or Wrong?” in Louis Pojman’s *Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong*, 4th ed. (Belmont, Mass.: Wadsworth, 2001). While I endorse Pojman’s chapter on relativism, I am not nearly so enthusiastic about his chapter in defense of objective moral truths. He tries to tie a defense of universal moral truths with naturalistic evolution, a very dubious project at best.

someone else? They too had bought into the cultural ethos of tolerance based on relativism. Their Christian high schools and churches had done little to challenge this thinking or prepare them to deal with relativism. But what was very interesting to me was that after we discussed the secular philosopher's article at length, nearly all students, including the secular ones, rejected relativism as the whole truth of the matter! They realized that at least some morals have to be objectively true.

BUT CAN WE KNOW OBJECTIVE TRUTH?

As Western Christians are buying into relativism more and more, this attitude threatens to completely eviscerate our historic stance on having objective truth based on God's unchanging character and His revelation in the Bible. Now there is another view in our universities, both secular and even many Christian ones, and in our churches as well. It calls into question our ability to know objective truth. This view is *post-modernism*.

As I spent more time at USC, I focused my studies on postmodernism and wrote my dissertation on a key aspect of it. I found in the secular university classrooms and academic books that the humanities (including subjects such as religion, English, education, linguistics, art, history, sociology, and many more) have, by and large, accepted postmodernism's key philosophical ideas. Postmodernism may seem similar to, yet it is different from, ethical relativism. Ethical relativists think that there are no objective moral truths, things that are in fact true for all people across all cultures. Some postmodernists might hold that view, but most hold to something similar yet different: *even if* objective truths exist, say the postmodernists, we cannot *know* them as such.

Interestingly, some Christians are advocating that we should understand the faith in a postmodern way. I have found that there are at least two emphases they make. For one, several emphasize that we need to "contextualize" the faith in ways that will enable us to reach postmodern people, especially people of generations "X" and "Y." These people have been very influenced by postmodern thought and attitudes, these Christians maintain, so if we are to reach them with the gospel, we must

find ways to contextualize Christianity that postmodern people will appreciate and understand.

A second emphasis is more theoretical, and it is that we should not only contextualize the faith, we also should postmodernize the faith itself. Here we see the work of the more philosophical ideas driving postmodern thought, and this is where I want to assess carefully the postmoderns' recommendations. We will see much of the theoretical work being done by people like Nancey Murphy, the late Stanley Grenz, John Franke, Brad Kallenberg, and even Stanley Hauerwas. We also will find that Brian McLaren, perhaps the most influential leader of the Emerging Church, and Tony Jones, recently appointed national coordinator of Emergent U.S., draw upon and may argue for certain theoretical ideas, but more so, they are concerned about how believers need to embody and embrace postmodern ideas and values in order to be truly faithful to the Lord in these times. This is what McLaren means by the title of his widely influential book, *A New Kind of Christian*. In his view, living out Christianity in a "modern" way just will not cut it in postmodern times, and it also will leave aside many postmodern people who will not hear the gospel if it is preached and lived out in modern ways.

For many Christians, though, I believe there is a general lack of understanding about postmodernism and in particular Christian postmodernism. When I have taught on this topic at church or school events, I have found that many believers think they should be concerned about postmodernism but they have little or no idea about its main ideas. This is especially so among Christian parents, but even their teenage children have little conception of what postmodernism is. And I have found many Christian adults are utterly surprised to hear that some Christians are advocating a postmodern way of interpreting our faith.

Recently I spoke to a graduate-level class for youth workers at my school, Biola University. They had read a text on postmodernism and youth ministry, which happens to have been written by Tony Jones, whose views we will examine. While they realized that they need to address the postmodern mind-set of many youth, they also lacked the tools to assess Jones's views. Indeed, many youth ministers themselves have been influenced to approach ministry and their faith in a post-modern way.

TWO KINDS OF POSTMODERNISM

It will be helpful to first get a big-picture view of postmodernism, in order to understand its main ideas. There are two levels of postmodernism at work in society. First, there is the “*street*” or *popular* level, in which postmodernism manifests itself in attitudes such as *suspicion of authorities’ claims* to be telling the truth or to be acting for the good of people. Instead, postmodern ways of thinking have led us to realize that leaders often are acting to preserve their own power. After all, we know that Richard Nixon covered up the White House’s involvement in Watergate, just to preserve his presidency. Bill Clinton stretched our commonsense understanding when he claimed that he smoked marijuana but did not inhale, and that he did not have sexual relations with Monica Lewinsky. Clinton carefully crafted his meanings of these words to protect himself from criticism or even impeachment.

This same distrust of authorities often manifests itself in a deep *suspicion of hierarchies*. Often I saw this attitude in my fellow graduate students who had had a Catholic upbringing. They were angry at the Catholic emphasis on a church hierarchy that could give normative ethical and theological pronouncements for all Catholics. This same distrust of hierarchies is often evidenced in feminist writings as well. But distrust is not limited to just religious hierarchies; for example, many who opposed the Vietnam War were motivated by deep suspicions of the motives of the U.S. government in waging the war. Today, people are routinely suspicious of the motives of corporate executives who lay off large numbers of employees only to vote themselves enormous bonuses.

Postmodern attitudes have also been shaped by a *distrust of modern science*. Confidence in the goodness of science was shattered when we discovered how the Nazis used medical science to perform gross experiments on Jewish subjects. Scientists also developed the most destructive weapon we know to date, the nuclear bomb. People now are far less trusting of scientists’ claims to be acting solely for the good of humanity. People are tempted to abuse their power, and we are rightly suspicious of claims made by the powerful that they are acting solely for the good of others. We often question their vested interests, as well we should.

Another key trait of postmodernism “on the street” is very notice-

able among our youth. More than anything, I think, they are looking for “authentic” people. They do not want just promises; they are looking for people whose lives and deeds match up with their words.

How and where do we find authentic lives? The postmodern answer is *we find it in community*. Instead of supporting a rugged individualism, which still dominates much of American society, postmoderns look for authentic people in communities. This is the kind of attitude shift that Robert Bellah and his coauthors suggested in their widely read sociological book *Habits of the Heart*, where they observed that people are looking for places of belonging that may be the primary basis for the formation of their sense of identity.³

These attitudes help show why postmodernism is attractive to some Christians. For one, the attitude of suspicion toward authorities’ truth claims resonates with our understanding that all people are sinners and are capable of great deception, self-interest, and quests for power. For another, some Christians find a natural parallel between the postmodern emphasis on living in community and the “one another” biblical teachings. That is, they see the church as the Christian community in which we are to live out the life of Christ as a witness to outsiders.

When you draw together these values and attitudes, a common thread emerges. On a popular, everyday level, most people think that science gives us the facts about the physical world. Scientists still enjoy that prestige. When the person in the scientist’s white lab coat advertises a product, that endorsement gives the product credibility. But there is a vast split in people’s minds between the facts that science can give and the values or preferences that religion and ethics provide. And, most importantly for our purposes in this study, people tend to think that ethical and religious truth claims are simply *up to us*. According to the popular, street-level version of postmodernism, there is no factual, objective religious or ethical truth that we all can know and that is true for everyone. It used to be that Christians could approach someone and read through a booklet like *The Four Spiritual Laws*, and there would be a common basis for understanding those biblical truths. While that still will happen with some people, it now is becoming more common that

³Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986).

someone would merely reply, “That is a nice story. Now let me tell you my story!”

That is street postmodernism, but there is also *academic postmodernism*. Academic postmoderns are highly suspicious of human reason’s abilities. In fact, while many “modernists” (a term relating to the modern era, or the Enlightenment, roughly 1550–1945) thought that we could know universal, objective truths by our reason, postmodernists have given up on knowing such truths. This is an *epistemological* claim, which simply is a claim about what we can know and how we can know. Instead of knowing the world as it really is, academic postmoderns claim that we cannot know any such thing. We are left with having to “make,” or shape, our own worlds ourselves, including religious and ethical “truths.” Notice that this is a *metaphysical* claim, meaning that it is a claim about the nature of what exists.

How do we make our own worlds? We do it in community, or culture, say the postmoderns, and we use the *language* of our community to make our world. This touches on a key element of both academic and street postmodernism: the focus has shifted away from the rugged individual, still very popular in American society, to the community. This emphasis on community is enticing to some Christian academic postmodernists, for they want to say that the true community is the church, and the language of the church is the Gospels, which are written in a narrative, story-like format. With an emphasis on language and on how we talk in community, postmoderns stress narratives, or stories. One result of this is that the terminology within our churches is changing from someone telling his or her testimony, to telling his or her *story*.

One implication of academic postmodernism is that if we cannot know reality (how things really are), then we cannot know what an author (of a book in the Bible, the Constitution, etc.) really meant. Thus, in many Bible studies, a frequently asked question is, “What does the passage mean *to you?*” as though we cannot know what Paul, Luke, or Peter meant when they wrote a book. Now, somewhat subtly, even if this question is asked unintentionally, the implication seems to be that the meaning of the passage is up to us, a meaning that we must *make for ourselves*.

Clearly, postmodernism undermines any claims to know objective truth, and when applied to Christian truth claims, this approach would

seem to offer a serious challenge to the Christian faith. But is that the case? To what extent should we (or should we not) as Christians embrace the ideas of the Emerging Church and other Christian postmodernists? Christian postmodernism is more problematic than the postmodernism offered by non-Christians, since writers such as Stanley Hauerwas (a theological ethicist), Stanley Grenz and John Franke (evangelical theologians), and Brad Kallenberg (an evangelical philosophical theologian) all will say that the gospel is the truth. In this they are right, but what they mean by this is not that it is the objective, universal truth for all people, which can be known as such. They believe we cannot know such things. Instead, they say, the claims that the gospel is the true story or that Jesus is the only way to God are true because these are the ways we as Christians should *talk* according to our “grammar,” the Bible. By looking at Christian postmodernism, we can clarify specific implications of this view for Christians and Christianity, and we also can gain insights into postmodernism more broadly conceived.

So I will address several aspects of Christian postmodernism and assess to what extent Christians should, or should not, embrace it. I believe we will find both strengths and weaknesses in Christian postmodernism, and in the proposals offered by McLaren and Jones of the Emerging Church in particular. To do that, I will try to give a brief background to help us understand better how we have shifted from a once-dominant understanding that ethics and religious claims are objectively true, to a view that they are relative, and now to a postmodern view that they are just what communities (or cultures) have created. These are the emphases of chapter 1, where I will also compare the modern period with our postmodern one.

In chapter 2, I will explain how postmodernists like Hauerwas, Grenz, Franke, and Kallenberg think we should see Christianity in a postmodern way. In chapter 3, we will look at how and why two leaders of the very influential Emerging Church, Brian McLaren and Tony Jones, advocate a postmodern approach to the faith, especially in pastoral ministry. Chapter 4 will explain how postmodernism is surfacing within academic departments in secular and Christian universities, to help us see the extent of its influences as well as begin to examine them.

Then, in chapter 5, we will begin a critique of Christian postmodernism, and postmodernism more generally conceived. I will criticize

postmodernism's core philosophical ideas. In chapter 6, I will assess the extent to which we should accept McLaren and Jones's proposals as leaders of the Emerging Church. In chapter 7, I will continue to address the implications of postmodernism for Christian ethics and several essential Christian doctrines. Having shown the need for Christians to reject key aspects (but not all) of postmodernism—particularly as Christians conceive it—in chapter 8 I will look at the issue of relativism. Is postmodernism just relativism in new clothing? If it is, is that a serious problem? I also will try to address why Christians are attracted to, but should not embrace, relativism, despite the appeals and pressures in our culture to be tolerant and open-minded.

Overall, I will try to show that we have no good reason to give up the objectivity of Christian truths by accepting certain postmodern ideas, especially in a day when the objective character of Christian beliefs is under assault. So, in chapter 9, I will develop my own positive case why I think we can (and often do) know objective truth in morality, religion, history, and other areas. Finally, I have provided a bibliography of materials (books, tapes, websites, etc.) available for further study on postmodernism. I have categorized these according to their level of difficulty as well as by topic.

If Paul was right (and I believe he was) that in Jesus Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col. 2:3), we need not, even dare not, abandon the objective truth of the Scriptures. Instead, we can stand firm, being fully assured that our faith and its many claims are objectively true, and that we can know it to be so. Further, and contrary to McLaren, we need not have “bombproof” certainty to know that Christianity's claims are true.⁴

It is true, of course, that truth can be used as a club. May that not be the case. We need to heed the postmodern reminder that truth must be embodied, or lived out. And we must match our embodiment of truth with the embodiment of grace, just as it was in the life of Christ (John 1:14). We need to live out both grace and truth, which I think will make for a very powerful witness in these postmodern times.

⁴ See Brian McLaren, *More Ready Than You Realize* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2002), 131.