

# Truth in a Postmodern World

## Answering the Charges of Arrogance, Imperialism and Intolerance

By Lewis Winkler

### Three Derogatory Labels

One of the really daunting challenges facing Christianity in a postmodern world is answering some of the attacks of the postmodern community against it. And while there are many possible attacks that could be addressed, I think there are three central ones that need a clearer answer if Christianity is to thrive in the first half of the twenty-first century.

Postmodern society typically gives Christianity three derogatory labels in an attempt to discredit and marginalize it. First, we are considered arrogant if we claim that Jesus is the only way to have a relationship with God. Second, we are considered imperialistic if we claim that our perspective of truth and morality transcends all peoples and all times. Third, we are considered intolerant since we do not accept some views of the world as valid interpretations of reality.

These are hefty indictments, not easily dismissed with a wave of a hand and a good hearty laugh, especially in the cultural tide that we currently find ourselves so frequently swimming against. Can anything be said in Christianity's defense, or should we meekly turn aside to pay silent homage to the intellectual and moral gatekeepers of tolerance in our postmodern world?

### Tolerance always has limits.

The third accusation, that of intolerance, was briefly explored in my article, "Tolerance in a Postmodern World" and will not be revisited here, except to say that tolerance always has limits. Those who decide what those limits are need some sort of evaluative foundation to exclude and hinder unacceptable ways of living in and thinking about our world. Will the foundation be solid or sandy? Postmodernism stands upon very sandy soil, whereas Christianity stands upon the rock of Jesus Christ.

### Are exclusive truth claims arrogant?

But what of the first claim, namely that it is arrogant to make exclusive truth claims? What can be said to this? Are we arrogant to say that Jesus is the only way to know God? Only if two criteria are met: Claims are arrogant only if, one, they are false and two, if they are put forth with an heir of superiority.

To deal with the second problem first, it can be noted that while those who know the truth can certainly be arrogant about it, that is no reason to reject the facts simply because the fact holders are unpleasant (arrogant) people. For example, I may not like the fact that some professional athletes are arrogant and full of themselves, but this does not change the truth that they are good athletes. It is always a good reminder to be humble in the way that you hold onto the truth, one Christians should take keenly to heart.

But what can be said of the first idea? Are exclusive truth claims inherently arrogant? No. And here's the reason why: I am not *necessarily* arrogant when I claim that I am my father's only son. If I make an exclusive claim like this, it is not inherently arrogant of me to do so, especially if it's true and I do not come off as being full of myself in the claim I make. Exclusive claims to truth may or may not be true, but contrary to the postmodernist, just because they are exclusive does not disqualify them from consideration.

### **The Problem of the Tar-baby**

One other way to look at arrogance is from the problem of the so-called “tar-baby.” The more a pluralist claims that the “exclusivist” is wrong to hold exclusive views, the more the pluralist becomes an exclusivist in pluralist clothing. Why? Because in order to say that exclusivism is wrong, the pluralist must in the same breath claim that he is right. That is, the more the pluralist castigates the exclusivist for claiming to be right, the more he becomes one himself by claiming himself to be right!

I think that much of the discomfort we as Christians feel is due to the fact that in order to make claims about truth, we need to assert that we have objective, accessible bases upon which to judge the way things really are. But this is directly analogous to many other fields of study and concern. Science, for example, is constantly making claims about the nature of reality. And these claims are testable. But are Christianity’s claims any less testable? Not entirely. While there are some issues that remain beyond to the scope of testability, there are many others within the Christian faith which clearly are. And this gives us the bases upon which to test and judge the rightness of any claim, religious or otherwise.

### **Is truth imperialistic?**

But let’s move to the second concern, that of imperialism. It is often charged that those who claim to have and know universal truth are imperialists who are trying to impose their views and values upon the world. This is a pretty serious charge. And you don’t have to look very hard or very far to find examples of people and institutions (both in our world today and throughout history) who have in fact done this. People have misused exclusive truth claims (religious and otherwise) to execute, destroy and subjugate both peoples and nations.

But the misuse of exclusive truth is no more an indictment against that kind of truth than the misuse of pairing knives is an indictment against master chefs. That exclusive truth can and will be misused is a given. But it does not change the nature of the truth. People have frequently used the name, of Christ to manipulate and kill, but that does not vilify Christ! It vilifies those who have used His name in vain and/or for sordid gain. It confirms the doctrine of human depravity, not the doctrine of postmodern pluralism!

But having said this, keep in mind, that claiming to know the truth does have an aspect of control to it. This is the kernel of truth in this criticism. After all, reality (truth) does have a way of pressing itself in upon us. Just as we would all like to be able to fly the heavens unaided, we are in reality unable. And truth does place limits on what we can and cannot do, does it not?

For example, if it is true that I am married, I am now no longer able to have just any woman I want. Truth is like this. It tends to restrain and limit us, something we in 21st century America don’t always take too kindly to. But just because truth is constraining, does not mean it is either bad or false. It simply means that we must use it with great care and caution.

### **The Powerfully Intolerant Postmodernists**

The greatest irony in all of this is that the very ones who laid claim to the idea that exclusive truth claims are a tool for domination, are the self-same ones wielding the most widespread influence and dominating power upon the masses. The rise of “political correctness” and the thought police against hate crimes are extremely repressive structures designed to prevent

anyone from making repressively exclusive truth claims. The problem is, their perspective is shockingly exclusive and repressive! There seems to be no way around the dilemma of holding to some universal system of truth. The question only becomes which one?

**We have the greatest cure.**

As Christians, we have an important message, and whether or not the world wants to hear it or believe in it, it is the truth and it desperately needs to be said. If we have the cure for all cancer, it would be ridiculous and wrong to keep it a secret. And we have a cure that is far more critical than just a cure to cancer. We have the cure for spiritual cancer which will cost people their eternal, not just physical life.

But now we can see that the shoe is on the other foot, because what this does is remind us that contrary to the assertions of some, we are not wrong or insensitive to tell everyone everywhere that they need Jesus Christ to be their Savior from sin. Rather, far more we are wrong and uncaring to keep it a secret!

The apostle Paul lived in a pluralistic culture, not unlike the one of our day. And it was to this culture that he boldly proclaimed the exclusive but true claims of Christ. Why? Because he truly believed that those who did not know Christ did not know God. And because I believe this as well, it motivates me to let the truth be known in season and out of season, whether popular or not.