

## **Postmodernism & Epistemology**

Let us begin with prayer.

*Heavenly Father, we thank You for this beautiful morning, for the sunshine and the warmer weather and the hint that spring will indeed come. And Father, we are so thankful that we are living in Your universe, that You are the One who has made all things. You have committed yourself to this creation and You do promise that the seasons will come, one after the other, and that spring will return. Father, You are the One who is committed to new life, and You bring new life to us. Father, as we think of that promise of spring and Your work in our hearts to renew us day by day, we look forward to the regeneration of all things when Jesus comes, both of the creation around us and of ourselves as well. In the meantime, Father, we pray that as we look forward to that day You will help us to be those who serve You faithfully, who love Your truth, and who delight in making it known to those around us. Teach us today, we pray, for Jesus' sake. Amen.*

We are going to look now to postmodernism and say a little bit about epistemology—the philosophy of knowledge, how we know anything. I am not going to take a lot of time on this. I want to go quickly through this section on epistemology. It is the third area in which we hear the word “postmodernism” used in the context of the philosophy of knowledge. To give some background to this, it is important for us to recognize that we as Christians, for example, would be considered pre-modern by postmodernists. Many others who believe in God in some form or another—Orthodox Jews, Muslims, Hindus who are monotheist (though most Hindus are pantheist and pagan, but a few are monotheist)—and not only those who believe in God in some sense, but anyone who has any sense that there is something ultimate in the universe would be regarded as pre-modern. Pre-moderns, like the Christian, have the conviction that God knows everything. And it is no problem that we are finite and limited in our understanding because God knows everything and He has made Himself known to us. Not only that but because we are made in the image of God (the Christian would say we are made in the likeness of God), God is able to communicate with us in language and reveal truth to us in a way that we can understand. Also, God has made us in coherence with the world around us. We are part of this universe. God has set us here. We are like God in terms of the fact that we are persons made in His image—able to understand as He understands, to think His thoughts after Him—but we are also part of this creation. Because there is coherence between us and the creation and because God has given us the gift of understanding and rationality, we can understand the world in which we live. We can come to a true understanding of it. So the Christian, while we recognize that knowledge is sometimes difficult to get because of our sinfulness, believes that God is so committed to revealing truth to us (and not just to believers but to all people), that it is possible for all human beings to have true knowledge and a true understanding about the nature of the world in which we live.

The period of modernism is the period of the Enlightenment from approximately 1600 or 1650 up until the very recent past. Modernism—we want to use the term rationalism or secular humanism—rejected the need for the existence of God and said it is possible for human beings to know truly by the use of our reason. That is really what the “Enlightenment Project” is all about. It is the sense that reason is sufficient to lead us to a clear understanding of the nature of the universe and the nature of human existence and that reason will teach us how to live and give us a set of valid and universal, ethical standards. That was the conviction of the enlightenment of modernism, of secularism, for a couple of hundred years or more.

Postmodernism is a passionate reaction against that confidence and reason. Fundamentally, postmodernism is saying that if there is no God up there, let us be serious about what that means. We are alone here in this world. It is only us, and we are finite. For the Christian, finiteness is not a problem because of the existence of God and His revelation. However, for the postmodernist, being finite is an enormous problem. It is a barrier over which one can never leap. That brings us to the points we are going to look at here today.

This first point in postmodernism is that there is nothing transcendent, nothing above us—neither God nor anything else—that understands everything. Consequently, there is no objective truth available to us. There cannot be because it is not possible for a finite, limited person existing at a particular moment in time in a particular setting to know enough to ever be able to say that they know truly the way things are. That is the fundamental problem for postmodernism. If there is nobody in heaven, nothing transcendent, then there is no way we can possibly have access to objective truth. How can I ever know that what I think is objectively true? That is why it does not help you to say that it is a contradiction to say there is absolutely no possibility of knowing anything. You say, “Well, that is an absolute statement.” But if you respond that way to somebody who is truly postmodern, they will not pay any attention to what you are saying. You see, that is exactly our problem. We just do not know anything so even what I say is absurd, and what you are saying is absurd too. So it will not help you very much to make that kind of comment.

For the postmodernist, it is pointless to even ask the question whether or not there is an objective world. We have no way of knowing the answer to the question. There is a postmodern book on epistemology published about five or six years ago, which has an account of a brain in a jar that is in a laboratory experiment. The point of that parable is that we have no way of knowing whether that is true or not—whether I really exist and am standing here in front of this class teaching you today and you are sitting there listening to me, or whether I am actually just a brain in a jar in somebody’s laboratory experiment and they are causing my brain to have the sensations of you sitting in front of me and listening to me. Now, that is the point of the parable and that is a typical kind of parable for somebody who has a postmodern understanding of epistemology. We are trapped in our finiteness, and we have no way at all of getting out of it. The only thing that is available to us (and it brings us back to what we were talking about last time) is the language we use to describe what my personal senses perceive. So this is a huge dilemma.

David Hume already understood this at the very foundation of the Enlightenment—that it was a problem that I can never be sure that what I think I know is the truth. In particular, Nietzsche, at the end of the 19th century, developed this idea very carefully in a parable of his. He talks about a mad man who comes into the marketplace where everybody is carrying on as if life is perfectly normal and everything is fine. The mad man says, “Do you not realize that God is gone, and that means everything is gone, the possibility of knowing anything?” All the people in the marketplace are secularists, modernists, and they just laugh at him. They just laugh at him and say, “You are crazy! What on earth are you talking about? Everything is going to carry on just the same even though God does not exist.” The modernists were optimistic about the absence of God. Nietzsche is expressing in this famous parable what an awful problem it is that God does not exist. We cannot know anything. Nietzsche uses the image of the sun being removed from the horizon so that we are dwelling in complete darkness and in absolute coldness. Nietzsche then goes on to say some very famous words that are like a prophetic vision of the culture in which we are living now. What would happen, he said, when this truth begins to sink in, is that without God we do not have the possibility of knowing anything. What Nietzsche prophesied was a culture that could be identified by annoying skepticism and relativism. He prophesied annoying and crumbling skepticism and relativism, and that absolutely describes the culture in which you and I live today. It is a

deep skepticism, an uncertainty about what we can know and about the meaning of human life. Relativism is a loss of confidence that there are any moral standards by which we can judge our human life or call ourselves or other people to account. That is a prophetic description of the ruined world in which we live, and that was what Nietzsche was foreseeing. He was a very thoughtful man. He really understood what this would mean for people at a time when most people around him, most modernists, had no understanding at all. That is the fundamental point here.

The second point in the postmodernist view is in knowing I am not ever free (that I never stand by myself able to see anything objectively or even clearly), I always come to every issue with prejudices, beliefs, and a background. My parents and the culture in which I live have taught me to look at the world in a particular way and that determines what I am going to see. It is as if we are wearing a set of colored glasses but we do not realize that everything that we look at is colored by those glasses. To use another image, and this would be a helpful one, some of you are probably colorblind. That is not an absolute prediction, but it is probable that there will be some people who are colorblind in any given group of people. Some people who are colorblind do not know they are and then will suddenly discover it one day. When I was in seminary, a very dear friend of mine had a car and it was a dirty brown color. He had been driving it for years, but he did not realize it was brown. One day it got a scratch on it when somebody, where he was parked, brushed against his car. He went to buy some paint to cover up the scratch, and he painted it bright green. That is the color he thought his car was. I said to him, "Why on earth did you paint it that color?" He thought it was exactly the same, and he did not see it. That is a good illustration of the problem that the postmodernist is pointing out. The person who is colorblind does not know that he is colorblind. He sees the world that particular way. He cannot see it any other way. The postmodernist is saying that is true of all of our knowing. I am never free from my colorblindness. To every issue I think about and everything I look at, I come with a set of prejudices with my background and beliefs.

Some postmodernists will emphasize that there are communities of knowledge. Some postmodernists would look at a group like us and say, "There is a community of knowledge. They have a shared view of things. They share the same prejudices." Or they might look at a group of Muslims and say, "There is another group, a community with a set of shared prejudices." Or they might look at a group of, let us say, gay rights activists or a group of radical feminists and say, "They share the same prejudices." Some postmodernists emphasize those communities of knowledge—people who are bound so closely together that they are looking at the world, not in absolutely similar, but very similar ways. Others will stress the isolation of the individual knower—that is that each of us is trapped completely, like the colorblind person, in his or her own particular view of the world and can never get out of it to understand what anybody else thinks because one cannot get inside somebody else's head. That is the reason why we have the problem with language that we talked about last time. We cannot ever really communicate with each other. Our words are constantly slipping past each other. We cannot even know whether another person really understands what we have said because they have automatically interpreted our words through their own set of prejudices and convictions. So that is the second problem.

Our third point is that reason is a weak tool and can never lead us to true knowledge, for it is always constrained by our prejudices. Modernism emphasized, very passionately, the validity of reason as an adequate tool to lead to truth, to true understanding of the universe in which we live, to a true understanding of the human condition, and to a sure set of ethical standards. Postmodernists say instead that reason will never lead me to the truth because my reason is always under the control of my prejudices. There is an element of truth in this that we all need to recognize. At each point here postmodernism is saying some things that we need to take seriously because modernism was wrong. It

was really wrong. Reason does not lead to the truth. We have no access to ultimate truth without the revelation of God. So the postmodernist's critique of modernism is an accurate critique.

The postmodernist says that reason and the claim of knowledge are weapons used by the powerful to maintain their power and interests at the expense of the powerless. So, postmodernism regards a person's claim to have truth as just being a weapon to impose his or her views on other people under the guise of being reasonable. Again, you see what a challenging situation this makes for us as Christians. We cannot just stand up there and say, "This is true." A postmodernist would ask why, and you would say, "Well, I believe it." He would say, "That is exactly what I thought. That is your personal faith." It would not help you at all. "I believe something quite different," he would say. And so you would say, "Let me reason with you about it." But he would say, "The reasons you are putting forward only make sense within your set of prejudices. They do not make any sense to me." It makes it extremely difficult to communicate. How do you get somebody out of his or her subjectivity because the postmodernist insists that reason is always bound by the subjectivity of the individual. For the postmodernist, knowledge is simply a weapon in society, a weapon to be used in the culture war. This is why our society talks about things like the culture war. I think it was a Christian sociologist, James Davidson Hunter—a member of the PCA who teaches at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville—who first coined the expression "culture wars." In other words, we are in a society where there are different cultural groups at war with each other. And knowledge becomes a weapon in that war, knowledge that we use to our advantage to try to push our agenda into society and impose it on other people. Again, we have to be very careful how we say things and how we do things in this cultural context because the attempt to use money and power to influence people is immediately seen as suspicious, as a kind of imperialism. It is seen as a misuse of our private knowledge to attack other people. That is the third element of the postmodernist's view. And I will run through the last couple quickly.

The fourth element is that postmodernism is passionately anti-abstract. A lot of modernists' philosophy seems very abstruse to a postmodernist as it deals with all kinds of theoretical questions. The postmodernist says, "This is just a waste of time. We want philosophy to actually deal with the practicalities of human existence." Jean Paul Sartre said he wanted to create a philosophy that makes human life possible. Sartre was an existentialist. Think about that word, "existence-alist." He was saying, "I want my philosophy to be about existence, to enable me to live, to exist. I just want some theoretical, abstract ideas about the universe and about the human condition. I want to be able to live." And existentialism, I suppose, is in one sense a precursor of postmodernism. It is passionately anti-abstract. It is a very strong rejection of the way philosophy can just play games with words.

The fifth element of the postmodernist view is that there are no grounds for optimism about humanity or the future. This is the second fundamental aspect of modernism. The first aspect was the confidence in reason; the second is an optimism about the human condition. Postmodernism strongly rejects that. We have no grounds to be hopeful about our future, about the future of the individual, about the future of our nation, or about the future of the human race. There are no grounds for optimism whatsoever. People are not necessarily basically good. In fact, history is filled with appalling examples of human evil. The postmodernist would delight in pointing out that it is in the 20th century where western society prides itself on its modernism, its advances, and its scientific and technological achievements, and yet we ended up doing some of the most wicked things in the whole of human history. For example, in the second World War 50 million people were killed; there were 6 million Jews killed in gas chambers in Auschwitz, and there was an enormous number of people put to death in the Soviet Union during the time of Stalin. The 20th century is a century of very great wickedness, and the postmodernist delights in pointing that out, not in the sense of thinking this is something to laugh about but in order to say, "Stop having the folly of being optimistic. All your scientific advances just enable you to kill each other in

greater numbers and in more brutal ways.” So the postmodernist points to the awful destructiveness, for example, of nuclear weapons. We make these things but we can destroy the race and the planet on which we live. They would point as well to the way technological advances like the television actually dehumanize us. We sit in front of them like vegetables becoming more and more passive, less and less creative, and less and less involved. We live in this extraordinarily advanced society, but community has almost disappeared from among us. So the postmodernist is pointing out all sorts of practical realities. Science and technology do not deliver us from the problems of our human condition, and they even make some of those problems even worse. That is why there is a passionate rejection of optimism in postmodernism.

I was pointing out that the postmodernists tell us that each of us has a set of prejudices, many of them taught by our parents, by the community, and by the cultural context in which we were raised. I have been asked what the difference is with coming to seminary. Are we not just being taught another set of prejudices? Of course the postmodernist would say that is exactly right. You come to seminary just to be reinforced in your prejudices. Knowledge is just a tool to make you feel more comfortable and secure in the prejudices you already have, which will make you even more inflexible and incapable of communicating with anybody else. That is precisely what the postmodernist would say. He would regard any educational institution as doing that, including one in which he is teaching himself. You cannot escape from that. That is why someone has said postmodernism is Nihilism with a smile. The postmodernist will happily acknowledge it if you say, “But you are doing the same thing that you are accusing me of—communicating prejudices to people and that is what you are doing.” He will say, “I know it perfectly well. The difference is with you, you do not. And he will be amused by that. That is why it is not easy to respond. That is challenging, and it is something you need to reflect about. I would say, just at the level of listening to any of us teach, that Scripture, of course, teaches us to respect people in authority. So I hope you will respect me and my fellow professors here on this campus. At the same time, Scripture also challenges you to be discerning. In Acts 17, Paul is preaching to the Bereans and he says they were of more noble character because they examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul was saying was true. So you do not want to just sit here listening. You need to reflect about it and ask yourself, “Is Jerram just communicating his prejudices?” That is a very good question to ask. That is why at the very beginning of the first class I said that if you disagree with me, please do not hesitate to say so because I am interested in finding out truth and not just communicating the prejudices I already have. So at that level, yes, we need to be aware of the need to reflect on everything we hear. The New Testament says to test everything and hold fast only to that which is good. At a deeper level, the postmodernist is really saying that you cannot know anything and you cannot actually test anything. However, he always puts himself in the position of critiquing other people far more consistently than he critiques himself, and it is important to point that out. Although you are not going to win a great battle by saying that, it is important to try to get the postmodernist to come down from his own particular pulpit and truly realize that he is in this position himself. In response I would say, “You are exactly right. If God does not exist, you are exactly right.”

I recognize that I would not be a Christian without God having made Himself known to us. There is no reason to be at all. We are not engaged in wishful thinking. The New Testament is very clear about that, and it makes this point in all sorts of different contexts. Paul says, “If Christ was not raised from the dead, if this is not true, then the people who died are still dead and we are still in our sins. Let us eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die.” There is a challenge here that we really have to reflect on. Do I believe this is the truth or do I not? If I do not really understand this as truth then I have nothing to say to my contemporaries. The only thing I can say is, “This is like music, and it will just make you feel more comfortable.” There is a very interesting story about a debate that took place between Rudolph Boltman—a very famous German and a very liberal theologian—and Karl Jaspers. Boltman regarded all

that the New Testament teaches us about the person of Jesus Christ as mythology. Christ was not the Son of God. He was not born of a virgin. He did not do miracles. He was not crucified for our sins. He did not rise from the dead, and He is not coming again. Boltman did not believe any of those things. He said all we can know is that there was someone called Jesus who existed. It was radical, historical skepticism. He had a debate with Karl Jaspers, a Swiss existentialist philosopher. Jaspers was a person who held this postmodern view of knowledge—that it is not possible for us to know anything with any certainty at all. Jaspers said something like this: God has withdrawn Himself as the sun has set below the horizon. We are living in absolute darkness; the only thing we have to hold up against that absolute darkness is a tiny flicker of light. That is our hope and longing for something better. During this public debate, they first discussed the possibility of knowledge and the inadequacy of reason. Boltman completely agreed with Jaspers because Boltman was really in this same dilemma even though he was a Christian theologian teaching theology at a university and preaching in churches. Boltman preached that people should put their faith in Christ—in His death and resurrection—though he did not believe in them. The two men agreed that we have no possibility of knowledge, that life is ultimately absurd, there is no meaning to the human condition, and that we cannot truly know anything. Then Jaspers said to Boltman publicly, “Well, why all this talk about the resurrection? You know, how can you possibly talk about the resurrection of Christ if you agree with me that knowledge is impossible, that reason leads us nowhere, and that there are no answers to the human condition and to our problems?” And Boltman’s response was, “I have to have something to say to people in need. I do not believe the resurrection happened. I do not believe anybody else is going to be raised from the dead. When we die, that is it. We go out like a candle. But people need to hear something in their need.” Now, you remember in the last lesson I quoted Frances Young using the image that Christianity is like music. That is perfectly appropriate to describe what Boltman was doing. We go to church, we worship, we listen to sermons, and we proclaim the Gospel to people because we know that the human condition is completely absurd and meaningless. But we need some comfort in that, and this is the way we feel comforted—by going to church, worshipping, and listening to sermons. We have to understand that that is how people hear us—that we are just sharing, to quote Shakespeare, “a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing,” just for the sake of comforting ourselves. That is how people hear us, and it is not easy to break out of that.

Now we will discuss the consequences of postmodernism. What does this mean? At the moment it would be easy for somebody to respond by saying, “The issue of style does not matter. It is just buildings, paintings, and music. It is just a kind of intellectual game. You have been talking about language and literary criticism and now about epistemology. That is just something that affects a few university professors and a tiny number of intellectuals. This is all completely beside the point. What does this have to do with us?” Maybe some of you have been thinking that. I hope not. If you have been thinking that, let me tell you that you have nothing to say to your contemporaries. If you do not understand the problem this creates for us, it means you do not have any idea how the unbelievers around you are thinking and living. If any of you in this room thinks that what we have discussed during the last two lessons is really kind of irrelevant, let us think about the consequences. I want to go through these consequences carefully.

Number one: human reason is inadequate to lead us to the truth. We have no possibility of finding objective truth, no possibility of finding absolute truth. All there is for us is personal truth. You have your truths and I have mine, and that is all there is. We cannot get anywhere else at all. There is a story that comes from a book by Walter Truett Anderson called *Reality is Not What it Used to be* in which he illustrates the problem. He told a joke about three baseball umpires having a bite to eat and a beer after the game was over. This is what they say to each other. The first one says, “There are balls and strikes. I call them the way they are.” The second one says, “There are balls and strikes. I call them the way I see them.” And the third one says, “There are balls and strikes and they are nothing until I call them.” That

expresses the postmodern dilemma. We really cannot know anything, even with regard to a game of baseball. There is only my personal truth. I have no access to truly understanding the world in which I live, the human condition, the future, or anything else. Truth is what I decide it is: “There are balls and strikes and they are nothing until I call them.”

Does this really affect the people around us? Well, do you remember the story I told you at the beginning about the young people here in St. Louis? There is a group of kids at a university and a group of kids in the inner city. Both of them are exactly in this place—that is, skeptical about the possibility of knowing anything at all. I am not particularly into surveys and statistics, though they certainly have some value. But you will not find me quoting lots of them. However, if you look at the surveys that George Bonner and George Gallup have done over the last 10 years, the figures you will get consistently are something like this. Around 2/3 to 70% of the whole population in every part of the country does not believe there is absolute truth. Those are the figures. It does not matter how you ask the question. You can ask it in an abstract way. If you believe there is absolute truth, you can ask it in much more practical ways that are easier to get access to what you mean. No matter how you ask the question, that is the answer you will get. Almost 70% of Americans of every racial, cultural, educational, social, and economic group across this nation—from the Bible belt to the far west to the northeast—will answer in this way. The figures are astonishingly similar across the whole nation. When it comes to people of Generation X the figures are over 80%. I would agree from just chatting with friends of my boys when they were in high school. I have three sons who are in their 20s now. They had one or two Christians they knew in school, but apart from them there was not anybody for whom it had even entered their mind that knowing truth about the world would be possible. See, it is not that they have come to the conclusion that you cannot know truth. They take it for granted that you cannot. They do not even ask the question. It is not because people have all been listening to postmodern lectures—that is not the point. It is the air we breathe in the culture. Just listen to the music that young people listen to. Just think about the discussions they are having. People come at things with prejudices that prevent them from seeing what is happening. They impose their views on things. You see, there is an element of truth in what postmodernism says, but at the very deep level people do not believe that access to truth, to absolute truth, is possible. There is only their own personal truth. You have your truth, and I have mine.

There are all sorts of things that reinforce this. Pluralism reinforces this. We may use the word “pluralism” in several different senses. The first sense—and this will be true if you look up the word “pluralism” in a dictionary—is what we might call “descriptive pluralism.” Descriptive pluralism says we are living in a society in which there is a vast diversity of groups of people—different races, cultures, religions, and ways of looking at life. That is descriptive pluralism, and of course this is accurate and true. America, at the level of religion and probably every other level as well, is the most diverse society the world has ever seen. That is the reality of the culture in which we live. This is true. America is extraordinarily diverse—racially and religiously. I was in Houston three weeks ago teaching a doctoral class there. There are at least 40 Islamic mosques in Houston. I was in Chicago not long ago. There are more than 50 there. It is the same in New York and Los Angeles. St. Louis has several. In a city like Houston, Los Angeles, New York, or Chicago, there would be two or three dozen Hindu temples or Buddhist temples. Take the St. Louis area as an example. One day I drew a radius of five miles from Covenant Seminary just to look at the religious diversity around the campus. Within a radius of five or six miles you will find something like 60 or 70 different Christian denominations represented. In the greater St. Louis area as a whole it is well over 100. There are all sorts of different denominations and endless churches that have no affiliation to anybody else at all. There are many different Protestant churches as well. Within a five or six mile radius of Covenant’s campus there are also lots of Catholic churches of various different kinds. There are several Greek Orthodox churches, Russian Orthodox churches, and Serbian Orthodox churches. Then there are synagogues. There are five or six synagogues

within five miles of here and several Jewish schools. This is one of the largest Jewish communities in the United States because of the Jewish Community Center here. It is a city where Jews come from all over the world and start their life in the United States, and then spread out from here across the nation. There are at least half a dozen synagogues within five miles of here. There is an Islamic Mosque near Covenant's campus that was just built three or four years ago. It is a huge mosque. Some There are a couple of other Muslim groups as well as that mosque. There is a Hindu Temple less than five miles from Covenant. It is a huge Hindu temple, and there are other Hindu meeting places as well. There are endless New Age groups meeting within the area—dozens of them of all sorts of sizes and a vast variety of beliefs. There is a Mormon Temple just down the road from Covenant—the 50th Mormon temple in the world. There are several Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Halls and several other Mormon churches in the area as well. Just in this immediate area there are several Christian Science churches and a huge Christian Science High School just a couple of miles away. They have the biggest campus of any educational institution in the whole St. Louis area. This is one of the largest centers of Christian Science in the world right here where we are. And that is just all the different kinds of places of worship, never mind people who believe all sorts of other things or who think they do not believe anything at all. We are living in a context of extraordinary religious diversity. That is descriptive pluralism.

We may use the term “pluralism” in a second sense as well, and that is “relativistic pluralism.” Again, you will find this in a dictionary. If you look it up in Webster or in any other dictionary you will find that the first definition is “a society with great diversity.” But you will find a second definition. It is that there is not one view of reality that makes full sense of the world, but there are all sorts of competing and different views that people have of the world in which we live. The second definition would be something like that—that there is no one truth, that there are all these various ways of seeing the world. That is relativistic pluralism. When you are talking with somebody you need to make sure that you understand how you are using the term because if you are using it in a descriptive sense (that first sense) then there is nothing wrong with that. That is simply the truth about where we live and we need to recognize that. If you are using it in the second sense you need to understand that. Otherwise you are just going to go past each other. It would be a perfect illustration of the postmodern dilemma, that we use words in different ways. There is a third sense of the term as well, and it is what we might call “legislated pluralism.” That is where a society and its laws and lawmakers decide that it will uphold pluralism. In other words, people will be free to have their different religious views, and all will be protected by the law so that the society decides that the government will not favor one church or one religion over another. Sometimes we use the word “pluralism” in that sense as well, but this is actually a good thing that we have a pluralistic society. We want laws to protect this, to protect religious diversity. Frances Schaeffer used to say, and this statement may surprise some of you, “I may disagree with you, but I will die for your right to disagree with me.”

Sometimes Christians get angry in an inappropriate way with this issue of pluralism. We think that what we really need is the state to work on our side as Christians and uphold Christianity—legislate prayer in the schools. I am probably treading on all sorts of toes by talking about this issue, but let me tread on them firmly. Christians do not need the state to try to require people to be Christian. You cannot legislate worship. Well, you can but you should not want to as a Christian. You cannot require people to pray. I grew up in England where we had school assemblies every day with required prayer and required religious instruction because it was a state church. It was an enemy of the Gospel most of the time because most of the people praying those prayers did not believe them. It actually had the effect of inoculating people against Christianity. And the religious instruction from the Bible was by people who did not believe it most of the time, and we all hated those classes. It had the effect of making us feel that Christianity is completely irrelevant because the people who taught it did not believe it. That is one problem with trying to have the state legislate your religion.

Another problem is this: if we ask for this, are we saying that in a state like Utah we want legislated Mormon prayer because the majority of the people are Mormons? Or let me put it another way. How do you pray for the missionaries from your church who are in a country like Saudi Arabia or Iran? Let me tell you how you pray because in those societies Islam is legislated by the state. It is against the law to preach the Gospel of Christ, and it is against the law to convert and there are severe penalties if you do. It would be the same in a Hindu kingdom like Nepal. It is against the law for a Nepali to preach the Gospel of Christ, and it is against the law for a Nepali to convert to Christ. Praying for freedom of choice (because I have very good friends who work in both of these contexts) is the beginning of legislated pluralism. That is what you are praying for. You are not praying that all Muslims will be put to death and not allowed to speak and the mosques closed down. You are praying simply that Christians will be allowed to proclaim the Gospel and that the people in Saudi Arabia or Iran or Nepal will have the freedom to convert to Christianity. You know that freedom—in that sense, the state not interfering with religious belief—is the friend of the Gospel. The Holy Spirit does not need the force of the state to uphold the Gospel. He simply needs the possibility of Christians being able to live and proclaim the truth and convert without fear of persecution and then people will become Christians. That is the reality. That is what we pray for in every setting where Christianity is persecuted. Of course we recognize that this creates problems. Before the fall of the Iron Curtain in the former Soviet Union, Christians were persecuted all over the place. We all prayed many times for the end of communism so that the church might be free to preach the Gospel without hindrance from the state. Now that has happened. One of the consequences, of course, is that now Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses and every New Age cult is also able to proclaim their ideas all over the former Soviet Union. They, as well as the church, are growing rapidly there. But Christians cannot have it both ways. You cannot say, "Freedom for me but not for anybody else." You see, historically it is no accident that the church is much stronger here than it is in any western European country where we had the state backing up our religion. You do not need it. The Gospel flourishes much better in a context of freedom. We do not need to burn books and we do not need to stop people from listening to false teachers.

Let me tell you a wonderful story, something that might be quite new to you. William Kerry is the founder of the modern missionary movement in the 1790s. Protestant churches did not really understand the challenge of the Great Commission—to go out into all the world and preach the Gospel. (You might think that is very clear to us. We do struggle with not seeing things clearly because of our prejudices, and knowledge has not always come easily to us.) It was not until the 1790s that the Protestant church really began to get its act together, and that started with William Kerry going from England to India to start to preach the Gospel there. William Kerry was a fascinating man. He translated the Bible into Bengali, the language of the people. He was a passionately committed Calvinist. He also translated the Hindu holy books from Sanskrit into the language of the people because he was not afraid of them reading them. He just simply wanted them to have the opportunity to look at God's Word and compare for themselves its truth and its claims with what their own religions taught. He was not afraid of them seeing what Hinduism taught more clearly than they had ever seen. We do not have to be afraid. You will never proclaim the Gospel faithfully to anybody by requiring that they do not watch things, listen to things, or read something else. Our education can never be about communicating propaganda. That is what the Marxists did, and sometimes Christians talk as if that is what we want to do. We will just give people absolutely programmed education. We will not allow them to ever think about anything else. That is not the way God treats us. He challenges us with the truth, and we have to challenge people with the truth and not be afraid of them being exposed to other ideas. It does not help us. We do not need to enforce it in any way.

That was just a little aside, but let us come back to our main point of how pluralism reinforces this. In the first sense, the fact that we live in a descriptively pluralistic society makes it much easier for people to say, “I am a Christian,” if everybody around me is a Christian. But if I have neighbors or college roommates who are Hindus or Muslims and they are really decent people, that is challenging. So you have to think. It ought not to be challenging, but it is sometimes challenging to us because we have not thought through what we believe. We assume that being a Christian is the only way you can be a decent person. Some Christians really think like that. When I was in seminary one of my fellow students said to me, “Non-Christians do not love each other. Have you ever met any?” If you try to put yourself in a little cocoon then you might have such views. But if you really rub shoulders with people and get to know unbelievers, you will find lots of really decent people out there. I am not saying that anybody is perfectly good—no one is, but that is not the point. But there are lots of really decent people who are not Christians. So living in a pluralistic society can challenge us. In the second sense, living in a pluralistic society, in a relativistic society, which says there is no truth that explains reality, is very challenging to us because that is the air we breathe all around us. So it really affects us in all sorts of practical ways.

Someone might say, “This is part of being an American. Everybody has the right to his or her own views. I am free to think and believe what I want. This is just part of our American democracy.” In one sense, of course, that is true. We live in a society that has a history of upholding people’s freedom to think and believe what they want, and that is a good thing. But, it depends on how far we take that. If we turn that freedom into saying, “Therefore people are free to think what they want and they are right when they think what they want,” then you have another problem. That is why the first half of what Schaeffer said is important. “I will disagree with you, and I will sit down and try to persuade you, though I will die for your right to disagree with me. But I will disagree with you.” In other words, the Christian has to hold onto this conviction of truth rather than just saying, “Well, everybody has a right to his or her own views, and that means everybody will just leave them in their own views.” The Christian can never be content with that. However, it is very challenging for us not to stay there, and that is one of the reasons why Christians just like to be with other Christians. It is much more challenging to actually get to know somebody who thinks something quite different and have to deal with it. It is more comfortable just to stay with my fellow believers.

The question has been asked, “Is this the first time that there have been problems with truth, skepticism, pluralism, and religious diversity? Yes and no. Let us start off with no. If you look at the period in which the apostles went out into the Greco-Roman world across the Roman Empire to proclaim the Gospel, they certainly were speaking in a religiously pluralist context. The Roman Empire, in the first century, was very religiously diverse and there were a lot of parallels, actually, to the context in which we are. The mystery religions, for example—and we are going to talk more about them later when we get to the early church—are very similar to New Age religions. People did not believe they were objectively true. They were myths that they were religiously pursuing in order to provide themselves with some comfort, hope, brotherhood, and these kinds of things. People wanted a social group where they could enjoy themselves with other people who shared the same convictions. But there was a lot of religious diversity because the Roman Empire was enormous. It was one of the biggest empires the world has ever seen. Across that Roman Empire people worshipped all sorts of different gods and had many different religious perspectives. The Romans basically tolerated them all, except that they required everybody, eventually, to offer incense to Caesar. First they regarded Caesar as a high priest of the state religion. Then they started regarding Caesar as a god and required everybody to acknowledge him as a god and offer incense to him. For many of the people, that did not matter. They did not particularly believe their religions, although some of them, like the people in Ephesus, did. They certainly believed in Artemus. That is why they had that riot. But, many people did not. The more thoughtful people did not. They did not mind offering incense to Caesar anyway. This was just something that held the state together. It

made a huge challenge for the Christians who were not relativistic in any sense. They had to say, “No, I will not offer incense to Caesar. I am quite prepared to honor him as the emperor, but I will not worship him as a god. I will not say that he is lord.” That is why they were killed and why they had a hard time. There were some among the Greeks and Romans who were genuinely skeptical. Like the postmodernist, they thought that ultimately, knowledge was not possible. But they were a tiny minority.

So there are some similarities in the sense that there was religious pluralism in the New Testament period and in the centuries afterward. There is also a radical difference because while there were a few people (and you can trace that in Greek philosophy) who really believed we can know nothing, the main currents of Greek philosophy were not like that at all. Plato, who is the greatest of the Greek philosophers, is quite clear that knowledge is possible, especially moral knowledge. In fact, he regards denying that we can know what is morally good as the greatest sin and the greatest blasphemy, and he thought that we were required to live it. It is at the very heart of everything he taught. So you would find very few people actually, in terms of the population, who were skeptical and who were relativists. In our culture it is very different. It is not just one or two philosophers, but we live in a culture that is skeptical and relativistic, and that is the difference. So yes, there are some similarities. This is not the first pluralistic culture, though it is certainly more diverse than any one that has ever been. What is different is that relativistic pluralism is far stronger than it was in the Roman Empire because there is a much deeper skepticism underlying it.