

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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THREE AFFIRMATIONS OF CERTAINTY

The late Francis Schaeffer, in his classic books *The God Who Is There* and *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*,¹ coined the expression *True Truth* to describe that which has been and always will be true. In our Postmodern setting, truth is a matter of perspective. People today speak of *my truth*. Something can be true for you but not true for me. Alister McGrath writes, “It is utterly wrongheaded to say that something is *true for you but not for me*. For example, what if I think fascism is true and you think liberal democracy is equally true? Should the fascist’s repression be tolerated by the believer in liberal democracy? If not, on what grounds? Why not permit Stalinism or Satanism or Nazism? Without criteria to determine truth, this relativism fails miserably.”² Christians, of all people, should never embrace this distorted notion of truth. But, sad to say, there is afoot among some purported evangelicals a very diluted notion of truth. Douglas Groothuis has documented this and observed, “The older liberals held to a classic correspondence view of truth and claimed that many biblical statements – particularly those truth-claims related to history and science – failed to correspond with reality. On the other hand, the Christians attracted to postmodernism change the very concept of truth itself and then apply their new concept of truth to the Scriptures. The Bible is then relieved of the pressure to exhaustively conform to an objective and given reality outside itself and outside the perspectives of its readers. The Bible is now *true* in the sense that it is found meaningful by the believing community, that it gives us great narratives, and that it inspires us spiritually. Perfect agreement with fact is no longer an issue.”³

I addressed this in a book I co-edited with Ron Gleason. “Evangelicalism, in the assessment of Carl Raschle, is in a state of crisis because it is being confronted with an *intellectual challenge of a magnitude it has never before confronted*. And just what is this foreboding thing? Simply put (but difficult to define precisely) it is *postmodernity*. Raschle, as the title of his book makes clear, contends that the church at large must embrace this state of affairs. But this kind of *Chicken Little* response to the changing tides engulfing our culture is nothing new. A similar alarm was sounded at the turn of the eighteenth century by Friedrich Schleiermacher. Sinclair Ferguson recently observed along these lines that, *in his own way, Schleiermacher had patented and branded a ‘seeker sensitive’ theology that (he certainly believed) made the gospel relevant to his contemporaries – ‘the cultured despisers of religion’ who, under the spell of the Enlightenment had given up on the possibility that Christian doctrine could be true. For them the knowledge of God was no longer attainable. Kant’s critique of reason had limited it to the knowledge of the phenomenal realm; access to the noumenal was barred. Schleiermacher, refusing to believe that all was lost, turned things on their head, stressing that the essence of true Christian faith was the feeling or sense of absolute dependence upon God.* Despite the rasping protests of some post-conservatives, the parallels between what Schleiermacher was attempting to do in the early decades of the nineteenth century and the proposals of this group of evangelicals that fondly refers to themselves as *emergent* or *post-conservatives*, are striking. In a provocative essay that attempts to sanitize Schleiermacher for contemporary evangelicals, Nicola Hoggard Creegan rightly observes that Schleiermacher is the one voice from the past that speaks directly to our postmodern situation. How so? B. A. Gerrish pinpoints with this observation the similarities between the late Stanley Grenz and Schleiermacher:

'Grenz does not seem to recognize, or perhaps he prefers not to say, that his theological program for the twenty-first century is pretty much the program that the supposed arch-liberal Freidrich Schleiermacher proposed for the nineteenth century. Differences there may be. But the threefold emphasis on experience, community, and context was precisely Schleiermacher's contribution to evangelical dogmatics. Successive waves of neoorthodox and postmodernist attacks on him have submerged his contribution beneath an ocean of misunderstandings. He never renounced his evangelical-pietistic experience: rather, his theology at its center was reflection upon this experience from within the believing community in its new situation. He was certain that his experience must point to something constant since the time of the apostles, yet always to be conveyed in language that is historically conditioned. No less a critic of his doctrines than Karl Barth correctly perceived in Schleiermacher's faith *a personal relationship with Jesus that may well be called love.*'

"In both cases the attempt to contextualize the Christian faith in terms of the contemporary culture produces a syncretic grid that, in our times, in turn gives ultimate priority to our postmodern matrix. Gerrish's mentioning of Karl Barth is also significant, because there are those in the postmodern camp who claim Barth as their own. But, despite our own reservations about Barth, we think he would be flabbergasted by the attempt to enlist him as a spokesman for this crowd. Perhaps nowhere is this more obvious than in his famous debate with his neoorthodox ally and onetime close friend Emil Brunner over the question of natural theology. Brunner came out in defense of it, and Barth responded with his thunderous *Nein!* His opening remarks would make most postmoderns shudder: *I should like nothing better than to walk together with him [Brunner] in concord, but in the Church we are concerned with truth, and today with an urgency such as probably has not been the case for centuries. And truth is not to be trifled with. If it divides the spirits, they are divided. To oppose this commandment for the sake of a general idea of peace and unity would be a greater disaster for all concerned than such division. Oh, my, Barth is concerned with this thing called truth.* Postmoderns will squirm at the thought. But this should come as no big surprise to those familiar with Barth, who viewed Schleiermacher and his enterprise with what borders on contempt."⁴

In 1 John 5:18-21, the Apostle emphatically declares that there are absolute certainties that can be known. "The Epistle ends characteristically. It has been concerned throughout with the proper grounds, moral, doctrinal and social, of Christian assurance. So the author takes up the theme of what we should know, and do know, and concludes with the statement of three clear and candid certainties, each introduced by *oidamen, we know*. Here are no tentative, hesitant suggestions, but bold, dogmatic, Christian affirmations which are beyond all dispute and which neatly summarize truths already introduced in earlier parts of the Epistle."⁵ Note especially, "The threefold use of the verb *we know (oidamen)* in verses 18-20 suggests intuitive knowledge rather than the activity of acquiring knowledge. In this epistle the verb is always used in the plural, either in the first or second person, and thus relates to the corporate knowledge of true believers against the spurious claims of the heretics."⁶

- I. **THE FIRST AFFIRMATION (v. 18).** Every true believer who has God as his father does not and cannot continue to live a life committed to sin (same thought expressed in 1 John 3:6-9). This is an *insight* given to all of God's children. The term *nous* ("insight"), occurs only here in the Johannine literature. In relation to *nous* ("mind," in the general sense of the faculty of thinking), it suggests more specifically the process of reasoning which leads to perception. Bultmann, 89, argues that the gift of insight mentioned here corresponds to the "anointing" (*chrisma*) which the believer receives as a means of true knowledge (spoken of by John at 2:20-21, 27). Cf. also Jer. 31:33 (LXX = 38:33, using *dianoia*); Eph. 4:18; 1 Pet. 1:13; 2 Pet. 3:1. See further Westcott, 195-96; Brooke 150. Possibly because of their potential misuse by heretics, John (both in the Gospel and letters) is reluctant to use nouns (such as *gnosis*, "knowledge," and *nous*, "mind") which express intellectual powers.⁷

- II. **THE SECOND AFFIRMATION (v. 19).** The second of John’s affirmations is that “we are children of God.” He joins himself to his readers in this certainty. But where does the certainty come from? In the first instance the certainty that the one born of God does not sin comes from the ability of Jesus (or God) to keep the Christian. In this case the certainty that “we are children of God’ comes from the fact that the tests of righteousness, love, and sound doctrine have been applied and the results discovered to be positive.⁸
- III. **THE THIRD AFFIRMATION (v. 20).** This is, as Stott has pointed out, “the most fundamental of the three. It undermines the whole structure of the heretics’ theology. It concerns the Son of God through whom alone we can be rescued from the evil one and delivered from the world. Both revelation and redemption are His gracious work. Without Him we could neither know God nor overcome sin. These are possible to us today only because *the Son of God is come*, and, having come, *hath given us an understanding*. . . The verbs must be viewed together. The Christian gospel is not concerned merely with the truth that Christ *has given us* certain things, but that He *has come*. This is another example in the Epistle of John’s emphasis that the Christian religion is both historical and experimental, and not one without the other. Moreover, both verbs are in the perfect tense. The benefit of His coming abides. His gift He will not take away (cf. Rom. 11:29).”⁹

CONCLUSION: There is a “zeal that is not according to knowledge,” and zeal about what is not good (Romans 10:2). Then the more zealous and exercised someone is, and the faster they run, the further they go wrong and out of the way. The greatest zealots in unwarrantable things readily become the most dangerous. “My son,” said dying David to Solomon, “know thou the God of thy fathers,” while to Israel he said, “Keep and seek for the commandments of the Lord your God.” Remarkable words, keep and seek, plainly implying that there can be no keeping of God’s commandments without seeking to know and understand them well. Little knowledge of God, of the nature of godliness, and of the principles of religion, with this wrong kind of zeal, have produced much damage to the gospel, and brought it under great contempt. Since it is those, and only those, who keep His commandments that have a good understanding (Psalm 111:10), we should by all means strive to have our practice marching side by side with our light, and not to have any of our light detained in unrighteousness (Romans 1:18), made a prisoner under a guard of corruptions to keep it from shining out and influencing our practice.¹⁰

ENDNOTES

¹ *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer, A Christian Worldview: Vol. One: A Christian View of Philosophy and Culture* (Crossway Books, 1982).

² As cited in Paul Copan, *True For You But Not For Me: Deflating The Slogans that Leave Christians Speechless* (Bethany House, 1998), p. 23.

³ D. Groothuis, “Truth Defined and Defended in Reclaiming The Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation In Postmodern Times, eds. M. J. Erickson, P. K. Helseth, J. Taylor (Crossway Books, 2004), p. 61.

⁴ cf. my Introduction to *Reforming Or Conforming: Post-conservative Evangelicals and The Emerging Church*, eds. G. L. W. Johnson and R. N. Gleason (Crossway Books, 2008), pp. 15-17.

⁵ J. R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Eerdmans, 1975), p. 191.

⁶ D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Epistles of John: An Expository Commentary* (Bob Jones University Press, 1991), p. 264.

⁷ S. S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John: Word Biblical Commentary* (Word Books, 1984), p. 306.

⁸ J. M. Boice, *The Epistles of John: An Expository Commentary* (Zondervan, 1979), p. 180.

⁹ Stott, op. cit., p. 194.

¹⁰ This section is adapted from “When Knowledge Misses The Point: James Durham (1622-1658), The Great Gain of Contenting Godliness, available @ Reformation Scotland: The Covenanters Blog, July 2023.