Post-truth Christians

I was taught to stay on guard against the left's postmodernism. Now it's the right that seems unwilling to look truth directly in the face.

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Century illustration (Source images: Getty)

When I was a young adult, coming of age at the turn of the millennium, my evangelical pastor often preached against moral relativism. "If anything is true, then nothing is true," he would say, "and the world falls apart."

Around the same time, I attended a summit, held at a conservative Christian college, that was meant to introduce college-bound students to secular philosophies and then refute them with the Bible. It was here that I received a simplistic definition of postmodernism as the rejection of absolute truth. At the time, postmodernism was often conflated with the politics of the left. After all, Democrats had excused Bill Clinton's sexual misconduct and his fast-and-loose definition of truth under oath.

Today, conspiracy theories and scientific skepticism have permeated the political right. Donald Trump's presidency has been characterized by serial dishonesty, the bounds of which appear to know no limits. The overwhelming barrage of untruth might be the point: to list the instances in which President Trump has rewritten history and made false claims can feel both mind-numbing and hopeless. The same demographic that, 20 years ago, was adamant about truth—White evangelicals—now largely embraces what they once would have derided as relativism. Like so many other millennial evangelicals who grew up on a steady diet of anti-postmodernism, I continue to feel astounded by this moral hypocrisy.

After all, the Protestant preoccupation with truth extends well beyond the musings of my childhood pastor, all the way back to the Reformation. Martin Luther saw the Bible as the source of truth, and Calvin affirmed that "all truth is God's truth." During my coming-of-age, I split time between a fundamentalist Christian school and a church in the Evangelical Baptist tradition. It was then that I encountered the fruits of Luther's and Calvin's epistemologies firsthand. While the two spaces were broadly similar, in the fundamentalist school the emphasis on truth wasn't just about core doctrines, like salvation by grace through faith or the literal resurrection of Jesus. It was something we were encouraged to seek for all things. Absolute truth was the theme—and it was often conflated with certainty.

I spent my teen years praying and seeking the will of God for everything from where I would attend college to where I would apply for a summer job. When making any kind of decision, I sought divine guidance. This obsession with making the right choices and doing God's will made me doubt my own intuition. It led me to search for answers and authority outside of my own ability to know and perceive.

As a teen, I wanted to go to a private Christian college, in part because I hoped to avoid the intellectual creep of postmodernism. When my parents insisted that attending a Christian college was a financial impossibility, I fought with them, arguing that my education would be inferior because teachers who did not believe in

God could not know the truth, because “all truth is God’s truth.”

My parents—not as fundamentalist as I was back then— rolled their eyes and insisted that I attend the affordable public university in our home state. I enrolled, begrudgingly and on guard. During my first semester in a communications course, I was instructed to craft a speech that mimicked the public radio program *This I Believe*. We were given example titles from the show about things authors believed: “Learning to Trust My Intuition,” “Disrupting My Comfort Zone,” “There is No Such Thing as Too Much Barbecue.”

My classmates understood the tone of the assignment and crafted speeches that were light and creative, but I couldn’t move past the haunting feeling that this was my first test. I was being asked to make a stand. Was I with God or against God? Any topic that seemed less weighty felt like a betrayal. The first step toward backsliding, the first step into hell, the very thing I’d feared would happen if I went to a public university.

In my speech, I proclaimed that I believed in absolute truth. I considered my audience—the nonbelievers, the lost souls, my classmates—and tried to appeal to what I imagined was their state of mind. I summarized some arguments from C. S. Lewis. I brought in evidence that I would have considered science. It was an appallingly pious speech, but somehow I still received an A.

I hated every moment of giving the speech, and not just because I could tell my peers were judging me. I hated the speech because I was not convinced it was true. I was gripping the idea of certainty and absolutism so tightly that it was fracturing. I longed for assurance, for stability in my new setting of intellectual diversity, but what I found instead were questions. This was not my first experience of doubt, but it was a formative one.

I leaned into the questions with trepidation, studying the liberal arts and reading texts through lenses that were considered postmodern. I wrote papers about The Death of the Author and the impossibility of knowing a writer’s intended meaning. I interrogated the existence of facts, which by virtue of our subjectivity were now up for debate. The sky is blue—to whom? Does 1+1=2 even when you’re underwater? Who defines “1”? Do we *really* have proof that it exists?

All of these deliberations felt both delicious and dangerous. Slowly, I began to loosen my grip and try on some new ideas about subjectivity.

Still, I continued to attend conservative churches. One Sunday, I got into a debate with an older church member about whether people could agree upon facts. He was a retired physician and missionary. “Of course!” he nearly screamed in my face. “If you don’t have facts, you have nothing at all.”

“Who defines a fact?” I countered.

He shook his head like he was trying to tame a wild animal. “God does! And science does!” he cried.

I was beginning to wonder whether his absolutist position was just stuck in the Reformation era. Perhaps it was arrogance to believe that one could “know” and “perceive.”

While many despair that humans can know truth, Martin Luther believed that the work of the Holy Spirit in the Christian’s conscience could provide some confidence. Discernment, then, is a key component in identifying truth. Jesus instructs us to observe the natural world in this process: “A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. . . . Therefore by their fruits you will know them.”

Before his crucifixion, Jesus tells Pilate that the reason he was born was to “testify to the truth.”

Pilate responds to Jesus’ claim by asking, “What is truth?” This question is a diversion from reality. Looking truth directly in the face would require Pilate to sacrifice his power—something the far right likewise seems unwilling to do when it comes to Trump and political power. Their embrace of post-modernism is self-defense.

Reflecting back upon this time of my own intellectual transition, I see how slippery the concept of truth can be. I can empathize with skeptics who are “just asking questions,” because years ago, I was asking a lot of questions too. I see how, in the midst of fear or precarity, one might long to latch on to a muscular outside authority that defines the truth for us. The evangelical absolute-truth-to-post-truth pipeline isn’t a contradiction; it’s a consequence of clinging to certainty rather than nuance.

Some argue that the far left and far right are not on opposite ends of a straight line but are situated quite close, curving in to almost touch—like a horseshoe. They have different views but the same tendencies toward control, violence, and extreme,

fundamentalist thinking. As they scream at each other, they are close enough to feel the other’s hot breath. Both ends of this spectrum prioritize the proclamations of distant authorities rather than the discernment of the self.

We all have to make hard decisions when faced with truths that run counter to our own power and with what telling the truth might cost us. But without this holy work, the whole world falls apart.