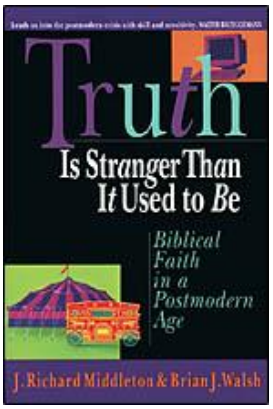

IVP Author Interview

J. Richard Middleton & Brian Walsh, authors of Truth Is Stranger Than It Used To Be

IVP: Postmodernity takes whatever meaning it has from a prior understanding of modernity. Help us identify what you see as the key marks of modernity—the modernity that presumably now is passing or has passed.

Richard Middleton: The main mark is the motif of progress. People had the aspiration that the world was inevitably going to get better, not least through human effort. That's shot these days.

Brian Walsh: The myth of progress promised us an earthly paradise, but some of the results of that "progress" have in fact left us with a despoiled wilderness. So the environmental crisis is one of the indications of the death of progress. But there are also the voices of women, of aboriginal peoples, of colonized peoples, who are saying that progress was perhaps good news for one segment of the world's population--but invariably at the expense of others. Those voices also raise questions about progress.

IVP: What do you say to those like sociologist Anthony Giddens, who claims there is no such thing as postmodernity—that if anything we're living in ultramodernity or hypermodernity?

Middleton: We might be inclined to agree. We have a hard time making up our minds whether we are genuinely in a postmodern age or in a hypermodern age. Our analysis is that modernity is itself an unstable hybrid of epistemological realism—the attempt to get the world right, which goes back to Plato--and human autonomy, which is the attempt to transform the world in accordance with human aims. Postmodernity is a situation in which we've given up on realism, so it's not modern in that regard. Yet even if we don't believe we can get the world right, we do believe we can make the world anything we want. Postmodernity enhances the modern sense of human construction and autonomy. So our period is modern, if ultramodern, in that sense.

IVP: Now things are getting juicy, since you bring up the criticism of epistemological realism. Many Christians, at least at first blush, can't imagine any good could be had from listening to antirealists such as Derrida, Rorty or Lyotard. But you don't entirely agree in your book.

Walsh: No, we think that people like Rorty and Derrida can serve the Christian community because they dethrone certain idolatries of Western modernity. They don't dethrone the myth of autonomy, but they do dethrone the myth of universal reason. And universal reason has been a bad idea for about 200 years now. We can thank Rorty and Derrida for undermining that bad idea.

IVP: Why is universal reason a bad idea?

Walsh: It doesn't acknowledge the particularity of all human thought and knowing, that all human beings think from a particular place within a particular worldview. The second problem with this doctrine of universal reason is that it doesn't take seriously the fallen character of human cognitive processes. Universal reason really does posit that we can think things straight simply on our own autonomous powers. It doesn't acknowledge our fundamental brokenness.

Middleton: We need to stress that in Western culture universal reason has been used to marginalize Christians out of public discourse for a long time now. Christians should be sensitive to that. Universal reason gives "reason" distinction and tends to privatize "faith."

IVP: You're also concerned that universal reason is what postmodern commentators call totalizing and so, in its practical and political outworkings, actually oppressive.

Walsh: The evidence seems overwhelming that that is the case. Whether you're talking about the manifestations of universal reason in the final solution of the Holocaust or you're talking about the manifestation of universal reason in nuclear arms, there seems to be something inherently violent here. But not only is there that sort of geopolitical, technological violence, there is also the assumption by means of universal reason that Western culture has the truth, and that necessarily marginalizes all others who somehow haven't got it. It would seem to me that a Christian epistemology wants to be characterized by an awful lot more humility than that.

IVP: But as you recognize early in your book, the same critique can be turned back on Christians. It can be said that the Bible presents a metanarrative—a truth for everyone, everywhere—and since metanarratives are inherently totalizing, we should give up on the Bible's metanarrative. How can you accept much of the postmodern critique and not give up on Christian metanarrative?

Middleton: One of the points that we try to make in this book is that Christians, even when they interact with cultures like postmodernity, don't tend to go back to the Bible. I think Christians are suspicious of the Bible as a genuine resource. So Brian and I try to use the Bible as a resource, and we think that within Scripture there are at least two fundamental themes that are anti-ideological, checking the oppressive effects of metanarrative. One dimension is sensitivity to suffering. God hears the cries of the oppressed Israelites and intervenes to set them free. Jesus on the cross, God incarnate, faces suffering. It's central to the biblical story that God attends to human suffering. The other key theme is that Israel's God is the creator of all people from all nations. So Christians have to take into account that all people in some sense started at the same place. We can't exempt anyone from the possibility of redemption. Rooting the story in creation indicates that it's not simply a local narrative of the Christian church, true only in some corner of the universe. We're telling the story of the world, and that, of course, has the potential to be totalizing. But we believe this is a metanarrative that can include others without suppressing their genuine differences.

IVP: So you will not relinquish the Bible as metanarrative. But at the same time you've hinted at some uneasiness with realism. I think we need to hear more about your understanding of truth. Do we still hold to truth, or is truth a concept we ought to let go of?

Walsh: If we're going to talk about truth in a constructive way, then we would suggest that we talk about truth in terms of gift and call. On the most fundamental level truth is not a construct; truth is received as a gift. Jesus is the truth, so truth comes to us as a person. Yet we are also called to be epistemologically busy in this creation. We're called to continue with formulations and a knowing of the world that will be in constant process.

Middleton: Yes, because even the truth of the gospel—which we constantly articulate in the church, in liturgy and proclamation and evangelism—is a human construction. I mean, the Four Spiritual Laws is a human construction in response to the truth of Jesus.

Walsh: But certainly any notion of truth as arrival—that somehow we've arrived at the truth and this certain formulation is final—that kind of a truth we are happily abandoning in the book.

IVP: At this point some of our readers may be asking, "All right, just how liberal are these guys?"

Middleton: To be controversial but accurate, the heart of our book—the biblical part of our book—is submission to the authority of the canonical text of Scripture. That means you actually have to read the text, and the text is much more dangerous than our theological categories have ever said. The text can shatter our categories. And if it shatters conservative orthodox categories, people may say, well then, you're liberals. But if you're shattering categories in submission to the text, that's something quite different from liberalism.

Walsh: In that regard we think many evangelicals to our theological right are more liberal or modernist than we are. What's interesting about the propositionalist theology popular in some evangelical circles is that, with all of its language of submission to the authority of Scripture, in fact the Scriptures play almost no role for it. Especially not the Scriptures in terms of their narrative structure and character. And that's because a propositionalist theology moves you not toward indwelling the biblical story, but rather toward pulling out of the biblical story various kinds of "timeless truths." What this does is codify the Scriptures in such a way that people actually don't need to read the Bible because they already know what it says.

IVP: With all this heavy talk about epistemology and the like, I don't want it neglected that one of your favorite or at least most quoted theologians is singer and songwriter Bruce Cockburn. Why is that?

Middleton: They're very personal reasons. There have been times in our lives when we've gone through a lot of personal struggles and struggles with fear. Bruce Cockburn's music kept us faithful to the Lord in a very difficult world—the world of pain and fire and steel, to quote one of his songs. And then we've been able to explore how he brings the Christian faith into interaction with the suffering of the world in a way that is illuminating for reading the Bible.

IVP: I'm with you. Viva Bruce! But our marketing department, which actually finances the *Alert,* will pound me if we work harder at selling Cockburn records than promoting your book. So I need to ask, in light of the fact that a number of Christian books on postmodernity are appearing, what sets yours apart?

Walsh: I hope what characterizes our book is that it's a sensitive and engaged reading of our times. We're not engaging in knee-jerk reactions to what appears to be the relativism and chaos of our times. And then, second, I would hope that our book is a more biblical engagement of postmodernity. We've tried to use the resources of Scripture to reorient us in the midst of these very disorienting times.

Middleton: That's certainly one of the most important distinguishing marks—that we actually do Bible study. Most other people address postmodernity through theological categories and not through study of the Bible. More than half of our book is Bible study.

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