

Preface

“I’M SPIRITUAL BUT I’M not religious.” I hear more and more people say that. I think what they mean is that they are interested in spiritual things, but they cannot accept the way religion presents its truth as objective, certain, and precise. That was the modernist notion of truth around which so much of our theology took shape, but we now know that such a notion of truth is unrealistic, given the nature of our human condition. Human experience is never objective, nor is our interpretation of it certain and precise. This is especially true concerning our experience and understanding of the Gospel. If it were, there would not be the more than 30,000 different Christian denominations worldwide. Jesus said, “I am the . . . truth,”¹ and a truth that is a person can never be objective, certain, or precise. Yet when the Gospel is presented it is often in the context of it being objective, certain, and precise. When presented in such a context to twenty-first century people who are aware of our limited access to truth, such a presentation is seen as both arrogant and naïve. What we need in order to bring the Gospel to people today is a realistic notion of truth—a notion that is compatible with what we now know to be the limits of our human understanding.

The world, or at least our understanding of it, has certainly changed. We are on the threshold of a new era. This is nothing new. Our Western history is marked by distinctly different epochs that the vicissitudes of history produced. The rise of Christianity and the fall of the Roman Empire eventually resulted in a medieval world that was very different from the ancient world. In the ancient world, Greek cultural influences, and later, Roman political and economic interests, were the unifying forces. In the medieval world, there was little in the way of political or economic unity, and culturally it was religion that most shaped the period. At the end of the medieval period, new developments began to change the way we thought about the world. Of course, our thinking had been changing throughout

1. 1 John 14:6.

the medieval period, but the changes were gradual and piecemeal. With the advent of the modern era, however, the changes were considerably more radical and broader in scope.

With the “modern world,” we no longer believed that the earth was the center of the universe as it had been for the ancients and medievals. We were discovering new worlds beyond the western horizon of the Great Sea, and we were discovering other new worlds with the inventions of the telescope and microscope. The invention of the printing press was enormously important to learning and the dissemination of information. Mechanical devices were beginning to appear as never before, and there was the rise of a merchant class that did not fit into the medieval categories of either nobleman or commoner. All these things contributed to changing the way we thought about the world. The greatest influence on our thinking, however, would be the new science that was emerging. The new science would eventually change the way we thought about the world, but more significantly, the way we thought about truth itself.

This new science and the notion of truth that it propagated would also greatly contribute to transforming the modern world into a secular age in which religion would have a considerably diminished role among a great number of people. We might imagine that the rise of science and the decline of religion resulted from the fact that science had answered many of religions’ questions and therefore made religion superfluous. This was hardly the case. Rather the new science introduced a concept of truth that was incompatible with what had been the medieval notion of spiritual reality. Consequently, either people became nonreligious, or, if they remained religious, this modern notion of truth shaped that religion. Today, that modern notion of truth has been debunked. Consequently, we are now free to rethink our concept of truth. Our aim is to construct a concept of truth that is compatible with both what we now understand to be the nature of our human condition and the spiritual reality of which Jesus speaks.