Paul's Preaching and Postmodern Skepticism

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Abstract

By focusing on Paul's own descriptions of his preaching, and especially on 2 Corinthians 4:1–6, we can see several ways in which Paul's own views provide answers to postmodern skepticism. Paul presupposes that God exists, the same God who is set forth in the Old Testament as the creator and sustainer of the world. In 2 Corinthians 4:1–6, Paul affirms that his message has divine authority, divine truthfulness, divine power to overcome resistance to its claims, and divine presence through the glory of Christ. Paul's message also shows how, in the midst of the Roman Empire's situation of multiple cultures and multiple languages, he preaches a gospel with universal claims, in "the open statement of the truth" (2 Cor 4:3).

Various trends in postmodern thought have contributed to increased skepticism concerning the very possibility of infallible revelation in human language. What response should we give? It should be clear that the Bible is antithetical to this skepticism. It claims to carry a message from God. It announces truths communicated from God and salvation coming from God. Included in this salvation is a process of healing in knowledge, through fellowship with God in Christ.

There are many aspects of biblical teaching on which we might focus. I propose to focus on the preaching of the Apostle Paul, and particularly

on 2 Corinthians 4:1–6, which exposes Paul's own view concerning his preaching.

The Apostle Paul in his own time and place did not directly confront postmodernism, but he did confront philosophical skepticism as well as more banal forms of incredulity (Acts 17:32; 19:9; 14:2; 17:5). He did not deal with modern multiculturalism, but he dealt with multiple ethnicities in the Roman Empire. So it is worthwhile exploring the relation of his preaching to skeptical challenges in our day.

I. *Roots of Postmodern Skepticism in Issues of Worldview*

Paul's preaching is best considered against the background of the larger worldview that he inherited from the Old Testament. So, before turning to details about Paul's preaching, let us briefly consider the contrast between the worldview in the Old Testament and the worldviews characterizing trends in postmodern thought.

What does the Bible say? There is one God, who created and sustains the world (Gen 1; Ps 104). This God speaks (Gen 1:3). And he has given the gift of speech and language to human beings. He is sovereign over all cultures and present in all languages and cultures through general revelation (Ps 19:1–6; 104; 148). Since the time of Adam, human beings have been in systematic, rebellious flight from his presence. But through Christ God has granted a rich salvation that is able to overcome human resistance, to bring about forgiveness of sins, to transform human hearts, and to bring us into the light of God's truth. A sound approach to fundamental issues concerning languages, cultures, and ethnicities will build on these truths. It leads to a very different structure of understanding than is typical in the halls of modernism and postmodernism.

I have elsewhere undertaken to give a more wide-ranging response to modernism and postmodernism by developing a biblically based approach to truth, language, culture, and society.[1] I cannot repeat everything here. But it is worthwhile illustrating some of the principles by focusing on Paul's preaching. So we now turn to 2 Corinthians 4:1–6 as a key text about the nature of his preaching.

In considering the implications of Paul's preaching, it is useful also to be aware of the international context of gospel proclamation. The origins of

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[1] Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009); Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Sociology: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011); Vern S. Poythress, *Inerrancy and Worldview: Answering Modern Challenges to the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

postmodernism lie primarily in Western cultures, but they are spreading throughout the world. So it is fitting to address these issues in an international context.

II. *The Presence of God*

In the key passage 2 Corinthians 4:1–6, Paul has this to say about his preaching:

> Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.[2]

This passage is relevant to modern challenges especially because it is God centered and Christ centered. The differences in worldview are most profound right here. Paul—and the Bible as a whole—differs from postmodernism on the question of God. Is there a God? Is he the creator of the world, as verse 6 presupposes when it alludes to Genesis 1:3 and God's creation of light? Is God the *kind* of God who not only created the world long ago but continues to act in it? Verse 6 indicates that God continues to act in revelatory presence: he "has shone in our hearts." This God imparts genuine religious knowledge, not mere opinion: "the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (v. 6).

The answers that people give to questions about God make a profound difference in their view of what kind of world we live in. Is ours a world in which God manifests his authority, exerts his control, and expresses his presence?[3] Is it a world in which God actually makes himself known to human beings?[4] Paul clearly believes we live in this kind of world. In 2 Corinthians 4:1–6 he does not offer an elaborate discussion about the nature of God and the doctrines of creation, providence, and revelation. Rather, he presupposes them. Even before he was a follower of Christ, he was a Jew, a Pharisee of

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[2] Biblical quotations are from the *English Standard Version*.
[3] John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), 15–18.
[4] Ibid., 18–20.

Pharisees (Acts 23:6). When he came to believe in Christ, he did not abandon his allegiance to the Old Testament. Since in 2 Corinthians he is writing to fellow Christian believers, he can take for granted this Old Testament foundation. But other people within the Roman Empire did not share it. In Acts there are occasions when he addresses pagans, and he speaks directly about the nature of God (Acts 14:15–17; 17:22–31).

Paul's view of the world is in pointed contrast to the typical worldviews of modern skeptics. For the skeptic, the world is a place that is dead with respect to God. Maybe the skeptic says that there is no God. Or, if there is a God, he is fundamentally inaccessible. If so, modern people should take it for granted that God is absent and not interfering, and try to craft their human existence and meanings based on that assumption.

When postmodern skeptics confront a passage such as 2 Corinthians 4:1–6, they have a response already in place. They have learned from sociology of knowledge and sociology of religion to be skeptical about claims for transcendent knowledge of God and knowledge of spiritual things. Second Corinthians 4:1–6 and all of Paul's preaching belong to the sociological category of "religious discourse." The framework for most postmodernist analysis puts all religious discourse on fundamentally the same level. Religious discourse offers merely human, social, cultural attempts to discuss and communicate about transcendence and the spirit world.

In other words, everything in Paul's preaching belongs to human language, interacting with human hearers, within a human cultural context. And so it does. But does Paul's preaching *also* involve God speaking through him? There is a fundamental error underneath the typical modern sociological description, because Paul has a worldview in which God is present right in the midst of the process of human communication. To ignore God is to ignore the heart of communication events and to falsify their true nature. It is to *pretend* that God is absent and that the message is *merely* human (as opposed to being human *and divine*). To say that the message about Christ is merely human implies that the message is without a transcendent claim to divine authority and without a transcendent power to create new life and new understanding (v. 6).

So which is it? Is Paul right? Or is the skeptic right in supposing that God can be ignored? Answering the question involves apologetics. Cornelius Van Til in his apologetics clarified for us how to respond to such skepticism.[5] A

5　Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008); John Frame, *Apologetics: A Justification of Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015).

Christian response has two sides. First, on the positive side, we continue today in the path that Paul laid out. We make known the gospel. We make known what Paul says, taking into account his worldview, and we maintain that his proclamation makes a divine claim to the allegiance of hearers, because God crafts Paul's words and is speaking in them. God is present and confronts the hearers with his light.

Second, we examine critically the foundational assumptions (presuppositions) underlying various forms of opposition and objection. We endeavor to overthrow opposition by showing its delusions. Paul himself describes his zeal to overthrow all opposition to Christ: "For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Cor 10:4–5).

When we confront modern skepticism, our analysis might begin with the issue of claims to knowledge. How does the skeptic *know* that God is absent and that religious discourse is always merely human? He thinks he knows because he already has his own worldview, which assures him that God is absent. Secretly, perhaps unconsciously, he prides himself on the idea that he has superior insight concerning the actual state of affairs. According to his view, Paul and other religious preachers are deluded in thinking there is a divine presence and divine authority in their claims. Such claims to divine authority are merely means for human manipulation.

The skeptic, I say, claims to have such insight. But such a claim is itself a claim to have impressive knowledge about God, even if it is a kind of negative knowledge about his absence. The claim dissolves once we observe that the skeptical claim does not even pretend to be based on revelation from God, but only on human insight. And why should not this alleged insight itself be delusional, because it has suppressed the knowledge of God (Rom 1:18–23)? The sense of insight has been generated in the context of the limitations of post-Enlightenment worldviews, which are culturally parochial in their ignorance of the spirit world. In the absence of divine revelation, the claim to know the nature of religion and culture before detailed examination of each of the many religions and cultures is not a form of openness but of arrogance.

III. *Confidence in Preaching*

But let us focus on what Paul says on his own terms. Paul expresses personal confidence in his preaching in three respects. First, the origin of his message is divine, and its authority is divine. It is "God's word" (2 Cor 4:2). Second,

the content of the message is sound; Paul preaches the truth, what he calls "the open statement of the *truth*" (v. 2). Third, Paul is confident in the power of his preaching to overcome opposition. His confidence is not based on his own rhetoric (1 Cor 2:1–5) or his human qualifications (Phil 3:4–8), but on God (2 Cor 3:4–6). Through the gospel, God works with the same divinely creative power that he showed when his words first produced the light of creation (4:6; compare Gen 1:3). In sum, the gospel that Paul preaches includes divine authority, divine truthfulness, and divine power. All three are important for its integrity.

IV. *Preaching and Manipulation*

One of the concerns running through postmodernist circles is the concern for propaganda. Sly people can use manipulative language for the sake of molding and controlling others. And the same can happen even in circles that *claim* to be Christian. Some preachers who claim the name of Christ craft a message that they use to enrich their own personal pockets (see 2 Cor 11:12–13). The concern about manipulation is one that Christian ethics can recognize, because sin infects the use of language.

The Apostle Paul voices this very concern when he contrasts his message with manipulation: "But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word" (2 Cor 4:2). Paul contrasts his work with others': "For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ" (2 Cor 2:17).

The expression "in the sight of God" in 2 Corinthians 2:17 and 4:2 indicates that Paul is aware of having to answer to God for his manner of communication. He lives in the presence of God. He must be truthful and faithful to God's message. He must not practice "cunning" or "underhanded ways," because he is aware of the all-important weight of God's evaluation. Contrast this view with postmodern skepticism. In the skeptic's eyes, God is absent, and therefore there is no transcendent checkpoint either for evaluating truth or for exposing underhanded motives. In that case, the job has to be done merely by human beings, and their finiteness leaves everything in doubtful shadows in the end.

Some people are deathly afraid of being "taken in." They refuse to give themselves to anything. Sometimes this fear comes from the postmodern atmosphere; sometimes from repeated doses of experience with human treachery. Fear can lead modern people into extreme skepticism concerning all religious claims or any kind of exalted claim to truth.

As usual, in accordance with Van Til's apologetics, the response is two-fold. On the positive side, we continue to present the gospel, which has divine power to overcome all opposition. We point first of all to the self-authenticating divine authority of the message. But second, the message itself, the message of Christ and his cross, is a message that shows its divine origin by its utter contrast with worldly thinking (1 Cor 1:18–31). It overthrows selfish human ambitions to serve money, power, fame, and pleasure. It denounces manipulative speech. It addresses the very concerns that drive people into skepticism. It shows that the work of Christ on the cross is designed as the God-given answer to the sinfulness of the human condition. In addition, Paul's apostolic behavior complements his apostolic message. He comes as a servant of Christ and a servant of the truth, presenting Christ as Lord and himself as a servant (2 Cor 4:5).

On the negative side, we challenge the assumptions of skeptics. The skeptics are afraid of being taken in. But they have already been taken in —by the propaganda of postmodern skepticism. A universal fear that avoids all allegiances produces its own dissolution, because it must repudiate allegiance even to itself. Skepticism is like a universal acid that, if left uncontained, dissolves all truth, including even the alleged insight that there is no accessible truth.

The skeptic thinks it is safest to see through language and to see through people in order to discover sinister and manipulative motives. And in a sinful world, there are plenty of such motives, here and there. But to see through everything is to see nothing at all. If a person tries to do it, he also has to see through even his skepticism, and to see through even himself. But he can never plumb the depths of his own sin. And to see through himself would also be to dissolve himself and any claims to significance that he attributes to his own opinion.

Skepticism cannot save. Christ as he is presented in the gospel does save.[6] That is what Paul knows. And it is what the Holy Spirit demonstrates in the power of Paul's preaching, because people are saved! Their transformed lives are further, confirming evidence that this message, unlike the deceitful counterfeits and substitutes in false religions, really is divine (2 Cor 3:1–3; 1 Thess 1:6–10).

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[6] Vern S. Poythress, "Christ the Only Savior of Interpretation," *Westminster Theological Journal* 50.2 (1988): 305–21.

V. *Multiple Cultures*

Let us consider another postmodern challenge. Postmodern skeptics are queasy about absolute claims partly because they are aware of multiple cultures. They ask, "How can one claim within one culture be universally true, when it is relativized by its cultural setting? How can one religion be right when we find competing religious claims originating from different cultures?"[7]

It is well to remember that the existence of many cultures and their troublesome diversities is not a fresh discovery. Paul in his own time had contact with multiple cultures. He had Jewish parents but grew up in the Gentile city of Tarsus. He also studied under Gamaliel in a scholarly subculture in Jerusalem, in the heart of Judaism (Acts 22:3). He knew the Old Testament Scriptures. He also knew about Greek philosophers and Greek athletic games (Acts 17:28; 1 Cor 9:24–26). He was not naive about culture. Nor was he naive about religion. He had Jewish parents, but as a participant in the Roman Empire he saw emperor worship and multiple forms of idolatry (1 Cor 10:19–28; Acts 17:16, 22–23).

The Roman Empire in which Paul labored was united by Hellenization, by Roman military power, by Roman law, and by Roman-regulated trade and economics. It was what we call a "civilization," Greco-Roman civilization. But the Roman conquerors did not homogenize the population. Roman power sat uneasily on top of troublesome diversities and tensions, some of which could smolder and burst into rebellion (as with the Jewish revolt of 66 A.D.). Multiple ethnic divisions persisted, as the list in Acts 2:9–11 testifies. The Empire contained multiple people groups, multiple political divisions, multiple languages, and multiple religions. Paul in his travels saw the gamut.

In this context, Paul gives us strong testimony concerning a universal message that goes to all cultures. He speaks about "the open statement of the truth" (2 Cor 4:2). His proclamation makes a public statement, such as could be heard by members of any subculture within the Roman Empire. He implies that the truth is accessible to all through his public proclamation.

The responsibility for hearing it is also underlined by the common character of all human reception. Paul appeals "to everyone's conscience" (v. 2). He does not explicitly discuss the unity of the human race at this point, but in the background stands the unity of mankind in Adam, as expounded in Genesis 1–2, Romans 5:12–21, and 1 Corinthians 15:21–22, 44–49. The unity

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[7]   See Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 3–21; Poythress, *Inerrancy and Worldview*, chapter 1.

of the race is closely connected with the universality of human responsibility to worship the true God and the universality of conscience. Paul touches on this responsibility directly in his sermon on Mars Hill:

> He himself [the true God] gives to *all mankind* life and breath and everything. And he made *from one* man *every* nation of *mankind* to live on *all* the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, *that they should seek God*, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. (Acts 17:25–27)

Such a universal statement reaches even beyond the bounds of the Roman Empire, to encompass all people belonging to all ethnicities. Paul refers to "*every* nation of mankind … on *all* the face of the earth" (v. 26). The gospel "is the power of God for salvation to *everyone* who believes" (Rom 1:16). The obedience for which the gospel calls is "obedience of faith … among *all* nations" (Rom 1:5). This universality includes the "barbarian," beyond the bounds of Roman civilization (Rom 1:14; Col 3:11). The universal reach derives not merely from Paul's understanding of common human nature in Adam, and from the universal reach of the implications of Christ's salvific work, but from Old Testament promises that include the nations in salvation (for example, Rom 15:9, citing 2 Sam 22:50 and Ps 18:49; Rom 15:10, citing Deut 32:43; Rom 15:11, citing Ps 117:1; and Rom 15:12, citing Isa 11:1, 10). Before coming into contact with any particular people group, Paul already knows that the same gospel that he preaches to others is also for them. It is for them because God has already promised it. Moreover, God made and governs all people groups. The God who knows the end from the beginning has guaranteed that this gospel, and not another (Gal 1:6–7), will result in actually saving people in these groups. Paul's mention of "conscience" (2 Cor 4:2) is only one dimension within a larger creation order that Paul presupposes in his preaching.

VI. *God's Presence in Culture*

It is no wonder that postmodern skeptics have trouble with idea of universal human responsibility, because of their worldview. If God is absent or non-existent, who is to say what "human nature" is? Who is to say whether there is anything in conscience that is absolute and not overridden by cultural molding? And who is to say whether conscience should be attended to, if God is no longer present and giving testimony to his standards through conscience? If God is absent, personal meaning is absent. And because human beings cannot live without meaning, they must undertake to create

their own meanings, individually and corporately (through cultures). According to this view, any religious message that does not completely mesh with humanly created meaning is construed as an intrusion, an oppressive denial of the freedom of each and every person to create the meaning of his life.

The response from a Van Tilian point of view is twofold. Positively, we proclaim the presence of God, not only in his message of salvation, but in the very constitution of mankind and the constitution of conscience. The gospel comes not as an intrusion, but as a message of salvation, of rebuke, or transformation, and of healing, according to the design of the same God who made us all.

Negatively, we may observe that a humanly constructed meaning is ultimately meaningless, because it is arbitrary if it is based on merely human willing.

VII. *Paul's Adjustments*

Does Paul adjust his message to meet his audience? It depends on what kind of "adjustments" we are talking about. The record in Acts shows adjustments in starting point and in emphasis. Paul's two main speeches to pagan audiences contain material about monotheism, creation, and providence (Acts 14:15–17; 17:22–31), while his speeches in synagogues tend to start with elements from the Old Testament story of Israel and God's promises of salvation through the Messiah.[8] But the differences in starting point are compatible with the language of 2 Corinthians 4:3 about "our gospel." Paul's letters indicate that he had a consistent core message about Christ and his work of salvation (see, e.g., Rom 1:1–6; 1 Cor 15:1–11; Gal 1:3–10; 3:1; 1 Thess 1:9–10; 2 Tim 2:8–10). Paul at various points stresses that the same

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[8] I am presupposing here the divine inspiration and consequent historical reliability of Acts, as a testimony about Paul's modes of preaching. But even those who do not agree with my presupposition should see that the kind of adjustments that we find in Acts are consistent with Paul as he appears in his letters. The main difference in mode of approach in Acts is understandable, because Paul does accept the Old Testament worldview, but does not have to articulate that worldview explicitly when he is addressing fellow Jews. There is much to learn here about a proper kind of contextualization. Today missionaries, like Paul, must still think about what they can presuppose when they address their audiences. Pagan contexts are not religious vacuums, but contexts of false religions. In such environments, much darkness has to be overcome, and the doctrines of God, creation, providence, and fall have pointed relevance. There can be many adjustments to take into account the reigning mindset of the audiences. But the nature of the true God must be proclaimed over against the distortions of false religions and false unbelief, not merely trimmed to fit in with unbelief. Paul rejects syncretism, and so should we.

message of salvation—the same gospel—goes to both Jew and Greek (Rom 1:5, 16; 3:29–30; Gal 2:9, 15–16; 3:28).

Then what about 1 Corinthians 9:22, where Paul says, "I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some"? The context, beginning with 9:1, focuses on Paul's behavior and conduct, not on his message. For example, he says, "To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews" (v. 20). It means that he did not needlessly offend Jews by eating unclean food in their presence. It does not mean that he trimmed the gospel so as to make it inoffensive (cf. Gal 5:11).

VIII. *Multiple Languages*

Consider another postmodern concern. Postmodern skeptics worry about the alleged limitations of languages. Together with multiple cultures come multiple languages, and—so it is alleged—multiple versions of truth, one version (if not more) for each language. Language becomes a prison from which human thought and human notions of truth cannot escape. The bounds of language are the bounds of what can be described and asserted and thought. And, supposedly, that leaves no room for a robust divine revelation in language.

The Apostle Paul was not naive about language, any more than he was about culture. Growing up in Gentile Tarsus, he would have learned Greek (cf. Acts 21:37). We do not know whether his Jewish parents or a synagogue school in Tarsus taught him some Hebrew. But he studied under Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). At that point, he would have had to know Hebrew. And studying in Jerusalem, he would have picked up Aramaic on the side. At one point he gave a speech "in the Hebrew language," either Aramaic or Hebrew (v. 2).

Thus, Paul knew by firsthand experience that ideas can be translated from one language to another. In 2 Corinthians 4:2, the expression "open statement" shows in compressed form that Paul was not troubled about merely theoretical difficulties about translation, nor about the fact that not every single nuance from a discourse in one language can be easily captured in another. He knew by experience that the gospel can be expressed in more than one language.

So what are the real problems? The more painful issues lie at a deeper level. Consider the mockery at Mars Hill (Acts 17:32). The Athenians did not mock because they literally did not understand the basic meaning of what Paul said about the resurrection. Rather, they mocked precisely be-cause they *did* understand, and they thought that Paul's claim was absurd on the face of it. Their incredulity was not generated merely by Paul's use

of the Greek language. Paul and the diaspora Jews and the Athenian Gentiles all spoke Greek. The incredulity was generated by a cultural mindset among pagan Greeks. Pagans did not expect an afterlife in the body, but (if anything) an afterlife only for the disembodied soul. Bodily resurrection did not cohere with their existing belief system. Their resistance was spiritual, not linguistic.

Believing that God is absent, postmodern skeptics have no easy way of adjudicating between differing belief systems. The differences are therefore treated as ethically neutral, and mere "tolerance" becomes the preferred social solution. Paul has a different answer, which appears in 2 Corinthians 4:1–6. He frankly acknowledges that some receive his gospel and some do not. The difference, however, is not ethically neutral. "In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ" (v. 4). As most commentators agree, "the god of this world" designates the devil. The devil has blinded some hearers.

In 2 Corinthians 4, Paul does not elaborate on the activity of the devil. He makes it clear elsewhere that this demonically induced blindness goes together with human responsibility when people reject the truth (Rom 1:18–23; Eph 4:17–19; 2 Thess 2:9–12). Moreover, the blindness in question has a corporate as well as an individual dimension. Whole groups of people can live in darkness.

Paul's language about the devil seems to postmodernism even more absurd than the claim that God can give us a transcendent message in language. Belief in the devil is viewed as a primitive superstition from which modernity has delivered us irreversibly. Moreover, from a postmodern standpoint, Paul is being politically incorrect. His description seems insulting to non-Christians. But of course this appearance of insult comes against the background of postmodern worldviews. The problems are the usual ones: (1) Postmodern skepticism, while claiming a kind of religious neutrality, actually rejects the truth of the gospel, and with that rejection shows that it is part of the problem. As a movement, it participates in the blindness induced by the devil. (2) Postmodern skepticism shows a complete lack of skepticism about its own vision of the world, including the assumption that the devil does not exist. Claiming to be multicultural, it shows its own cultural captivity to a limited, Western narrative. This narrative confidently proclaims the nonexistence of evil spirits not on the basis of investigation but on the basis of immersion in post-Enlightenment propaganda.

IX. *God's Presence in Language*

Paul, we say, is confident that the gospel is capable of being translated. Indeed, it has already been translated when Paul explains it in Greek, because it was prophesied beforehand in Hebrew in the Old Testament (Rom 1:2). Paul is confident not merely for pragmatic reasons, not merely because he sees some people believing the gospel. Implicitly, he has a philosophy of language. He hints at but does not develop such a philosophy, based on the presence of God in language. The allusion in 2 Corinthians 4:6 to Genesis 1:3 presupposes that God was able to speak and did speak even before any human beings existed. God said, "Let there be light" (Gen 1:3). God is not only the master of language, but in certain ways he is the origin of language. He is the original speaker. Language that human beings use is therefore ultimately a divine gift. It is not a prison from which God is excluded.

This theistic philosophy of language forms the larger context in which Paul uses the expression "God's word" in 2 Corinthians 4:2. Paul presupposes that the gospel that he himself proclaims is not merely human words but words spoken by God: "When you received the *word of God*, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the *word of God*, which is at work in you believers" (1 Thess 2:13). The Holy Spirit provides these words:

> Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in *words* not taught by human wisdom but *taught by the Spirit*, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. (1 Cor 2:12–13)

X. *Multiple Meanings*

Postmodern skeptics have still another difficulty. They are skeptical about meaning in general, even within a single human language, because any one piece of language can be interpreted in multiple ways and sponsor multiple meanings. Who is to say which meaning is "right"? Once again, the difficulty makes sense if God is absent, because then there is no clear authority rising above the diversity of human interpretations and human opinions.

Second Corinthians 4:1–6 provides the beginning of an answer, because the gospel is "God's word." That expression presupposes that God is the ultimate judge of its meaning. It does not mean whatever various people claim it means, but what God means by it. Moreover, as we have already observed, 2 Corinthians 4:1–6 acknowledges a kind of diversity of meaning when it speaks about those blinded to the truth (v. 4). People say all kinds

of things about the meaning of a particular verse in the Bible, or the meaning of the Bible as a whole. That kind of diversity in meaning *conforms* to biblical teaching about meaning, because the Bible has its own explanation for such diversity. As usual, its explanation is politically incorrect. The Bible does not level all meanings on the basis of common humanity, but distinguishes truth and error on the basis of divine judgment and divine truth.

XI. *God's Presence in Meaning*

God is present as he speaks in the gospel. He is present not only in the process of speaking, but in the process of receiving. The Holy Spirit comes to interpret the gospel, and when the Holy Spirit creates us as new creatures indwelt by the Spirit, we receive the Spirit's message with positive understanding:

> The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The *spiritual* person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. "For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ. (1 Cor 2:14–16)

Paul pointedly distinguishes two *kinds* of reception. Whether a person receives the right understanding depends on whether that person is "natural" or "spiritual." The fundamental divide is between those who believe in Christ and those who do not, or between covenant keepers and covenant breakers, or between the regenerate and the unregenerate. In addition, of course, we can contemplate fine-grained changes in understanding taking place over time among these two categories of people. The believer can grow in knowledge (Eph 4:12–16).

XII. *Is Paul Right?*

All in all, we can see several ways in which Paul's understanding of his own preaching is supported by a larger worldview context. Within that context, Paul's preaching has decided contrasts with postmodern skepticism. And at least in implicit form he offers answers to that skepticism. The gospel he preaches is a universal gospel for all nations, because God designed it to reach every segment of humanity, in multiple cultures and languages.

But for those troubled by postmodern skepticism, the question remains, "Was Paul right?" As long as the postmodernist remains in his skepticism, he thinks he must continue to treat Paul's gospel as merely one more

human "religious discourse," trapped within the finite prison of language and culture.

But Paul's gospel says, among other things, that it is really the skeptic that is trapped—trapped in demonic darkness. The solution is found in Christ and in the gospel that proclaims his salvation. The gospel provides facts about Christ's work (1 Cor 15:3–11). It is a public proclamation, referring to the real event of Christ's resurrection, and confirmed by multiple witnesses. But, more than that, the proclamation is "God's word," confronting all who hear with the very presence of Christ himself in his glory. As the gospel comes, it brings "the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ" and "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor 4:4, 6). The God who created light by speaking with divine power also creates saving knowledge of himself by shining the light of his glory, when he speaks with divine power in the gospel (Rom 1:16).[9] The skeptic who turns away from the gospel is blind to reality, the reality of God in Christ working through the power of the Holy Spirit, and the reality of a created world in which the Creator himself can speak.

But in a day influenced by postmodern thinking, we must also consider people who claim to be Christian believers, who claim to receive new life from Christ, but whose perception of God and the world is colored by various skepticisms. They may affirm the gospel in some sense, but still say that in some ways Paul was "a man of his time." Allegedly, he was captive to his first-century environment, to his rabbinic background, and to "outmoded" ideas from the Old Testament. These modern voices then claim that some of these outmoded ideas found their way into his teaching in his letters. Allegedly, Paul said some things that we now "know" to be flawed. According to such thinking, Paul's proclamation of the gospel is authentic, but he may have flawed ideas about culture, language, conscience, and perhaps also the very status of the gospel that he preaches.[10] So, according to this line of thinking, 2 Corinthians 4:1–6 should not be received and believed uncritically.

The orthodox doctrine of inspiration has never claimed that the human instruments of inspiration, like Paul, were flawless in every sphere of knowledge. It does claim that when they wrote as inspired messengers of

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[9] See John Piper, *A Peculiar Glory: How the Christian Scriptures Reveal Their Complete Truthfulness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).

[10] For a critique of neo-orthodox views of inspiration, which find errors in the Bible, see John M. Frame, "God and Biblical Language: Transcendence and Immanence," in *God's Inerrant Word*, ed. John Warwick Montgomery (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany Fellowship, 1974), 159–77.

divine truth, they consistently proclaimed truth and not falsehood. They spoke the words of God (2 Pet 1:21; cf. 1 Cor 14:37). Paul shows that he is in line with this doctrine when he proclaims his gospel as "God's word" and his instruction as "a command of the Lord" requiring obedience (1 Cor 14:37).

Can we still believe such a thing? Really? Yes, we can, but only if we are prepared to reckon with the difference between Paul's approach and the atmosphere of postmodern skepticism. If the claim concerning divine speech has become incredible in our day, it is not because the actual evidence has changed significantly over the last fifty or even two hundred years, or because scholarly evangelical defenses of inerrancy have suddenly disappeared off the face of our planet. There was unbelief even among sophisticated ancient Greeks who gathered on Mars Hill. There was unbelief at the time of the Reformation. There was unbelief in nineteenth-century German scholarship. Why is unbelief attractive? Unbelief has become "easier" and belief "harder" partly due to cultural atmosphere. Has this atmosphere given us a new insight superior to Paul? I think not.

What Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 4:1–6 and in other passages where he reflects on the gospel is not a trivial part of his message. It guides us in understanding how we are to understand the gospel itself as it comes from his lips and his pen. If Paul were wrong about the nature of his proclamation, it would corrupt the ability of his hearers (like the Corinthians) to receive the gospel with proper understanding about its actual import. And if this reception were corrupted, we would no longer have the gospel itself with confidence. And without that confidence we would be in no position to sift between true and false religious claims. Rather than exercising skepticism toward Paul's words, we should turn that skepticism to a better use: to be skeptical of the skeptics and their dependence on a culturally myopic and patronizing Western narrative, which sustains skepticism toward the Bible.