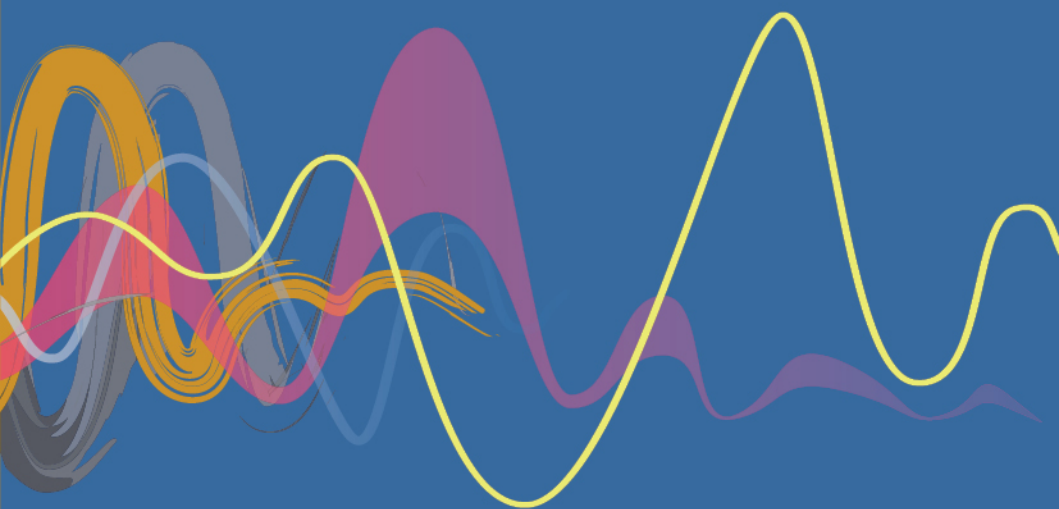


TRUTH be TOLD

Living truthfully in
a post-truth world



Lionel Windsor

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post-truth world

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 **matthiasmedia**
SYDNEY • YOUNGSTOWN

Truth Be Told

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INTRODUCTION

Johannesburg, South Africa, 17 July 2018: former US President Barack Obama is delivering his first significant speech since leaving the White House. It's a lecture to about 15,000 people, commemorating the one-hundredth anniversary of Nelson Mandela's birth. His topic: the perilous state of the world. There are enormous threats to justice and peace. Democracy itself is in danger. And a critical factor in the looming disaster, according to Obama, is the loss of objective truth.

“Censorship and state control of media is on the rise”, Obama warns. Social media have become tools for “promoting hatred and paranoia and propaganda and conspiracy theories”. People don't care about reasoned debate; instead, we “surround ourselves with opinions that validate what we already believe”. As a result, nobody is calling politicians to account for their lies:

Unfortunately, too much of politics today seems to reject the very concept of objective truth. People just make stuff up. They just make stuff up. ... we see the utter loss of shame among political leaders where they're caught in a lie and they just double down and they lie some more. Politicians

have always lied, but it used to be if you caught them lying, they'd be like, "Oh, man". Now they just keep on lying.¹

'Post-truth' was the Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year in 2016. It means "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief".² Its use spiked during the US presidential election campaign in that year (along with the 'Brexit' referendum in the UK). And it describes an ongoing reality in our world. As Obama pointed out, it's not just that people lie; it's that nobody even cares about lies. Truth isn't even a thing anymore.

According to Obama, the blame lies with economic circumstances and the politics of greed and power. But it's not so simple, is it? For at least half a century in Western media and educational settings, the idea of objective truth has been relentlessly dismantled and ridiculed in the service of so-called 'progress'. Generations have learned from infancy that 'my truth' is the most basic form of truth. What matters most is how I feel inside. This automatically makes claims of 'objective truth' highly suspicious.

The world didn't suddenly become 'post-truth' in the 2010s. All that happened is that the generations who had been taught to trust their feelings above claims of objective truth grew up and became majority voters. These voters put their faith in leaders who appealed to their intuition and preformed beliefs. Influential leaders, in turn, learned the art of using words to manipulate emotions and gain power. And the social media algorithms made the whole process wonderfully easy and efficient.

How do you feel about all of this? What can be done? For most of us, the natural reaction is to lay the blame at the feet of others. After all, very few of us are cynical enough to admit we don't believe in truth. 'Post-truth' isn't about me. It's a label that

describes ‘them’: the selfish politicians, the greedy corporate bosses, the corrupt priests, the neighbours or family members who have wronged us, the people we disagree with, the manipulative media. Obviously, *they’re* bad. But you and I are on the side of truth, aren’t we? And yet ... take a moment to reflect on your own life.

Are you a truthful person? Really? Do you always tell the truth in every circumstance? Do you always value truth by seeking it out? I suspect you answered “No”. If you answered “Yes”, you’re lying. So why don’t you always tell the truth? Maybe there are truths that you can’t speak out loud because it would hurt too much. Or perhaps you believe, deep down, that the truthfulness of your words doesn’t matter as much as the effect of your words. Maybe you think what matters most is achieving some greater goal: love, authenticity, happiness, unity, faith, peace, or progress. Perhaps you believe it’s okay to deceive to achieve that greater good. Well, sorry to say it, but that’s post-truth thinking.

Truth is personal

In this book, I plan to do something that I hope and pray will be both deeply uncomfortable and powerfully liberating. I want to help you to see that *truth is personal*. I don’t mean that truth is merely a matter of personal opinions. I mean that truth is something that operates at a profoundly personal level. Truth and lies aren’t just ‘out there’. They affect all of us. They’ve been affecting us since long before ‘post-truth’ became Word of the Year. The post-truth reality isn’t just a matter of politics. It permeates our day-to-day experience. It’s encoded in our technology. It affects our businesses, our media, our churches, and our schools. It rears its head in tribalism and narcissism. It fosters and enables abuse. It affects all our relationships. It’s everywhere.

But there's an even more central reason why truth is personal. Truth is about a person: God, the Father of Jesus Christ. God is true. I don't just mean that God is real—though I certainly believe he is real! I mean that he is *true*. That means two related things.

Firstly, God *speaks* the truth about himself and his world and you and me.

Secondly, God is *faithful*: that is, he is true to his promises. This is a further aspect of being true that we don't think of quite so often. Being true isn't only about making sure our words match reality; it's also about making sure our actions match our words. That's what God is like. He keeps his promises.

Because God speaks the truth and is faithful, he enables *us* to tell the truth. God's truth gives us the power and safety to admit our own lack of truthfulness and learn to live faithful lives in response to his truth.

I'm writing this book with Christians in mind. If you're a Christian, this book is designed to help you to understand the world we live in, to live for Jesus, and to speak about Jesus with your friends in a way that engages with some of the issues they're facing. But if you're not a Christian, I hope you'll see that this book can be useful for you, too. I hope it will help you understand the wonderful message about Jesus, see how Jesus makes sense of our world, and be encouraged to trust him.

This is the most challenging book I've ever written. I don't mean that the ideas are incredibly complex or hard to understand. I mean that it's personally challenging to me. As I prepared and wrote the book, I had to revisit times in my past when I'd been less than truthful and less than faithful. I had to own up to my faults. I had to come to God for forgiveness. But I can testify that the challenge has been worth it. God is always ready to forgive and to help me live with greater truthfulness and faithfulness each day.

The structure of this book

The book is in three parts. In part I, 'Our truth problem', I want to show you that our truth problem is bigger than you might have imagined. I'll be exploring various areas of our world: our politics, our technology, our institutions, our culture, our minds and hearts, and our relationships. It's designed to help you understand the world we live in a little better. Just to warn you, part I will be a little depressing. I want to help you see how pervasive and devastating the truth problem is for all of us. But hang in there. Once we see how bad the situation is, we can better see how good the good news really is.

In part II, 'The word of truth', I want to help you see the Bible's answer to our truth problem. We'll look at some important parts of the Bible that directly address the issue of truth. These include key places in the Old Testament, the Gospel of John, the letters of John, and three of Paul's letters: Ephesians, 1 Timothy, and 2 Corinthians. The Bible's answer to our truth problem isn't simplistic. It's an answer that operates at the deepest level imaginable. At the heart of this answer is the 'gospel': the message about God's Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus is full of grace and truth. Through Jesus, God rescues us from lies and gives us the reason and the power to live true and faithful lives for him.

In part III, 'Telling the truth', I want to explore practical ways for us to live lives permeated by the truth of the gospel. This involves going deeper into the 'how' of truth. We'll look at how to trust the true God, how to turn away from deception day by day, how to take lies seriously, how to make truthfulness more of a habit, how to keep our promises, how to approach tricky situations involving truth, how to share the truth truthfully, and how to live as God's people in communities of truth.

A forewarning and a favour

Before you begin reading part I, I'd like to forewarn you about something, and ask you for a favour.

At various points in this part of the book, I'll raise and discuss specific issues in our world related to culture, institutions, technology, and politics. You might disagree with me on some of those issues. That's okay. In fact, it's inevitable. Truth is so fragmented in our world that it's impossible for all of us to have a complete picture of every issue that takes all the details into account. So on specific points, I might be wrong, or you might be wrong, or we might both be wrong. And even if I'm right, I might express myself in a way that triggers a response in you that I wasn't intending.

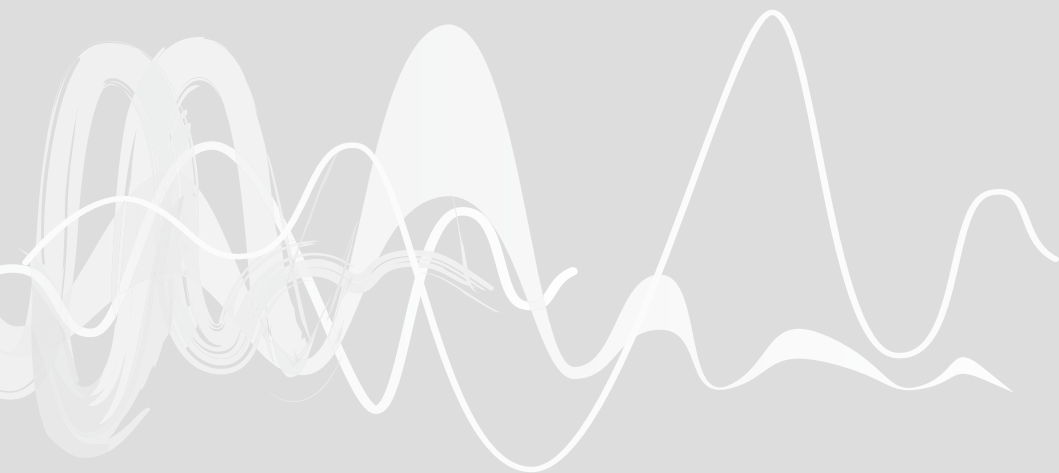
You might also feel like I'm raising too many problems without resolving any of the problems straight away. So it's possible that because you disagree with something I've said on an issue, or because I don't offer instant answers, you might feel it's not worth reading any further.

If that's the case, this is the favour I'd like to ask of you: please keep reading! Why? Because I'm not claiming that my opinions on these issues related to culture, institutions, technology, and politics are the gospel. I'm giving them as examples to help map out the landscape—to show you how big the problems are. The goal of the book is to show that the gospel of Jesus Christ is the answer to these problems.

So in part II, I'll lay the important biblical and gospel-driven foundations that we need in order to see the way ahead; and in part III, I'll build on those foundations to look at how we can answer those problems in the way we live. As a result, I hope and pray that you will be equipped to trust the God of truth and to speak and live truthfully in this post-truth world.

And of course, at any point as you're reading part I, you're very welcome to skip straight ahead to parts II and III!

PART I: OUR TRUTH PROBLEM





1. FAKE NEWS: TRUTH IN TROUBLE ON THE WORLD STAGE

When it comes to addressing the truth problem in our world, where do we begin? For some people, the answer is clear: certain politicians or political persuasions. When Barack Obama lamented the demise of “objective truth” in global politics a year and a half after leaving office himself (see the Introduction to this book), it wasn’t hard to guess who was at the forefront of his mind: his presidential successor, Donald Trump.

As an Aussie, I’m an outsider to US politics. But nobody, not even we on the opposite side of the Pacific, could ignore the roller-coaster ride that was the 2016 US election campaign. At the time, I asked and listened and tried to understand why so many Americans were turning to Trump as a leader. I came to see how his unfiltered criticisms of his opponents resonated with the mood of a vast swathe of voters who had been alienated by the attitudes and decisions of leaders in previous decades. I could see how he appealed to these voters’ sense of basic fairness,

loyalty, and authority. I could see why so many people thought he was a necessary corrective to the lies and abuses of previous administrations.

But Trump also had a lot of critics. And these critics routinely associated him with truth-twisting. In January 2021, the *Washington Post* catalogued 30,573 “false or misleading claims” made during his presidency.¹ They cited the time he used Twitter to accuse Obama of criminal wiretapping.² Others cited his claims that media outlets that criticized him were broadcasting “fake news” based on fabricated visual and written evidence: “What you’re seeing and what you’re reading is not what’s happening”.³ Much has also been said about Trump’s allegations of electoral fraud following his 2020 election loss, which were heard by some as a rallying cry to storm the US Capitol on 6 January 2021 to stop Congress from validating the election result.⁴

Reports like this can easily lead us to lay the blame for our truth problems at the feet of a particular politician or political persuasion. Some blame Trump for everything. Maybe you disagree—but perhaps you have another politician or party in mind whom you feel should take the blame.

There’s something appealing about this way of thinking. After all, if it were really the case that certain politicians or parties were to blame, it wouldn’t be beyond our grasp to fix the issue. We’d just need some good media fact-checking and a groundswell of people courageous enough to ‘call out’ the bad politicians and vote for the good ones (whoever we decide they may be).

If only it were that simple!

Not just one President

To start with, even if we stay focused on the United States for a moment, we’d be badly mistaken if we thought this post-truth

reality was isolated to one presidential personality or a single political persuasion. In his book *When America Stopped Being Great*, BBC journalist Nick Bryant chronicles the five presidencies before Trump's.⁵ He argues that the problems that surfaced around Trump's presidency were not isolated blips or historical accidents. Instead, he claims, they were logical consequences of multiple failures in American politics and society that had already occurred in previous decades. Most of these prior failures, in one way or another, involved the undermining of truth.

For example, Bryant describes the way the Reagan administration blended the presidency with television-style show business. Political leaders came to be judged less on their ability to govern and more on their ability to provide engaging content: to tell a good story, deliver one-liners, and feel and express the nation's emotions.⁶

He relates how Bill Clinton prevaricated about his misuse of power and sexual infidelity in his affair with an intern. When first questioned about the situation, he said: "There is no improper relationship".⁷ Then he argued that his critics hadn't understood what he meant by the word 'is' or what he meant by the term 'relationship'. Of course, nobody bought it.

Bryant continues to describe how the Bush administration, following the September 11 attacks, acted prematurely on evidence of weapons of mass destruction (which turned out to be false) to justify a disastrously costly invasion of Iraq.⁸

Finally, Bryant describes the way Obama's celebrity status and masterful rhetoric so often failed to translate into action. He consistently made grand promises that he didn't keep. When the Assad regime in Syria killed hundreds of civilians with a nerve agent, Obama failed to follow through on his warnings about consequences, leaving a power vacuum with devastating consequences for the region and the rest of the world.⁹

Of course, you could argue that Bryant has got it wrong on some points, or that he doesn't go far back enough—he could say more about Kennedy, Nixon, and many others. The point is that no matter which political leader or political party we look at, we'll find significant truth issues.

Not just the United States

And it's not just the United States. In the United Kingdom, former Prime Minister Boris Johnson is often cited as a leader who seriously undermined public trust through blatant contradictions between his words and actions. In May 2020, as the UK was slowly emerging from its first COVID-19 lockdown, Johnson addressed the public: "We must stay alert. We must continue to control the virus and save lives."¹⁰ He stressed that everyone should continue working from home unless their jobs required their physical presence (such as construction and manufacturing workers). He introduced increased fines for those who broke social distancing rules. Ten days later, Johnson had a garden party in his own residence, which he attended with about 30 others. When the truth about this party (and others) came to light, Johnson claimed that he hadn't realized it was a party but "believed implicitly that this was a work event".¹¹ His hypocrisy and breach of trust led to repeated calls for him to resign. Still, he was able to cling to power until another scandal emerged: he pretended not to know about the sexually abusive behaviour of his deputy chief whip. That one forced him out.

Many are claiming that Australian politics also has significant truth problems. Bernard Keane has recently argued that we are facing a new situation in Australian politics.¹² It's not just that politicians lie. Politicians have always lied. However, once upon a time lying was seen as a *bad* thing. Lies needed to be excused,

denied, or justified by some higher cause. Now lying is just expected. According to Keane, lying by politicians has been normalized as “a standard tool of political debate and a core part of their political personae”; and as a result, across the political spectrum, politics is becoming less and less a matter of reality and more and more a matter of “emotion, fantasy and conspiracy theory”.¹³ Keane argues that this post-truth situation jeopardizes the stability and cohesiveness of our entire society.

Not just the West

In other parts of the world, the truth problem is even more serious. Russia—a nation with a long history of propaganda over the course of the twentieth century—has continued the pattern into this century, bolstering its increasingly hostile actions, including its 2022 invasion and illegal annexation of large parts of Ukraine, by relentlessly spinning propaganda designed to hoodwink its citizens and by mounting aggressive cyber-warfare operations designed to destabilize its enemies and potential enemies. These operations often involve using social media to create chaos through online misinformation.

China, tipped soon to become the most powerful nation on earth, is exceedingly concerned about avoiding the fate of the former Soviet Union, whose policy of *glasnost* (‘openness and transparency’) after years of state control contributed to its break-up.¹⁴ China seeks to control tightly what its citizens see online. The ‘Great Firewall of China’ restricts access to many non-Chinese sites. China routinely seeks to cover up its widespread abuses of its Uyghur Muslim minority. When the Commissioner of the United Nations Human Rights Council produced a damning report on the situation,¹⁵ China used its power and influence to ensure that the Human Rights Council voted to shelve its own

report without even discussing it.¹⁶ Meanwhile, China has repeatedly opposed and even detained foreign journalists who discuss these issues.¹⁷ I'm sure that between the time I write this and the time you read it, there will be even more issues. They just keep coming.

And it's not just Russia and China suffering a truth problem. As I write this, there have been repeated accusations of serious lies and cover-ups against Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, and many others.

Truth is in big trouble on the world stage. This is a serious problem. When the facts are attacked, trust is shattered. When the truth is denied, people die. When truth stops even being a thing people care about, societies fall apart.

Speaking truth to power?

What can we do? A concept often cited to address this problem is 'speaking truth to power'. The phrase was coined by non-violent religious dissidents in the mid-twentieth century. It means courageously standing up for truth against the lies of those in power.

There's a lot to commend in this idea. It helps us see that truth matters and is worth making sacrifices for. It reminds us how important it is to support people who courageously stand for the truth, even when it hurts.

But there's a problem with the concept of 'speaking truth to power'. It assumes that there are only two kinds of people in the world: truthful people and powerful people. And when you or I use the phrase 'speaking truth to power', we're clearly putting ourselves on the side of the truthful people. Sometimes, that's legitimate. But often, it's not that simple. Why? Because the truth problem is more elusive and more pervasive than that. The

powerful don't always lie. The weak may be just as untruthful. The truth itself may be more multifaceted than we like to admit. And even when the powerful people are lying, their power doesn't exist in a vacuum. Powerful people only gain their power through others: those who follow them on social media, those who trust them and believe what they say, those who give them a voice. The power of the powerful comes, at least partly, from you and me. We're all in it together.

So if we want to speak truth to power, we have to start by speaking truth to ourselves. 'Post-truth' isn't just a matter of politics. We're living in a post-truth *world*. There are truth problems in our technology, our culture, our institutions, our minds, and our hearts. We need to do more than expose and lament what's happening among certain politicians. We need to face the truth problems that affect us all daily. The rest of part I in this book is designed to help us do precisely that.