

SAVING TRUTH

Finding Meaning
& Clarity in a
Post-Truth World

ABDUM MURRAY

A onetime lawyer with a love for language and justice, Abdu Murray shows how “we have mistaken autonomy for freedom” and how this “quest for autonomy has led us down an endless road with no traffic lights or painted lines.” Aligning our hopes and desires with the truth can be costly but also freeing—as Abdu’s own story reveals and Jesus poignantly declared. I’ve had the privilege of speaking and answering questions with Abdu in numerous university open forums. I’ve witnessed his keen mind, winsome humor, and sensitive spirit touch even the most ardent skeptic or follower of another faith, who have then engaged in conversation with him long after an event. This book is genuinely a breath of fresh air and an invaluable and accessible resource.

RAVI ZACHARIAS, author and speaker

In a world of moral confusion and situational ethics, my friend Abdu Murray brings masterful clarity and penetrating insights in his invaluable new book. This is a book you’ll be telling all of your friends about!

LEE STROBEL, *New York Times* best-selling author; professor, Houston Baptist University

Abdu Murray’s *Saving Truth* is powerfully poignant in an age in which internet fabrications “travel halfway around the world before truth has had a chance to put its boots on.” There is no greater need in our post-truth “Culture of Confusion” than clarity respecting truth—what it is, how one can know it, and most importantly why we must submit our personal preferences to it, no matter the cost.

HANK HANEGRAFF, president, the Christian Research Institute; host, *Bible Answer Man* broadcast and *Hank Unplugged* podcast; author of more than twenty books, including *MUSLIM: What You Need to Know about the World’s Fastest-Growing Religion*

Saving Truth is a timely and important book. Murray deconstructs many of the confusions inherent in our “post-truth” culture. And yet he offers positive steps forward. I wish every Christian—and especially every Christian student—would read, study, and discuss this book.

SEAN MCDOWELL, Ph.D., professor, Biola University; internationally recognized speaker; author or coauthor of more than eighteen books including *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*

Everything we believe about culture, politics, or religion is shaped by our view of the world. Every Christian believer must, therefore, ask an important question: Are we allowing our Christian worldview to help us see reality clearly? In *Saving Truth*, Abdu Murray uses his considerable skills as a lawyer and Christian thinker to examine the most pressing issues of culture. His style is accessible and winsome, his message is relevant and timely. If you want some help evaluating the challenges facing our nation and Church, get this book.

J. WARNER WALLACE—Cold-Case Detective; Senior Fellow, the Colson Center for Christian Worldview; Adjunct Professor of Apologetics, Biola University; author, *Cold-Case Christianity*, *God's Crime Scene*, and *Forensic Faith*

Whether we know it or not, the most important subject in the universe is Truth. Live by it and your eternity is secure. Ignore it and disaster awaits you in this life and forever. With this insightful book, my brilliant friend Abdu Murray is *Saving Truth* on the most relevant issues in our lives. Abdu brings you light and clarity to this increasingly dark and confusing world.

FRANK TUREK, CrossExamined.org and coauthor, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to be an Atheist*

We seem to live in a world where we've moved on from the concept of truth, and yet we cannot ultimately live without it. Abdu Murray has a big brain and a big heart and provides a uniquely reliable, understanding, and hope-filled guide to the issues facing (and overwhelming) us today.

SAM ALLBERRY, apologist with RZIM; author, *Is God Anti-Gay?*

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ABDU MURRAY

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Saving Truth

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CONTENTS

1. The Blossoming of the Culture of Confusion.	11
2. Confusion and the Church: Seductions of a Post-Truth Mindset	27
3. Confusion's Consequences— Getting Freedom Wrong.	47
4. Clarity about Freedom	71
5. Clarity about Human Dignity.	93
6. Clarity about Sexuality, Gender, and Identity.	117
7. Clarity about Science and Faith	161
8. Clarity about Religious Pluralism	187
9. The Son through Fog: Clarity's Hope.	213
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	227
<i>Notes</i>	229

*For Nicole, who like a Lake Michigan sunset, is a
“sea of glass mingled with fire.” I hear your voice
whenever I put pen to paper. Your tenderness
for others and fiery faith inspire me always.*

The Blossoming of the Culture of Confusion

You've been at an intersection before, waiting for the red light to change, and had that uneasy feeling: *Is the bus next to me moving forward or am I in reverse?*

The first thing you do to regain clarity and overcome the quick flash of vertigo is look at something that doesn't move—a mailbox, or the streetlight perhaps. Getting a fixed point of reference clears up your confusion and relieves the vertigo.

But what if there are no fixed points of reference? What then?

Some time ago I rode a car ferry across a river between Michigan and Ontario, Canada. One would think that a boat ferrying cars from one country to another would be large, holding many cars. Being from the Great Lakes state, I've ridden such grand ferries. This wasn't one of them. This ferry could hold two cars at most, and that morning it was just me. Because the ferry was so small and the trip so short, the deckhand asked me to stay in my car, which I happily did, given the young day's heat and my car's air-conditioning. Glancing down at my GPS just when the ferry pulled away from the dock, I didn't see us

leave. Due to my car's mass and suspension, I didn't feel the boat gently pull away either. When I looked up and my eyes met the flowing river, my body told me I was stationary, but my eyes told me that we were moving. Looking at the ferry couldn't help me overcome the vertigo because it was moving too. And the ever-moving river didn't provide a fixed point of reference. There were no mailboxes or stoplights; a sure foundation was hard to find. So my dizziness persisted longer than it would have in a typical bus-at-the-intersection incident. Only the unmoving land across the river could abate my nausea and clear up my confusion.

Whenever we find ourselves in such situations, we instinctively try to end the disorientation by hurriedly locating a fixed point of reference that doesn't depend on our feelings. In fact, we recognize in those moments that our feelings are part of the problem. Imagine if in my situation the land itself was moving. Awash in the river, I wouldn't have been able to find a bearing. My feelings would have been unreliable. My confusion would have persisted and my uneasiness wouldn't have diminished.

Culturally speaking, in the past decade we have found ourselves adrift in a river with no bearings in sight. The cultural river we find ourselves in isn't narrow. We can barely see the land's outline. In fact, we departed from it so long ago that we've forgotten what solid earth feels like and have begun to question whether the land itself is anchored or afloat.

As if to put an exclamation mark on this situation, the Oxford Dictionaries selected "post-truth" as 2016's Word of the Year. The Oxford Dictionaries annually select a word that captures the culture's current mood and preoccupations. And post-truth does exactly that. According to Oxford Dictionaries, post-truth

means “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” Although the word dates back at least to 1992, the usage of post-truth ballooned in 2016 by 2,000 percent. That may seem shockingly high, but pause to reflect on the year. The American presidential election was marked by so many competing and false claims, allegations of fraud, and proven mistruths, it was difficult to know who to believe. Voices across the political spectrum were quick to condemn the other side with little or no facts and quick to defend their champion regardless of facts. Raw emotion dominated the megaphones of 2016’s various protests such that the truth behind the controversies was drowned out. “Fake news” allowed agendas to advance regardless of, and often contrary to, the truth. Was it not the case that facts were dismissed as getting in the way of agendas? Was it not true that sensitivities to personal preferences and hair-trigger senses of outrage shaped debates and even determined the words considered acceptable in our supposedly free society? It’s hard to think of a word better suited to the spirit of our age than “post-truth.”

When the Soft Soil Is Harder

Post-truth has two modes. The first is a “soft” mode, by which I mean that we may acknowledge that truth exists—or that certain things are true—but we don’t care about the truth if it gets in the way of our personal preferences.¹ In this soft mode of post-truth, the truth exists objectively, but our subjective feelings and opinions matter more. The second mode is “hard,” by which I mean a willingness to propagate blatant falsehoods,

knowing they're false, because doing so serves a higher political or social agenda.

The differences between the soft and hard modes of post-truth may be subtle, but they are significant. Both are troubling and both appear to be growing more pervasive. But I suspect the soft mode of post-truth is more dangerous. Allow me to explain.

Postmodernism emerged in the 1970s as a rejection of the notion of objective truth. (Postmodernism had other aims, but this was a defining goal.) "What's true for you may not be true for me," we would hear. Or someone might say, "There's no such thing as objective truth." Both statements are self-defeating and unlivable. Any denial of objective truth must itself be objectively true if it's to be meaningful. Yet despite its incoherence, postmodernism was quite resilient and remained influential in the West for decades.

Its luster has finally dulled. To be sure, in the past few years postmodernism has continued to pop up in culture. But like a mustard burp, its tang is now momentary and passing.² Where postmodernism failed because it was inherently incoherent, the post-truth mindset may succeed because it is not. It faces the problem of truth head-on. Unlike postmodernism, the post-truth mindset acknowledges objective truth, but subordinates it to preferences. That's dangerous, as logic and evidence don't have the same influence over the post-truth mindset that they had over a postmodern. In a post-truth age, if the evidence fits our preferences and opinions, then all is well and good. If it doesn't, then the evidence is deemed inadmissible or offensive, with offense being a kind of solvent against otherwise sound arguments. To mix metaphors a bit, the post-truth mindset is

like bacteria that have mutated to become immune to antibiotics. Where truth and logic could combat postmodern bacteria, they seem powerless to arrest post-truth's infectiousness.

There Is No One Immune— No, Not One

Mixed reactions followed Oxford's announcement of post-truth as its 2016 Word of the Year. Some want to confine the post-truth mindset to politics, arguing that it occurred mainly within the context of the 2016 American presidential race and infected only one side, generally the side opposite one's own. Others instinctively claim post-truth as a positive development, the means to forge one's own destiny free of the shackles of tradition, facts, and even logic.³

Still others bemoan the post-truth mindset. Consider Kathleen Higgins' lament in her *Nature* article "Post-Truth: A Guide for the Perplexed." Shaken by the development of the post-truth mindset, she points out it may undermine scientific endeavor. "Science's quest for knowledge about reality presupposes the importance of truth, both as an end in itself and as a means of resolving problems. How could truth become passé?"⁴

Fascinatingly, she seems concerned only about how post-truth has become the traffic cop at the intersection of science and politics, particularly on the climate change issue. Higgins writes:

Scientists and philosophers should be shocked by the idea of post-truth, and they should speak up when scientific findings are ignored by those in power or treated as mere

matters of faith. Scientists must keep reminding society of the importance of the social mission of science—to provide the best information possible as the basis for public policy. And they should publicly affirm the intellectual virtues that they so effectively model: critical thinking, sustained inquiry and revision of beliefs on the basis of evidence. Another line from Nietzsche is especially pertinent now: “Three cheers for physics!—and even more for the motive that spurs us toward physics—our honesty!”⁵

Isn't it interesting that Higgins seems to lay the problems of post-truth at the feet of others, while implying that scientists are immune from its influence?

My point is not to denigrate scientists or science. Some of my close friends are scientists of high integrity. Nor am I making a statement about climate change. Clearly, science has benefited all our lives, and I'm convinced science is a gift from God. My point is the post-truth virus is so powerful that it can infect all of us: politicians and voters, pastors and philosophers, soccer moms and baseball dads, and yes, even scientists.

One would think a writer for *Nature* would recognize that scientists—who many seem to think lose their susceptibility to human bias when they don a lab coat—are not immune from post-truth's infection. There is ample evidence that scientists are all too human. In January 2016, just as the post-truth year began, Adam Hoffman reported the surprising results of several studies that concluded the findings of certain sciences are difficult to reproduce.⁶ One study asserted the findings in fewer than half of the psychology studies printed in prestigious journals could be reproduced.⁷ Stanford University's John Ioannidis

went so far as to say that across many scientific disciplines, “It can be proven that most claimed research findings are false.”⁸ Putting an alarming number to the problem, Ioannidis says, “We are getting millions of papers that go nowhere.”⁹

In the face of such conclusions, Hoffman asks, “So why is this crisis in transparency and reproducibility happening in the first place?” His conclusion is telling. In addition to conscious or unconscious biases, scientists are under pressure to obtain “breakthrough results,” and those are more likely to get published.¹⁰ In other words, the hard work of honest and forthright research is being undermined by the academic definition of success. No area is immune to post-truth infection.

The irony ought to leap out at us. Higgins is perplexed by the rise of post-truth in politics, fearing it may undermine society’s trust in scientists who “so effectively model” the intellectual virtues of “critical thinking, sustained inquiry and revision of beliefs on the basis of evidence.” Yet she herself seems to succumb to post-truth, as she vaunts the virtues of scientists while ignoring the questionable conclusions of many scientific studies. In making a case that scientists are above being post-truth, she inadvertently demonstrates the opposite by letting her feelings about scientists overpower the facts.

The creep of post-truth is seen in how we gather information about the world to conform to what we *want* to be true, not to what actually *is* true. Stephen Marche makes this point in a biased, yet incisive, op-ed piece in the *Los Angeles Times*.¹¹ He notes that many of us get our news not from time-tested news sources, but from comedy and satire shows like *The Daily Show*, *Last Week Tonight*, and *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*. These shows use comedians as faux journalists who mix facts

with satire and mockery. The jokes have an obvious slant and are meant to make a point about a particular situation, rather than just report facts. All of that is fine in itself. I'm personally a fan of well-done satire. But what can happen is viewers lose perspective, with the encouragement of these shows' producers. Viewers watch, satisfied by the parody of "the other side" of an issue, while fooling themselves into thinking they are being informed. According to Marche, these shows are why "the Left has a post-truth problem, too." With so much satire masquerading as journalism, Marche bemoans that "post-fact life is funny but not ha-ha funny. Everything has become a joke and so nothing is anymore."¹²

Such shows are emblematic of post-truth's effect on culture. We don't look to facts to find out the truth. We look at editorialized facts to support our preferences. Post-truth isn't just a political issue either. It also infects our spiritual lives and influences how we seek answers to life's biggest questions.

A conversation I had with a young man a few years ago during a multiday speaking trip comes to mind. His parents approached me after one of my talks to tell me that their son was increasingly hardened to the gospel and would become combative during spiritual conversations. But he was interested in meeting with me nonetheless. So the following night after speaking, I sat down with him in the now-empty auditorium. I asked him about his biggest objections to Christianity, and he told me that the Bible was full of scientifically impossible fables and morally questionable stories. As I began to address his objections, I was fascinated by his willingness to listen. This was surprising, given his parents' description of him. Our

interchange was going so well, I thought I'd simply ask where he'd gotten his arguments against Christianity.

"I watch a lot of YouTube videos by atheists," he responded. "I hear these things on *The Daily Show* on Comedy Central. And I read a lot of posts on the Internet." As it turned out, he hadn't read a single book or scholarly article nor taken the time to ask a pastor or theologian a single question.

"Those are really your sources for your worldview?" I asked. "Have you ever read a book by a real scholar or watched videos by credible Christians responding to the things you've watched?" His answer was simply "No." It had never occurred to him to do so. He bypassed sincere inquiry so he could marshal the "facts" he was interested in and hear arguments he was predisposed to agree with. He wanted to disbelieve, so he turned to sources that would reinforce his preferences. This is a quite human tendency, innate in all of us. It's called "confirmation bias." Truth didn't matter. His preferences mattered. But—and I do believe this is God's grace—by the time we were finished talking, truth had started to matter to him, and he was asking me for additional sources to read.

The Post-Truth Seed in the Garden's Soft Soil

As startling as recent developments have been, we should remember that the practice of subordinating truth to feelings is ancient. Biblically speaking, the post-truth mindset flowering today originally germinated in a lush garden long ago. God gave Adam and Eve freedom in Eden so that they could enjoy relationship with Him—the very reason for which they were

created. They had but one restriction: they could not eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. If they did so, they would become aware of evil, which would lead to a desire not just to *know* good and evil, but to *determine* good and evil. Satan used our innate human preference to exert our own sovereignty to tempt Adam and Eve away from the communion with God we were created for and toward autonomy apart from God. Satan preyed upon their desire for autonomy. He told them they would not die when they ate the fruit, but would become *like God*. That's when the fruit became desirable. What God had said didn't matter anymore. Their desires and feelings usurped the truth. This seed of the post-truth mindset has bloomed in our day.

Fast-forward some millennia and we see another instance of post-truth. Two thousand years ago, during the most important trial of all time, Pontius Pilate, the governor of the Roman province of Judea, stood before Jesus and claimed the authority of the world's most powerful empire. Jesus stood before Pilate and claimed to be Truth incarnate. He declared that his authority and message weren't based on the vicissitudes of political power or cultural feelings, but on unchanging truth. "You say that I am a king," Jesus answered Pilate. "For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice" (John 18:37). Jesus handed Pilate the opportunity of the ages to ask a perfect follow-up question. The form of Pilate's next question was indeed perfect, but his motivation was anything but. "What is truth?" Pilate asked, walking away before Jesus could answer. It made for a dramatic exit, but a pitiful display. Pilate exchanged the opportunity of a lifetime

for a rhetorical punch line. His attitude mirrors today's post-truth culture.

The 2004 motion picture *The Passion of the Christ* portrays a fictional yet scripturally consistent subsequent conversation between Pilate and his wife. Sitting in a now-empty court, Pilate sullenly asks his wife the same question he asked Jesus. "What is truth, Claudia? Do you hear it, recognize it when it is spoken?"

"Yes, I do. Don't you?"

"How? Can you tell me?"

She answers with a longtime spouse's candor. "If you will not hear the truth, no one can tell you." Steadfast in his cowardice, Pilate does not heed his wife's words, just as he failed to heed Jesus.

"Truth?" he snaps back. "Do you want to know what my truth is, Claudia? I've been putting down rebellions in this rotten outpost for eleven years. If I don't condemn this man, I know Caiaphas will start a rebellion. If I do condemn him, then his followers may. Either way, there will be bloodshed. Caesar has warned me, Claudia—warned me twice. He swore that the next time the blood would be mine. That is my truth!"¹³

Though Pilate uttered the word *truth* four times, he subordinated it to his personal situation and desires. He personalized the truth—calling it "my truth." Pilate wasn't a true skeptic. He was a cynic. A skeptic won't believe a truth claim until there is sufficient evidence. A cynic won't believe even if there is.

Pilate was a post-truth man, living with a post-truth mindset. He had the privilege of standing before the One who claimed to be Truth incarnate and would later prove it by rising from the dead. Yet Pilate wouldn't submit himself to the truth. He subordinated it to his personal preferences. How ironic that

Pilate's personal preferences trumped his recognition of a person who embodied Truth.

Jesus made the audacious claim that through him—and what he would accomplish on the cross—all of us could know the truth, and the truth would set us free (John 8:32). Some of us fervently hope Jesus was right about who he claimed to be. Others may prefer that Jesus was wrong in claiming to be the source of truth and true freedom. The most difficult step is realizing that our preferences aren't the governor here.

I understand the struggle between preference and truth acutely and so share something of a kinship with those who embrace a post-truth mindset. I was not born into a Christian background, yet today I follow Christ. In many ways, like the famous atheist convert C. S. Lewis, I desperately didn't want to meet the Jesus of the Bible. For most of my life I was a proud Muslim. I thought Islam was the truest path to paradise and every other worldview, especially Christianity, was wrong. But as I engaged with Christians about claims of Christ, I had the discomfort of uncovering what former Vice President Al Gore might call "an inconvenient truth." History, logic, and science pointed to the credibility of the Bible in general and to the claims of Christ in particular. My identity as a Muslim was at stake. Despite mounting evidence in favor of the Christian faith, I held onto the faith of my heritage because I preferred it, because I didn't want to change, because I preferred my side over the truth. Coming to embrace the truth about Jesus took me nine long years. It did not take me nine years to find the truth. It took me nine years to accept it. The truth wasn't hard to find, but it was hard to embrace. When I see today's post-truth snare, I know I was once caught in something similar.

As I once tried to avoid the Jesus of history, so our culture tries to avoid him. We may prefer a particular view about Jesus because it provides us with comfort, but what we need is the truth. “If you look for truth, you may find comfort in the end,” C. S. Lewis wrote. “But if you look for comfort, you will not get either comfort or truth—only soft soap and wishful thinking to begin with and, in the end, despair.”¹⁴ Is the truth about Jesus more important than our preferences? Did Jesus give us proof that he alone can reliably guide us out of post-truth and into truth? The more post-truth spreads, the more desperately we need to know who can provide us with clarity. Having listened to many voices and examined many worldviews, I’m convinced that Jesus’ voice is the truest.

Post-Truth’s Full Bloom into the Culture of Confusion

Post-truth has now blossomed into a Culture of Confusion. Confusion is embraced as a virtue and clarity shunned as a sin. The answers to life’s questions no longer need to correspond to reality. They need only cater to our desires.

But as our culture has embraced confusion and shunned clarity, have we found ourselves to be better off? The divisiveness of our rhetoric is corrosive. Those who disagree with us are “them.” Facts often seem to be a problem to get around instead of the useful tools they once were. And if someone takes a stand we disagree with on a particular issue, we label them in the most uncharitable way possible, never mind whether they may have a point.

I remember the pervasive anxiety of the Cold War in the

1980s. The world worried that something would ignite tensions between the USA and USSR, initiating a nuclear war. The Cold War could suddenly become hotter than a thousand suns, quite literally. During that time, people in power claimed to know the way forward. Conservatives, liberals, moderates. Capitalists, socialists, communists, and anarchists. So many voices claimed to be able to lift us above it all. They did little to ease the anxiety. Popular musicians wrote a song about the “Land of Confusion.”¹⁵

Thirty years later, do we not find ourselves neck-deep in the Land of Confusion? Men and women of power claim to be able to guarantee our unfettered freedoms, even if it may mean trampling on the freedoms of others. These same men and women of steel seem preoccupied with rights but often say very little about responsibilities. Yes, there are voices demanding truth and accuracy from our leaders, and rightfully so. But our demands for truth are so often selective—we want truth when it’s convenient or when it supports our point of view. When we look at our world today and see all the questions being asked amid a culture not truly committed to sound answers, it’s hard to imagine a land more confusing.

The confusion tends to swirl around certain questions: What does it mean to be human? What is human freedom and is it the same as autonomy? Do our rights have limits? Is there a transcendent meaning and purpose to human existence, or are we the measure of all things? We need clarity in our day to rightly answer these questions, to be informed individuals, honest scientists, and fair politicians. We need answers, not just questions. Yet as we ask questions, the Culture of Confusion’s answers are inadequate and don’t provide satisfaction. They

don't bring us to dry land. The Culture of Confusion's answers only give birth to more questions. G. K. Chesterton presciently observed this phenomenon in his masterpiece *Orthodoxy*: "Free thought has exhausted its own freedom. It is weary of its own success." Thus, "we have found all of the questions that can be found. It is time we gave up looking for questions and began looking for answers."¹⁶

We need the unmovable to guide us if we are to find answers we can all live with. Blaise Pascal put it well: "When everything is moving at once, nothing appears to be moving, as on board ship. When everyone is moving towards depravity, no one seems to be moving. But if someone stops, he shows up the others who are rushing on, by acting as a fixed point."¹⁷ There is one who stepped in the river of human history to provide an immovable fixed point of reference, even in the strongest of currents. In the pages that follow, I hope to demonstrate that it was not only Jesus' message in answering our deepest questions but also his actions that can bring clarity to a culture that needs it so desperately.