

# Session 4

## Postmodern Epistemology

Understanding Our  
Changing Culture



# Postmodern Epistemology

## What is Epistemology?



# Postmodern Epistemology

“The theory or science  
of the method or  
grounds of knowledge.”  
-Webster’s Dictionary



# Postmodern Epistemology

“The branch of philosophy that is concerned with the theory of knowledge. It is an inquiry into the nature and source of knowledge, the bounds of knowledge, and the justification of claims to knowledge.”

-Paul Feinberg

Walter A. Elwell ed., “Epistemology” in *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), 382.



# Postmodern Epistemology

## Key Terms

- Relativism:** The belief that all truth is relative, being determined by some group.
- Subjectivism:** The belief that all truth is subjective, being defined by the perspective of the individual.
- Skepticism:** The belief that truth cannot be known with certainty.
- Perspectivism:** The belief that truth is found in the combined perspectives of many.
- Pragmatism:** The belief that truth is ultimately defined by that which works to accomplish the best outcome. "The end justifies the means."
- Objectivism:** The belief that truth is an objective reality that exist whether someone believes it or not.



# Postmodern Epistemology

Which best describes our culture today?

1. Relativism
2. Subjectivism
3. Skepticism
4. Perspectivalism
5. Pragmatism
6. Objectivism



# Postmodern Epistemology

## Which is true?

1. Relativism
2. Subjectivism
3. Skepticism
4. Perspectivalism
5. Pragmatism
6. Objectivism



# Question

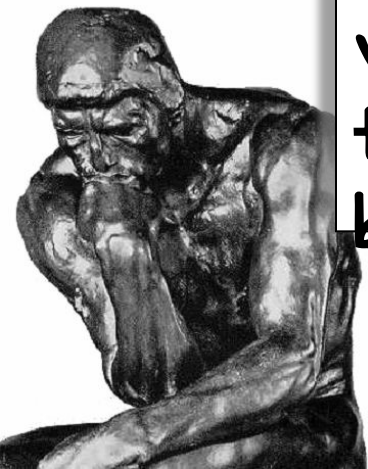
## What is Postmodernism?





# Postmodern Epistemology

“Christian’s today cannot work with the same assumptions that we did just 20 years ago. At that time, people would join you in your search for absolute truth. It is different now. Today, before we begin to lead people to the truth of Jesus Christ, we may have to lead them to the truth of truth. Common ground must be created before the Gospel can be proclaimed”



# Postmodern Epistemology

“Apologetically, the question which arises in the postmodern context is the following. How can Christianity’s claims to truth be taken seriously, when there are so many rival alternatives, and when ‘truth’ itself has become a devalued notion? No-one can lay claim to possession of truth. It is all a question of perspective. The conclusion of this line of thought is as simple as it is devastating: ‘the truth is that there is no truth’”

-Alister McGrath

# Postmodern Epistemology

## A Conversation Between Protagoras and Socrates (4th Century B.C.)

**Protagoras:** Truth is relative. It is only a matter of opinion.

*Socrates: You mean that truth is mere subjective opinion?*

**Protagoras:** Exactly. What is true for you is true for you, and what is true for me is true for me. Truth is subjective.

*Socrates: Do you really mean that? That my opinion is true by virtue of its being my opinion?*



# Postmodern Epistemology

**Protagoras:** Indeed I do.

*Socrates: My opinion is: Truth is absolute, not opinion, and that you, Mr. Protagoras, are absolutely in error. Since this is my opinion, you must grant that it is true according to your philosophy.*

**Protagoras:** You are quite correct, Socrates.



# Postmodern Epistemology

## Self-defeating Statements

“I cannot speak a word in English.”

“My wife has never been married.”

“We cannot know anything about  
God.”

“There is no such thing as truth.”

“Truth cannot be known with  
certainty.”



# Postmodern Epistemology

## A short history of western civilization

### Three periods:

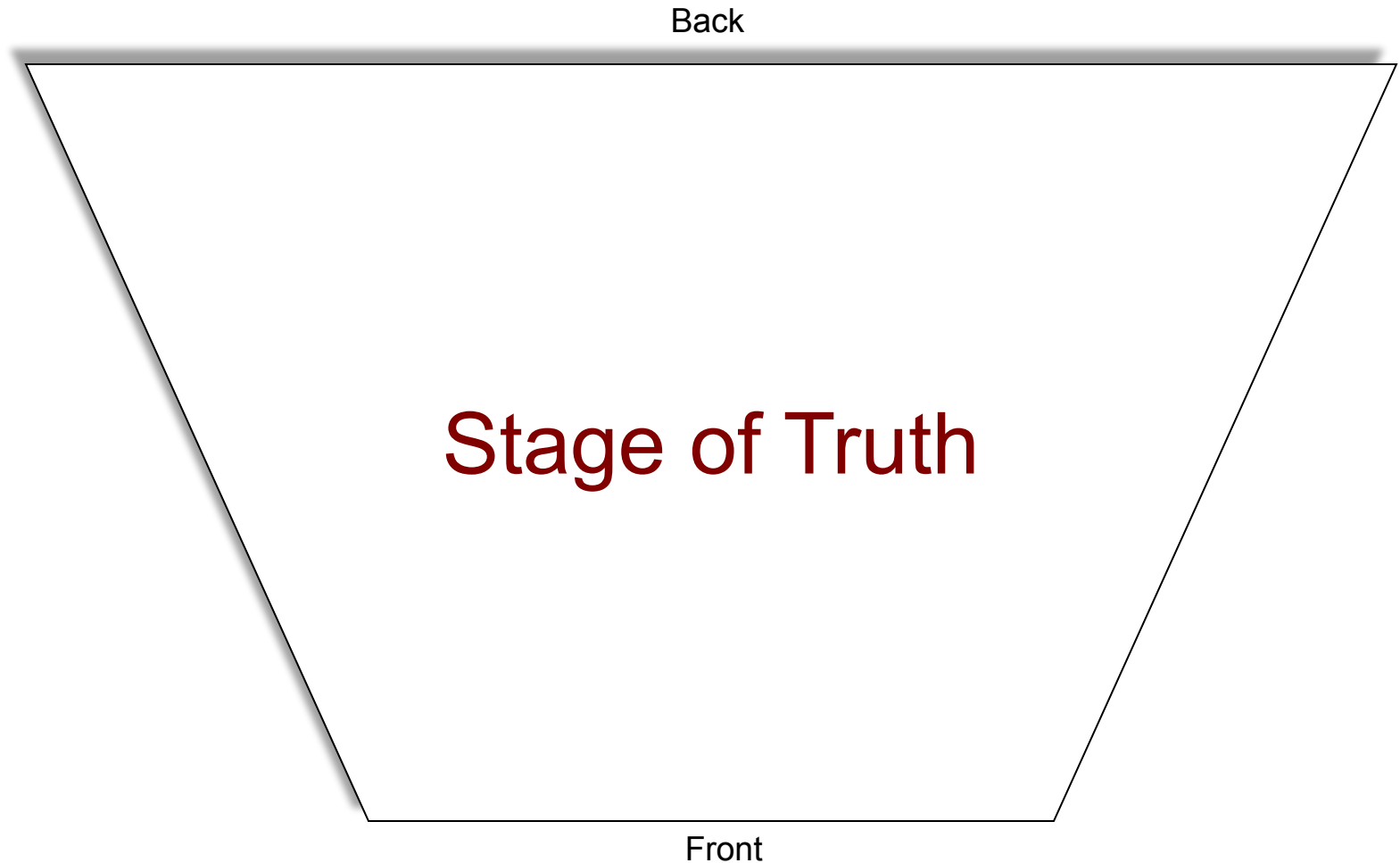
1. Premodern (400-1600 A.D.)
2. Modern (1600-1900 A.D.)
3. Postmodern (1960-present)



# Postmodern Epistemology

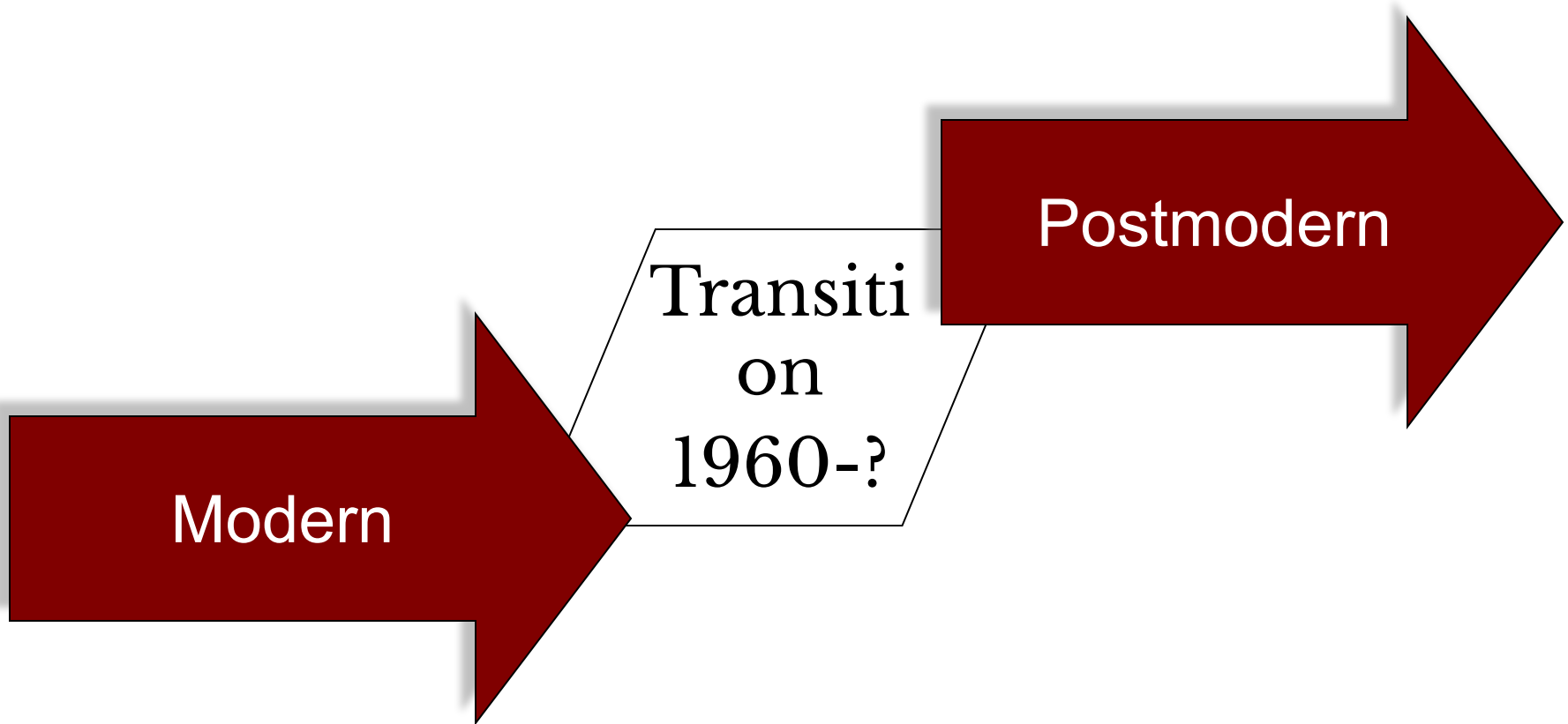


# Postmodern Epistemology





# Postmodern Epistemology



# Postmodern Epistemology

## Modern Generation

- Preboomers
- Boomers

43
%

## Postmodern Generation

- Busters (Gen X)
- Bridgers (Gen Y)

57
%



# Postmodern Epistemology

## Modernism

- Intellectual
- Reason
- Optimism
- Hope for the future
- Objectivism
- Exclusivism
- Science method
- Man is evolving

## Postmodernism

- Anti-intellectual
- Feeling
- Pessimism
- Despair for the present
- Subjectivism/relativism
- Pluralism/inclusivism
- Distrust in science

# Postmodern Epistemology

## The Ideal Modern Man:



- Spock is always logical and objective.
- Never acts upon feeling, because that would be “illogical.”

*“Physical laws simply cannot be ignored. Existence cannot be without them.”*

*“Pain is a thing of the*

# Postmodern Epistemology

## The Ideal Modern Man Mocked:

Data



- Data is the “perfect” modern human.
- Despite his “perfection,” Data . . .
  1. Wants to be human.
  2. Rebels against logic.

# Postmodern Epistemology



- **Premodern:** “There’s balls and there’s strikes, and I call them as they are.”
- **Modern:** “There’s balls and there’s strikes, and I call them as I see them.”
- **Postmodern:** “They ain’t nothing ‘til I call ‘em.”

# Postmodern Epistemology

"In Postmodernism, there is no objective, universal truth; there is only the perspective of the group. . . . In postmodernism, all viewpoints, all lifestyles, all beliefs and behaviors are regarded as equally valid. . . . Tolerance has become so important that no exception is tolerated."

-Charles Colson

*How Now Shall We Live?* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1999), 23



# Discussion Groups

