

Position Paper on Postmodernism

By Michael R. Jones

The term “postmodern” is usually used to refer to architecture or philosophy. While most people do not concern themselves with either, postmodernism as a philosophy or system of thought has influenced each person more than they would admit, or even realize. Every time someone says “That’s true for you but not for me,” they are espousing principles of postmodern thought. When a songwriter says that they never talk about what their songs mean because everyone should interpret them in a way that has the most meaning for them, they are espousing principles of postmodern thought (and by the way, when you agree with them, you, too, are thinking like a postmodern).

Whereas in the past truth was regarded as something independent of any given individual, and thus something that can be known or determined objectively, postmodernism has instead insisted that truth is something to be determined individually, according to my own understanding, independent of context, history, or intent. Following this, I may read a book and value it by inserting my own views in place of the original author’s, since what the author intended to say is irrelevant; all that matters is my perspective on the text.

While this may sound absurd, this is what postmodernism proposes as the proper understanding of the world. Authorial intent cannot be recovered, and it doesn’t need to be because it is irrelevant anyway. Language is inadequate to accurately describe the world and there is no correspondence between an object and the word that refers to it. Language is subjective; it only has meaning to the one using it. Once a word or statement is spoken, its original intent is lost and now may be appropriated by whomever in whatever manner they choose because meaning is not inherent in any text, object, circumstance, or fact; all that matters is one’s own individual perspective on it.

This view originated in literary theory but it obviously has enormous implications for various fields, some of which are crucial to everyday life. While this way of thinking has been applied to literature and history, imagine if one applied it to science or law; chaos would ensue as laws would have meaning only as one chose to interpret them. Everyday life would be like the story of the woman who was told by the police officer to stop swimming in the lake at the park. He referenced the sign that read, “No swimming allowed.” She replied, “I thought it said, ‘No, swimming allowed.’” Imagine, however, if she simply told the officer that what she was doing was not swimming because to her “swimming” meant something other than immersing oneself in water and moving one’s arms and legs in purposeful motion to propel one’s body through the water. Under the modern view, the woman would go to jail because her definition of swimming doesn’t matter as much as the intention of the one who wrote the sign. Under the postmodern view, the woman would have a valid point because to her “swimming” does mean something different. As absurd as all this sounds (and it is a bit oversimplified), that is what many thinkers have already done to art, history, and literature and more and more thinkers, and even everyday people, are applying these same principles to religion.

This view, however, is absurd in that it cannot be lived out. One cannot go through life refusing to acknowledge or seek authorial intent or interpreting events, circumstances, or objects independent of their historical or social contexts. If your boss sends you a memo that you don’t understand, it will not do simply to interpret it as you wish and then work along the lines of your own interpretation. A reasonable person would seek out their boss and ask exactly what the meaning of the memo is so that their next review does not reflect poor performance. This is true

of your next trip to the doctor, your next speeding ticket, and the instructions you give your children about their chores.

Even the philosopher regarded as one of the primary movers in postmodern philosophy, Jacques Derrida himself, demonstrates the foolishness of trying to live in such a manner. Derrida, perhaps the most popular postmodern thinker, is the one who popularized deconstructionism, the denial that words have meaning in and of themselves and so one can determine meaning simply by reading the words. And yet, when John Searle published an eleven-page response to Derrida in which he criticized some of Derrida's thoughts, Derrida responded with a 93-page article in which he claimed not only that Searle misunderstood him, but also asserted that his meaning should have been clear. Even some of Derrida's own followers were apparently embarrassed by the obvious disconnect between Derrida's thought and his actions.¹ Derrida the philosopher may desire to deconstruct statements, but Derrida the human being could not have acted any other way since it is foolish to live as if all expressions are objectively meaningless and truth is arbitrary and subjective.

Derrida's deconstruction was taken a step further by another thinker, Michael Foucault. Foucault added a moral element to the mix by claiming that interpretations of existence are put forth by those in power.² Thus, he believes, those who make moral claims are imposing an interpretation on existence, which can have no objective interpretation. This, of course, is a wonderful way to justify one's own misbehavior.³

This moral aspect of postmodernism cannot and must not be overlooked when evaluating it from a Christian perspective as it flows logically from the relativistic nature of postmodernism. If there is no objective truth, then there is no objective standard of morality or of religious truth. Thus the ultimate end of postmodern thinking with regard to religion is a religious pluralism that places all religions and religious claims on the same level and denies objective truth to all of them. This, of course, poses no problem to them because the objective truth of religious claims is irrelevant to postmoderns, what matters is what one thinks or feels about such claims. This some postmoderns have realized and assert, denying especially the doctrine of the Incarnation because it leads to Christian exclusivism.⁴ This pluralism is itself a claim to truth, but since it cannot be verified, because truth cannot be known objectively, it must be believed on the basis of faith.⁵

The church is viewed by postmoderns as part of the old modern order which has not yet caught up to the postmodern era. Some within the Christian community have sought to minister to postmoderns by understanding the way postmoderns think and altering traditional forms of worship, evangelism, and apologetics in an attempt to reach postmoderns. These proponents of "the emerging church," as they call it, have the best of intentions and seek to change the method, not the message. Many are concerned, however, that once the methods of scriptural ministry change, the message will change along with them either by default or through slippage. The

¹ This account is related in Millard Erickson, *Postmodernizing the Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 156.

² Stanley Grenz, "Star Trek and the Next Generation: Postmodernism and the Future of Evangelical Theology," in *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, second edition, David S. Dockery ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), 79. *The Challenge of Postmodernism* will hereafter be *TCOP*.

³ This is something Foucault was apparently trying to do. R. Albert Mohler, Jr., "The Integrity of the Evangelical Tradition and the Challenge of the Postmodern Paradigm" in *TCOP*, 59; see also note 26 on page 72.

⁴ For example John Hicks in Gary Phillips, "Religious Pluralism in a Postmodern World," in *TCOP*, 135; see also note 24 on page 142.

⁵ Zane C. Hodges, "Post-Evangelicalism Confronts the Postmodern Age: A Review of *The Challenge of Postmodernism*," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 9:1 (Spring 1996): 8.

emerging church's emphasis on community, fellowship, and faith is commendable, but they come perilously close at times to changing what are undoubtedly fundamental concepts and methods of Christian ministry.

For example, postmodern ministry minimizes preaching because preaching seems to imply not only authority, but also the expression of objective, foundational truths. While to many this doesn't seem like a bad thing, but postmoderns, emerging church leaders tell us, don't like that. Instead they propose not explaining every aspect of Christian teaching and leaving some of the mystery so that people can appreciate the wonder of God.⁶ They instead emphasize dialogue and personal testimony. This is such a fundamental change in Christian ministry and worship that one must ask how far a change like this can go before a session such as this can no longer be called worship.

For the most part, though, the emerging church is emphasizing things that certainly do speak to where postmoderns find themselves. If methods of the postmodern, emerging church can be reigned in and correlated to the Scriptural model then the church may find it easier to contact and minister those with a postmodern mindset. If preachers would do less lecturing and be more personable in their preaching delivery, perhaps postmoderns would feel more at home. Perhaps rather than delivering exegetical or philosophical lectures, the preacher could use his exegesis and theology to speak to the heart and to move to action,⁷ the postmodern and others may see the relevancy of the Christian faith. If churches emphasize community they are certainly not violating Scripture since Acts 2:42 makes clear that community was a central and vital part of the life of the early church, then perhaps postmoderns and other would feel more at home and stop viewing the church as an outdated institution.

The difficulty is in keeping the methods firmly in hand so that the message of Christianity may be preserved. As far as the content of preaching and teaching, fellowship, and defense of the faith are concerned, the church cannot surrender a belief in objective truth and must avoid the temptation to make the Scriptures relative or to admit pluralistic views of salvation to creep in. At the heart of postmodernism is the denial of absolute, objective truth, and this kind of truth is essential to Christianity. Without this truth the Bible is irrelevant because it has no meaning except what I give it, should I choose to give it any. There would be no such thing as sin because any moral code is something imposed upon existence. There would be no salvation because that presupposes one truth, rather than one among many. And none of these would really matter because there would be no God except the god I choose to fashion after my own imagination. Zane Hodges sums up these concerns admirably when he concludes:

Sadly missing [...] is any clear-cut insistence that the truth-claims of Christianity include an emphasis on what our Lord called the "narrow gate" to eternal life (Matt 7:13). That is to say, there is only one way of salvation: by faith alone in Christ alone. If modern evangelicalism embraces the view that there is considerable latitude possible in expressing the Gospel to a postmodern world, it will be exposing its own inherent doubts about the possibility of knowing the biblical Gospel in its exactitude. By so much, it will then deserve to be called *post-evangelicalism*.⁸

⁶ Eric Moore, "Postmodernism," unpublished notes for TH 461, Contemporary Issues in Church and Society (Plymouth, MI: Michigan Theological Seminary, 2005), 15.

⁷ Moore, 15.

⁸ Hodges, 13.

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For Further Reading

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NOTE: this book is written from a postmodern, emerging church perspective.

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