

A strange postmodern world

by Steve Cornell

Effective ministry requires cultural awareness. We must understand the cultural contexts of our ministries. We need to understand the underlying ways people think and especially the way people view truth and reality. Missionaries sent to foreign cultures have consistently recognized this need. Yet for many years those who remained in western cultures did not place as much emphasis on cultural awareness. They assumed they understood their culture. But times have changed. Fairly recent and significant shifts in the way people view truth and reality have required greater cultural understanding. Many have identified the shift as movement from a modern to a postmodern culture. But is this shift as significant as some suggest? And, if it is, what is at the heart of it?

In his book, *The Ruins of the Church: Sustaining Faith in an age of Diminished Christianity*, R. R. Reno wisely recommended, "If we care about evangelism, then surely we need to get our bearings in this strange postmodern world. If we wish to preach and teach effectively, then we must be clear about where the sharp and double-edged sword of the gospel cuts into the spirit of the age. This is especially important because our churches are awash with disorienting analysis. Some are eager to convince us that our sophisticated scientific culture just cannot accept the simplistic mythological worldview of traditional Christianity. Others are certain that the new global communication makes us so aware of cultural and religious diversity that the traditional exclusivist claims of Christianity are untenable. Still others drink deeply at the well of literary theory and in an intoxicated reverie announce that old ideas of meaning and truth have been transcended. Most however, offer a straight forward assessment: our postmodern world is so very, very, complex that the traditional forms of Christian preaching and teaching must be updated and revised" (From: *Mars Hill Audio Resource*, "Postmodern Irony and Petronian Humanism," www.marshillaudio.org, p.1).

Admittedly, there is widespread misunderstanding and disagreement about the label 'postmodern'. In his article, *The Dangers & Delights of Postmodernism*, D. A. Carson wrote, "The meaning of postmodernism is not transparent. Moreover, its range of application (it has been applied to literature, art, communication theory, architecture, epistemology, jurisprudence, the philosophy of science, and more) means that its associations for one person may be very different from its associations for someone else. (From: *Modern Reformation Magazine*, 2003, July / August Issue, Vol. 12.4).

In his book, *The Way of the (modern) world Or, why It's tempting to Live as if God doesn't Exist*, Craig M. Gay, observed that, "There is very little agreement as yet as to what 'postmodernity' means. While the term occasionally simply denotes dissatisfaction with modernity, it is increasingly used to suggest that we have entered into an entirely new cultural situation in which none of the old 'modern' rules and habits of mind need be taken seriously anymore. All such suggestions are mistaken and misleading. ...the ideals of the modern project are still very firmly embedded in the central institutional realities of contemporary society. Although modernity may well be passé in certain intellectual circles, typically modern ideas and assumptions are still quite effectively communicated within contemporary culture by many of the institutional realities that surround us and by many of the ways we do things today. Postmodernity represents only a kind of extension of modernity, a kind of 'hyper-modernity'" (pp.17-18).

Along similar lines, British sociologist Anthony Giddens suggested that, “rather than entering a period of post-modernity, we are moving into one in which the consequences of modernity are becoming more radicalized and universalized than before” (*The Consequences of Modernity*, p. 3). Accordingly, it could be said that we are living in most-modern times instead of post-modern.

Whatever label one chooses, western culture in particular has experienced some significant changes that effect gospel ministry. For the purpose of this article, these changes will be explored in relation to modernity.

Understanding the shift: pre-modern to modern to post-modern

1. Pre-modern: Religion is the source of truth and reality (God’s existence, attributes and revelation were givens in the culture)
2. Modern: Science is the source for truth and reality (religion and morality are moved to the subjective realm)
3. Postmodern: There is no single defining source for truth and reality beyond the individual—not even science or history.

Modernism brought relativism and individualism into the realm of religion and morality. Science (and to a degree, history) remained bastions of objectivity. Postmodernism radicalized relativism and individualism and applied it to all spheres of knowing—even science. In relation to this shift, a mood change has settled into western culture.

A mood change: from optimism to pessimism

Postmodernity has brought with it a shift from human optimism (based on scientific certainty and technological progress), to a pessimistic mood of skepticism, uncertainty and even angst. The people who fill our Churches have been affected by this shift---especially the young people. The postmodern mood is basically one of disbelief.

Contrasting modern and postmodern

The following contrasts between modern and postmodern offer another way to consider the mood change.

- Modernity was confident.
Postmodernity is anxious.
- Modernity had all the answers.
Postmodernity is full of questions.
- Modernity reveled in reason, science and human ability.
Postmodernity wallows (with apparent contentment or nihilistic angst) in mysticism, relativism, and the incapacity to know anything with certainty. (Graham Johnston, “Preaching to a Postmodern World” Baker, 2001)

Postmoderns on truth and reality

Postmodernity rejects individual autonomy, universal reason and absolute truth. Truth (under postmodernity) is completely perspectival and situational. History, social class, gender, culture, and religion all control the way we understand truth and reality. They shape the narratives and meanings of our lives as culturally embedded, localized social constructions without any universal application. Claims of universal meaning are viewed as efforts to marginalize and oppress the rights of others.

The most important value of postmodernity is the inadmissibility of all totalizing ways of viewing any dimension of life. Postmodernity, as a theory, refuses to allow any single defining source for truth and reality.

Kevin Vanhoozer illustrates the way postmoderns understand reality: “We do not simply look at a rose and evaluate its *intrinsic* beauty, fragrance and design, we consider ourselves as we look at the rose. The temptation is to think that the color of the rose is a product of our optical nerve, and its scent of our noses, so that in the end there is no rose left.” (emphasis mine) (pp. 75-76, *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: six views*, ed., Myron B. Penner).

Challenge to gospel ministry

Applying this shift to gospel ministry, D. A. Carson wrote, “Initially, the removal of transcendent truth or values led to a restlessness that was seized for the gospel. Now, the restlessness is moving toward a carefree attitude. Postmoderns seem to have a striking capacity to endure groundlessness and incoherence calmly –to live as ironists with equanimity.” (From: *Telling the Truth*, ed., D. A. Carson, p. 86).

Kevin Vanhoozer believes that many of the people we desire to reach with the gospel “reject unifying, totalizing, and universal schemes in favor of a new emphasis on difference, plurality, fragmentation and complexity. Postmoderns are suspicious of truth claims, of ‘getting it right.’” (*The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*).

The ethic of pluralistic civility is the social expectation. Tolerance is required of all. Lessons on good arguments and detecting error are unnecessary. Those who promote such things are suspected of imperialistic motives aimed at oppressing the weak and less fortunate.

R. R. Reno, perceptively observed the spirit of this age when he wrote, “Anxieties about the closed circuit of dogma, the exhausting weight of tradition, and the crushing force of institutional authority lead our postmodern culture to the extreme of denying the authority of truth itself.” (Ibid. p. 5)

Elements of absurdity in postmodernity

Although people entrenched in a postmodern outlook *profess* to care little about consistency, it is wise to expose the significant logical inconsistencies in postmodern theory. Consider the following:

- Postmodernity is the worldview that says no worldview exists.
- Postmodernity is an anti-theory that uses theoretical tools to neutralize all theories.
- Postmodernity demands an imposed uniformity in an effort to resist uniformity.
- Postmoderns often use propositional statements to negate truth based on propositional statements.

Discovering and exposing these kinds of logical contradiction often invites the postmodern smirk that says—“poor soul, you are so bound by modernity.” It is perhaps best to express these concerns as sincere questions. Our goal in evangelism is never to win an argument. It is always to lead a person to truth and freedom.

Effective ministry requires us to see through and gently expose the smokescreens people use to avoid truth. Many years ago, Blaise Pascal described what we observe in people today, “Being unable to cure death, wretchedness and ignorance, men have decided, in order to be happy, not to think about such things.” The gospel, however, calls us to think about these things and to turn from death to life.

Postmodernity: A benefit and a danger

“The introduction of postmodernity has proved of some benefit to Christian faith. The Enlightenment sought to relegate matters of faith to the rear of the bus as either insignificant or nonexistent. Postmodernity returns value to faith and affirms the nurturing of our spiritual being as vital to humankind. Unfortunately, with the loss of truth, people will now seek faith without boundaries, categories, or definition. The old parameters of belief do not exist. As a result, people will be increasingly open to knowing God, but on their own terms.” (*Preaching to a Postmodern World*,” Graham Johnston, p.31).

“The willing conformity that characterizes so much postmodern life can give the evangelist hope that the prideful self-sufficiency of modernity has finally exhausted itself. These are, however, deceptions made possible by a fixation on pride as the primary barrier to faith. Sloth and cowardice in reality are just as deadly. Both slink away from the urgency of conviction. Both fear the sharp edge of demand and expectation. Both have a vested interest in cynicism, irony and outward conformity. These vices, not pride, now dominate our culture.” (R. R. Reno, *Ibid*, p. 8).

Conclusion

Understanding the shift to postmodernity will become increasingly important for those called to minister in Western culture. In changing times, we must be willing to make changes in the way we do evangelism and ministry. But we must never make concessions to postmodernity that compromise the integrity of the gospel or diminish Scripture as the authoritative, univocal divine revelation for humanity. Any moderation of the demands of the gospel to accommodate the postmodern spirit will drain it of the power of God unto salvation. If the gospel is held hostage to the restrictions of postmodernity, it ceases to be the good news that humans so desperately need.

Eight truths for postmodern times

1. We are all sinners who receive the penalty of death (Romans 3:10, 23; 5:12)
2. God has demonstrated His love for all (John 3:16; Romans 5:8).
3. God desires salvation for all (I Timothy 2:3-4; II Peter 3:9).
4. God has made provision for salvation (I Timothy 2:5-6; 4:9-10; Titus 2:11; I John 2:2).
5. God commands all people to repent (Acts 17:30).
6. God will hold all accountable for their response to His provision (Romans 2:4-11; 14:11; Acts 17:31).
7. God takes no pleasure in the rejection of His provision (Ezekiel 18:23,32).
8. God will save all who place faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (John 3:16; 11:26; Romans 10:13).

Steven W. Cornell
Senior pastor
Millersville Bible Church
Millersville, Pa 17551
717-872-4260
www.millersvillebiblechurch.org

More resources on postmodernity

1. *Preaching to a Postmodern World*, Graham Johnston, Baker, 2001
2. *That's Just YOUR Interpretation: Responding to skeptics who challenge your faith*, Paul Copan, Baker, 2001
3. *The Truth about Tolerance: Pluralism, Diversity, and the culture wars*, Brad Stetson, Joseph G. Conti, IVP, 2005
4. *Talking about Good and Bad without getting Ugly: A guide to moral persuasion*, Paul Chamberlain, IVP, 2005
5. *Naming the Elephant: Worldview as a concept*, James W. Sire, IVP, 2004
6. *Engaging God's World: A Christian vision of Faith, Learning and Living*, Cornelius Plantinga Jr. Eerdmans, 2002
7. *The Way of the (modern) world Or, why It's tempting to Live as if God doesn't Exist*, Craig M. Gay, Eerdmans, 1998
8. *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern times*, ed. Millard Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, Justin Taylor Crossway, 2004
9. *Postmodernizing the Faith: Evangelical Responses to the Challenge of postmodernism*, Millard Erickson, Baker, 1998
10. *Truth or Consequences: The promise and perils of postmodernism*, Millard Erickson, IVP, 2001
11. *The Gaggling of God: Christianity confronts pluralism*, D. A. Carson, Zondervan, 1996.
12. *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity against the Challenges of Postmodernism*, Douglas Grouthuis, IVP, 2000
13. *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge of Christian faith and mission*, Harold Netland, IVP, 2001
14. *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Cambridge, 2003

