What Does Postmodern Mean?

We live in a postmodern world. Or, so we are told. But what does this mean? Basically, postmodern is a word used to describe major changes in the underlying ways people think—especially the way people view truth and reality.

Postmodern is a term of contrast. It implies modern. But before we lived in a modern era, the world was considered pre-modern. It helps to consider the main differences in these eras. The pre-modern era was one in which religion was the source of truth and reality. During this era, God’s existence and revelation were givens in the culture. In the modern era, science became the source for truth and reality. During this period, religion and morality were arbitrarily demoted to the subjective realm. In the present, postmodern era, there is no single defining source for truth and reality beyond the individual.

Postmodernism simply radicalized relativism and individualism and then applied them to all spheres of knowledge—even science. In a postmodern world, truth and reality are individually shaped by personal history, social class, gender, culture, and religion. These factors, according to postmodern thinking, combine to shape the narratives and meanings of our lives as culturally embedded, localized social constructions without any universal application.

Postmoderns are suspicious of those who make universal truth claims. All claims of universal meaning are viewed as imperialistic 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 worldview, refuses to allow any single defining source for truth and reality. The new emphasis is on difference, plurality and selective forms of tolerance. Postmodern thinking is full of absurdities and inconsistencies. It is, for example, the worldview that says no worldview exists. It is an anti-theory that uses theoretical tools to neutralize all theories. It demands an imposed uniformity in an effort to resist uniformity. It employs propositional statements to negate truth based on propositional statements.

Postmodern concern for plurality, diversity and tolerance have not led to a more stable and secure society. Instead, the postmodern era exchanged one misguided mood for another. Postmodernity was fueled by a shift from the human optimism of modernity (based on scientific certainty and technological progress), to a pessimistic mood of skepticism and uncertainty. One observer noted that, “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.”

This mood change was fueled by the devastation and disappointments of two world wars. Philosophies of despair and nihilistic existentialism became popular fare throughout Europe. These philosophies would later provide the ideological framework for the rejection of authority and institutionalism in America.

During the 1960’s and 70’s, the prevailing attitudes against authority, institution and establishment produced overwhelmingly negative effects on our nation. It was during this same
period that we experienced a massive societal shift away from the institution of marriage and family. This involved alarming increases in divorce rates and the widespread acceptance of co-habitation.

As a result of these changes, pastors, counselors, psychologists, psychiatrists and therapists are stretched to the limit as they try to help overwhelming numbers of people pick up the broken pieces of their lives and become whole again. Yet many of these helpers are equally lost because they accept the postmodern lie.

What is the lie? It is the wholesale rejection of universal reason and absolute truth. It is the delusional mindset that there is no objective goodness and rightness. These prevailing opinions have led to the dismissal of an absolute deity. Don’t misunderstand; God is warmly welcomed in the postmodern world as long as he doesn’t try to play God.

“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.” (Graham Johnston).

Yet the true and living God will not be defined by finite creatures. While postmodern guru-philosophers like Richard Rorty have tried to write the obituary of the “God’s eye view of the world,” the Creator of the universe still determines the standard of truth, goodness and beauty.