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I Don't Think We're in Kansas Anymore, Toto! Postmodernism in Our Everyday Lives

by Dennis L. Okholm

Like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, some in the church feel as if they have been spun around in a cultural tornado that has left them so disoriented that about all they can do is echo her puzzlement: "I don't think we're in Kansas anymore, Toto!" The term "postmodernism" is often used to denote the new state in which we find ourselves. And while it occurs in our everyday speech more often than the state name "North Dakota," it was not that long ago that its use was confined to a relatively small group of continental philosophers. In fact, the first time I recall seeing it in popular print was in an advertisement to describe the movie *Pulp Fiction*.

Still, the term has been around for some time. Though its origins are debated, it appears as early as the 1930s. But the consensus seems to be that its current use began in the 1970s.¹ Even so, there is no one definition of the term, which is actually quite postmodern in itself.² We will use it here to refer to a cultural phenomenon that has discernible features. We are going to paint with a wide brush and swipe with broad strokes, but we should finish with a fairly good understanding of the state in which the church's house has landed.

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The "Modern" in Postmodernism

If nothing else, postmodernism refers to the fact that we are no longer in the Kansas of modernity anymore. That means we must first understand something of "modernity" if we are going to get a handle on postmodernity.

Modernism takes us back to the Enlightenment, lodged primarily in the eighteenth century, but stretching from seventeenth-century Descartes through Kant to Hegel and the Romantics in the nineteenth century.

This period followed the premodern period of "superstition," blood fanaticism, and religious wars, all based on the excesses and prejudicial commitments of particular religious traditions (such as various forms of Protestantism and Roman Catholicism). Folks like Descartes and Kant attempted to establish culture and life on a universal objective foundation that is beyond dispute, that all human beings can agree on, and that gives us some certainty about truth and reality. Only then can we live in peace and make progress as the dignified humans we are.

Table of Contents

"I Don't Think We're in Kansas Anymore, Toto!"	p. 1
"Doubtful Disciples"	p. 7
"Postmodernism: A Declaration of Bankruptcy" p. 9	
Study of the Book of Revelation	p.14

In the modern project one does not need to rely on particular religious traditions and specific historic communities to know the truth. The human individual's reason can know the ultimate reality and absolute truth that transcends all cultures, all times, and all places. They are just there waiting to be discovered. Such confidence is enshrined in our Constitution's familiar line: "We hold these truths to be *self-evident* that all men are created equal." Through confidence in Reason (not just an individual's rational capacity, but a universal rationality which we all share) humans can understand the cosmos, establish social peace, and improve living conditions.

Behind this confidence lay a relationship between the individual human person and the universe that was put forth by Galileo, Descartes, and others—namely, there is the thinking human on the one hand and the non-thinking, machine-like universe outside of the human, waiting to be known by objective observation and pliable to human technology.

Except for a rationalistic deistic unitarianism, confessional religion was relegated to the private world, since it was thought to be a matter of opinion or tradition.³ Deism was thought to be a religion to which all reasonable folks could and should subscribe: it required only belief in a creator who set in motion a machine of a universe, programmed with moral instructions accessible to the thinking person, for which he would be held accountable in some afterlife. Miracles were not needed; the machine worked quite nicely on its own, and, in any case, no rational person could take seriously the miracles recorded in the Bible. A child of such Enlightenment thinking, Thomas Jefferson clipped stories of Jesus' miracles from his copy of the gospel accounts, but lauded Christ's moral teachings.

The "Post" in Postmodernism

Until recently, the modernist agenda held sway in the West, with only minor disruptions from time to time. But a new paradigm had been brewing a "postmodernism" dominated popular culture.

No longer is truth "out there" waiting to be discovered. All knowledge is system-dependent and culturally bound. There is no neutral, timeless, self-evident foundational truth available to anyone or that gives us absolute certainty about anything. The Augustinian dictum "All truth is God's truth" has come to mean "Everybody's truth is God's truth." It all depends on how one looks at it. As scholars ranging from Thomas Kuhn to Parker Palmer to Lesslie Newbigin point out, even the scientist is not some neutral intellect unlocking secrets from the stuff she studies; she brings a certain perspective with her to her studies which colors her interpretation and even her observation of the data.⁴

Not only has reason been demoted from its role as the unbiased discoverer of objective truth, it turns out that it is not all it was cracked up to be. Enlightened reason and the knowledge it brought is not an uncompromised good. Wars

have *not* stopped, and knowledge of the atom allows us to cook not only our food, but also whole cities.

What we are left with is reason that is molded by its social location. How and what human beings know is affected by their ethnicity, gender, socio-economic group, and so on. Furthermore, the postmodern regards as naive the Galileo/Cartesian depiction of the knower who stands aloof from the object of knowledge which she is observing. Knowledge comes through a relationship with the object of knowledge, whether the object is a person or molecules.⁵ The knower should also be fully engaged; that is, knowledge comes through holistic means—not just through reason, but also through emotions, intuition, embodiment.

A good example of this occurred one evening as my wife and I visited our son's high school classes on the annual "curriculum night." In his math class the teacher wrote a problem on the board and asked the parents to solve it. Those who got the answer right were asked how they arrived at the answer. When he came to one woman, she responded, "It just *felt* right."

What contributed to this shift? There are *intellectual* factors. Individuals and schools of thought in philosophy and literary criticism account for some of the genesis of what is now popularly described as postmodernism. The influences of past thinkers such as Nietzsche and Freud must be considered. But more to the point are Jean-François Lyotard, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Richard Rorty, and Stanley Fish. As a school, deconstructionism (a strategy of reexamining the presuppositions of a text in order to uncover contradictions and confusions inherent in the text) is also important. Some of this reading is rough going for the novice, but there are some handy summaries.⁶

Cultural factors cannot be ignored. For example, the technological revolution we have experienced in the twentieth century has shrunk the world but expanded our awareness. It was rare for someone from the U.S. to have travelled to an African or Asian country where life and thought radically differed; today it takes only hours on a comfortable jet to find oneself disoriented in Khartoum or Delhi.⁷ Add to this the information explosion through an electronic web that is world wide. The world that felt so comfortable, so manageable, is now overwhelming and often unfamiliar. Perhaps this in part accounts for the rapid cultural change we seem to experience. Enlightenment universal acultural reason begins to look quaint at best, an illusion at worst.

Perhaps the most profound cultural change is the proliferation of choice. The paradigmatic icon of choice is the VCR. Once the television set forced unification: we had to watch what all others wanted to watch at the time the networks determined at their speed and with their accompanying commercials. Now one can watch what she wants to watch while everyone else can still watch the competing program, and she can watch it when she wants and at any speed she desires, with or without commercials. But the VCR is not the only icon of choice. Again, there is

one's personal involvement with the Web. Cable proliferates. Perhaps most revealing is the grocery store: in 1976 the average American supermarket carried 9000 items, whereas in 1996 it carried 30,000 items; the cereal aisle alone is enough proof.⁸ This proliferation of choice led Alan Ehrenhalt to lament:

Too many of the things we do in our lives, large and small, have come to resemble channel surfing, marked by a numbing and seemingly endless progression from one option to the next, all without the benefit of a chart, logistical or moral, because there are simply too many choices and no one to help sort them out. We have nothing to insulate ourselves against the perpetual temptation to try one more choice, rather than to live with what is on the screen in front of us.⁹

The shift to a postmodern paradigm has been made easier in the U.S. by the *breakdown of a Constantinian alliance* between the culture and Christianity. The Christian paradigm is no longer the prevailing religious or moral view in the United States today, and it probably will never be again. This is obvious. In the 1950s it was American to be “Christian” and “Christian” to be American. As I drove by the grounds of a vocational school last December I noticed the huge sign that wished the passers-by “Happy Holidays.” It occurred to me that a few decades ago that sign would have read “Merry Christmas.”

For these factors and more, modernity's claim to ground life in universally accessible and defensible common knowledge turns out to be illusory. Subscription to a universal rational point of view, a universal morality, and a universal religious truth has expired. What is left? To answer that, we turn to a description of the postmodern state in which we have landed.

Crucial Characteristics of Postmodernism in Everyday Life

1. The rejection of a “master narrative”

The dismissal of a universal acultural point of view means that for postmodernism there are no master narratives; there are no metanarratives that define reality or history for all people at all times. Instead, we celebrate centerlessness, diversity, choice. To claim there is a master narrative is seen as oppressive.

Because of a book I had co-edited entitled *More Than One Way?*, I was invited to be a guest on an evening talk show in the Chicago area. With me were a Jewish rabbi, a Muslim imam, and a Catholic theologian. The question of the evening was “Who gets into heaven and why?” At the end of the first half-hour, the Jewish host asked me if, based on John 14:6, I thought that he, the rabbi, and the Muslim were going to be in heaven. After twice protesting that it was not my place to be the judge, I was pressed until I had to admit that it was only through Jesus Christ that a person is saved. The rabbi turned on me, incredulous that in the 1990s anyone would hold such a view, particularly in light of the Holocaust. For him, my insistence on a metanarrative—a normative reading of salvation history—

was an oppressive view of Holocaust proportions. For the next hour and a half I was seen as the oppressor and he was the victim.

Lesslie Newbigin is right when, using sociologist Peter Berger's categories, he states that the only “plausibility structure” in place today is the insistence that there is no socially accepted plausibility structure. And the one who says otherwise is a “heretic.”¹⁰

2. The authority of the self

In place of a master narrative is the authority of the autonomous self.¹¹ The self is the source of truth and reality. Nothing else should interfere. As Roger Lundin points out, we live in “an age that believes that freedom will make you true.”¹² All selves are autonomous. Our world is a fragmented, chaotic, arbitrary amalgamation of multiple selves. Gone is the Enlightenment's claim that there is a universal human nature, a universal humanity, a universal self.

If each self is autonomous to construct its own reality and truth, then we must respect others who define themselves. In postmodernism there is an acute awareness of the “other.” Again, this is a consequence of the fact that there is no metanarrative, no universal way of interpreting things. Each December equal respect must be paid to Hanukkah, Christmas, and Kwanza. And so we live by the dictum of “political correctness” and use “pc language,” all buttressed by the supreme virtues of niceness and civility. All selves have an equal voice and, more importantly, all are considered equally valid. As Derrida has suggested, the primary form of postmodern discourse is the collage.

3. The power of language

There is, then, no one way of looking at anything. Our lives together are fragmented into a plurality of views. Meaning and truth are not “out there” waiting to be discovered; they are social constructions created by groups that share a common tradition or perspective—collectives of like-minded selves. But some of these groups manage to gain a privileged status, silencing or marginalizing the views of others and insisting that their interpretation of reality and truth is the only true one. This is the oppressiveness we have mentioned above, and, as we have pointed out, postmodernism insists that a master narrative is really just one of many equally valid interpretations of reality. In fact, there are many realities—as many as there are perceptions. Even concepts such as “rational” and “justice” are up for grabs. Those who pretentiously define the terms for everyone else are the “victors.” Postmodernism claims that the entire cultural and social history of the “victims” is ignored, denied, or brought into line with the dominant narrative of the victor. The victim is, therefore, implicitly labeled by the victor a deviant or simply wrong. So knowledge of reality is not the discovery of what is waiting to be grasped in the same way by everyone. In the most radical senses of postmodernism, reality has to do with who has the power. For example, do we call what gestates in the womb of a pregnant woman a “fetus” or a “baby”? Is the termination of the pregnancy

“abortion” or “murder”? Thus we learn to appreciate the power of language.

We create reality with words that we use for pragmatic purposes. Language and symbols do not represent truth. Language is used to tell stories that rearrange information to describe whatever reality a person or group is constructing. Richard Rorty put it this way: “Anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed.”

4. The construction of reality

Now it should be obvious that what is perhaps most characteristic of postmodernism is its emphasis on the social construction of reality. This is poignantly portrayed in Woody Allen’s *Bullets Over Broadway*. Several times in the movie scriptwriters insist, “An artist creates his own moral universe.” The trouble is that the artist must then learn to live by the rules of the moral universe he has created. The protagonist in the movie—a young scriptwriter who has sold out to a gangster-turned-producer and his “leading lady” girlfriend who cannot act—becomes entangled in a moral universe he creates in hopes of reversing his artistic failures. After compromising his craft, ruining his relationship with his steady, and learning of the homicidal elimination of the artistically-challenged gangster’s girlfriend, he finally rejects the fabricated moral universe and submits to the one that he found himself thrust into all along. In a final scene of reconciliation with his original girlfriend he admits: “I know two things: I’m not an artist, and I love you. Now I’m free.”

But one’s own construction of reality is not always rejected in the end. In the Italian film *Big Night*, after two brothers realize that their supposed friend, neighbor, and competing restaurateur has ruined their business with a ruse, the competitor defiantly announces, “I am a businessman. I can be anything I want to be at any time.” And in *Star Trek: The Generations*, where virtual reality turns a spaceship hurling through the galaxy into a tall ship sailing through the high seas, there is no moral responsibility in the end: Captain Kirk can simply go back in time and replay an event in which he acted less than virtuous until he gets it the way he wants it. In the recent movie *Matrix* we witness *both* the computerized construction of reality by machines and the attempt to sabotage such a construction by a small minority of quasi-religious human remnants.

5. The priority of images

In the construction of reality images are important, whether one is courting sympathy in a murder trial, invading an enemy who is as another “Hitler,” slipping in sound bites and irrepressible images in a political campaign, or capturing a family vacation on video tape. The trouble is that in something like the last example one often misses an underlying reality of relationships that is taking place before one’s eyes while trying to get it just right on tape so that it will play well in the family room a year later. That is the essential message in the movie *Reality Bites*: a young woman is so caught up in her attempt to construct a filmed image of her friends’ daily lives and interactions that she

finds herself unaware of the relationships in which she is embroiled with the objects of her movie.

Language and video do not convey what is, but fabricate “what really is.” It is true: when the storm dumps you in some state other than Kansas, perceptions *are* reality. The lines between fantasy and fact begin to be erased. Pretty soon everything becomes a continuous interpretation of (and debate about) words. Words refer to words. Even the word “is” might be up for grabs!

6. The importance of management and therapy

It should come as no surprise that in the postmodern state the important occupations are the manager and the therapist. The pragmatic postmodernist seeks to manage her experience and environment in the interests of a “manipulatable sense of well being.”¹³ The concern is self-improvement and a comfortableness with one’s self over against the ethical ultimates and obligations imposed by “universal truth.” Rabbi Kushner’s book *How Good Do We Have to Be?* assures us that God only expects us to be pretty good. (At least Dennis Rodman is honest. About the same time as the rabbi published his book, Rodman published *Bad As I Wanna Be*. I suggested to my local Border’s that they display the books side-by-side!) Even churches are caught up in the cultural shift. The pastor’s chamber used to be referred to as a “study”; today it is more often called the pastor’s “office.” In fact, many churches have resorted to psychologizing the gospel to meet self-centered, consumer-oriented, media-induced “felt needs.” Proof came in my mailbox one day: relatives sent a church’s Easter-season brochure announcing its offerings. While there was not a single Bible study or prayer group listed, there were courses on managing finances, grief, divorces, medical emergencies, anger, and potty training.

What Should the Church’s Response Be When It’s Blown Out of Kansas?

Christian responses to postmodernism run the gamut. Some insist we should return to the Kansas of modernism and rediscover universal reason and a common reality. Others have settled into the new territory and are getting used to the exilic conditions, adopting postmodernism as their new home. It is probably best to see postmodernism in our everyday lives as both a challenge and an opportunity for the church.

First, the church must realize the shifts have taken place.

Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon indict the contemporary church in their book *Resident Aliens* for blithely carrying on as if modernism and the American-Christian metanarrative were still in place. While the indictment hit closer to home in 1989 when the book came out than it does in the undeniably pluralistic atmosphere we now breathe, there is still a lot of catching up to do in the church. For one of the authors, the shift took place as early as a Sunday evening in 1963, when the Fox Theatre

in Greenville, South Carolina opened for the first time on a Sunday:

On that night, Greenville, South Carolina—the last pocket of resistance to secularity in the Western world—served notice that it would no longer be a prop for the church. There would be no free passes for the church, no more free rides. The Fox Theater went head to head with the church over who would provide the worldview for the young. That night in 1963, the Fox Theater won the opening skirmish.¹⁴

What one critic recently said of a divinity school in Chicago unfortunately applies to many evangelical and conservative churches: “Someone has got to tell them that the Enlightenment is over.”

Second, the church should welcome postmodern’s overthrow of modernism’s confidence in unaided human reason.

The Gospel is not something that can be known by everyone merely through human reason. Paul makes this clear in I Corinthians 1:18-2:16. In the modernist climate of the past it may have been a wise strategy to approach people with rational arguments for the truth of Christianity and its morality, believing that any rational person who was not simply stubborn would accept the Gospel as the only guide to belief and practice. We often defended our beliefs and practices in terms of some publicly acceptable criteria of truth. The trouble was, until postmodernism came along we did not readily recognize the fact that we had made reason the final arbiter of truth and morality. And, along with that, we were so confident in human reason that we assumed we could achieve a rational certainty about Christian beliefs and practice.

An unfortunate side-effect of this was that our articulation of Christian doctrine and our Christian practice looked a lot more like Western reasoning (specifically, U.S.) than Christian reasoning, so that, for example, we reinterpreted the “hard sayings” of Jesus about turning the other cheek and a camel getting through the eye of a needle. Even our idea of the Christian-sanctioned “traditional” family, which we took to be a timeless, acultural paradigm, really turned out to be a concept dictated more by late nineteenth century and early twentieth century industrial America. As Rodney Clapp argues, postmodernism gives the church an opportunity to recover the particular *Christian* understanding of the family.¹⁵

Unlike those in the “Jesus Seminar” who have not yet heard that the Enlightenment is over and still operate as if modernism were the reigning paradigm, postmodernism should help us to realize what has always been true in orthodox Christianity—namely, that the truth of Christianity and its morality is *not* accessible to mere reason. The Christian’s perspective on God, humans, morality, and so forth is dictated by a very distinctive and particular point of view—that of Jesus Christ. The postmodern demotion of reason frees us to echo with the Apostle Paul that spiritual truths are only known by the

spiritually minded; they cannot be known by the natural mind (I Cor 2:14-16). We must therefore take responsibility as the church to live out before a watching world a *distinctive* understanding of what it means to be “rational” and “moral”—an understanding not necessarily shared by all people.

A caution is in order at this point. In accepting postmodernism’s rejection of modernist optimism about reason we cannot slip to the other extreme and abandon all rational scrutiny, seeing Christianity as just one more option among equally valid religions. Many in the postmodern camp would want us to do just that. But the claim that all religions are pointing to the same God and talking about the same salvation is itself an intolerant metanarrative—what Alister McGrath calls an “intellectual Stalinism”:

The days when it was possible to regard Christianity [or any other particular religion] as simply a local manifestation of a universal category of “religion” are long since past, despite the fact that this view is maintained on life-support systems throughout religious study facilities in North America.¹⁶

This came home to me when I sat on a panel at the national headquarters of the Theosophical Society discussing the assigned topic “Many Paths, One Reality” with a Buddhist monk, a Jain, and a Sikh. With a recitation of the Christian story, I attempted to make it clear that we were not talking about the same God (if about any god at all), nor were we talking about the same concept of salvation; in fact, our views were often contradictory (such as the Christian and Buddhist assessment of human suffering). Still, the moderator, who was the Society’s leader, summarized each presenter’s religion with observations of similarities in order to remind the audience that, in the end, we were all speaking about the same reality. (Actually, the moderator was forging an interesting amalgamation of modernist and postmodernist agenda. Though it’s another paper, the case can be made that we in the U.S. still have modernist “hangovers,” such as our belief in progress, coupled with characteristics of our cultural postmodernism.)

So, while we want to avoid either extreme with reference to reason, neither enthroning it and equipping it with universally accessible truths nor dismissing it as if it were merely a social construction, we can appreciate the fact that postmodernism forces us to examine ourselves and ask whether we have construed Christianity in North American white terms. We must listen to other voices, since there is no one human voice as modernism advertised.

Third, the church must learn and teach the metanarrative of Christianity.

Now we have come to the point at which the church cannot compromise with postmodernism. We cannot apologize for the Christian metanarrative claims about God as creator, about humans as fallen in sin, about Christ as the normative revelation of God, about redemption as solely available in Christ, and about the coming renewal of the

creation when the Kingdom of God is a completed reality. In other words, the world does not call the church into question, forcing it to answer the world's agenda; the church calls the world into question with the master narrative of the gospel.¹⁷ We are like the hero in a Walker Percy novel who is always a “bubble and a half off plumb”—we look strange to a world that has become comfortable with itself because we see the world in a different way, in the light of a defining story that embraces all time and all things (Eph 1:3-23).

In part, the church's job is to teach people to understand what they cannot and do not understand through mere human reason or intuition. The incarnation is not only God entering into our world as a *resident*, but entering into it as an *alien*. For example, Jesus spoke in parables to make his teachings clearer *and also* to hide his teachings. If the culture understands everything we do in worship, if the culture can make complete sense of our Christian practice, if the culture can understand our proclamation of a grace that cannot be earned, then we should probably be worried that we have not insisted on our metanarrative enough. The church lives its life and professes its faith in a way incomprehensible apart from the God revealed in Jesus Christ. Our morality does *not* make sense outside of the church and Jesus' vision of life. To the watching and listening world, severed from our master narrative, our actions and words look and sound like a foreign culture and foreign language.

By the way, learning a foreign language and its culture is much easier when we are children. The church *must* teach the Christian metanarrative to its children. That we are not doing a good job is easily demonstrated. Ask your church-bred high school youth to put the following events in the correct order:

Judah is taken captive by Babylon.
Moses leads God's people out of Egypt.
David becomes king of Judah.
Isaac is born.

Or, if you think the Old Testament is too tough, broaden the exam:

The prophets speak to Israel and Judah.
People speak in tongues on Pentecost.
God makes promises to Abraham.
Christ dies for our sins.

This should not be a tough quiz for kids who take AP exams in U.S. and world history. The question is: Whose master story *are* our kids learning best and fashioning their lives after? What single event is their interpretive key to understanding history—the Holocaust, the American Revolution, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, or Kurt Cobain's suicide? By teaching the story, language, and practice of the master narrative centered in Christ we can help those in the church make sense of life; we can give them a sense of coherence in a fragmented, decentralized world.

Fourth, the church must live and talk as a witness in the courtroom of the public world¹⁸

Refusing to compromise our commitment to the Gospel metanarrative does not mean that the church is not obligated to understand the postmodern culture in which we live and to which we must effectively communicate the Christian message. But it does mean that we can no longer defend the faith the “old-fashioned” way. Rationalistic, evidentialist arguments for God's existence or Jesus' resurrection have had their place, but they will no longer be effective with someone like the parent who “felt” her answer to the math problem was right. We live in a culture where only 28% of Americans believe that there is “absolute truth,” and the majority believe that two contradictory statements can be true at the same time.¹⁹

The Christian story *is* rooted in history and refers to real events, but communicating that history and reality can no longer be done as if people will accept our claims if only they were rational in their thinking. In fact, we must first convince those in our postmodern culture that we have something that needs to be heard that cannot be heard anywhere else; *then*, we can suggest that it might ultimately be true. John Stackhouse Jr. put it this way: we must argue for the *plausibility* of Christianity before we argue the *credibility* of Christianity.²⁰ And to do this the church must make the biblical story evident in all aspects of its life. Since we are not in Kansas anymore, we cannot be satisfied with a rational defense of our doctrinal confessions; we must go further and live out the doctrine we confess. (This is precisely what Elizabeth Achtemeier called us to in the previous issue of *Theology Matters*).

Fifth, the church might have to be an alternative culture at times.

The crucial question that is before us is how we are going to make the narrative that we believe to be true compelling for all? How are we going to witness to the God of Abraham and Jesus without that witness collapsing into the vortex of postmodernism?

It could be the case that the church's most effective witness in this postmodern culture *might* involve being less concerned about the relevance of the church at times and more concerned about the truth of the Gospel in a culture that is pluralistic, consumer oriented, and infatuated with managerial and therapeutic approaches to life. We need a strategy that is relevant to our postmodern culture, while we maintain the purity of the Gospel.

We are *not* in Kansas anymore. And unlike Dorothy, no matter how hard we wish nor how many times we tap our red shoes, there is no “home” to which we can go back. For the church there is only the Kingdom way forward.

1. See Thomas Docherty, “Postmodern Theory: Lyotard, Baudrillard and Others” in Todd May, ed., *Twentieth Century Continental Philosophy* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996), p. 474. Also, see Stanley J. Grenz, “Star Trek and the Next Generation: Postmodernism and the Future of Evangelical Theology,” in David S. Dockery, ed. *The Challenge of*

- Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement* (Wheaton: BridgePoint Books, 1995), pp. 89-103.
2. See Rodney Clapp, *Families at the Crossroads: Beyond Traditional and Modern Options* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), pp. 174-79; and Stanley Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996) for their handy summary definitions of “postmodernism.” Also, see Marva Dawn, *Is It a Lost Cause: Having the Heart of God for the Church’s Children* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), pp. 22-27.
 3. See Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986). The claim I am making here is not that confessional religion has no influence in the public realm, but as Newbigin persuasively argues, that confessional religion is not allowed in the realm of public “fact,” a domain dominated by the natural and social sciences. Religion and morality are made matters of personal taste or private opinion. For example, one would be a “heretic” to argue against the existence of quarks and other subatomic particles (though we who have not witnessed them empirically accept such “facts” on authority), but one would also be a “heretic” not to subscribe to relativism in the realm of morality and religion when it comes to issues like sexual orientation.
 4. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, (2d ed., Chicago: University of Chicago, 1970); Parker Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known*, San Francisco, HarperCollins, 1983); Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, chap. 4.
 5. See the account of the scientific research of Nobel prize winner Barbara McClintock in Evelyn Fox Keller, *A Feeling for the Organism: The Life and Work of Barbara McClintock* (San Francisco, CA: W. H. Freeman & Co, 1993).
 6. E.g., though his interpretations have been challenged, a decent introduction to some of these listed is found in Stanley Grenz’s *Primer*, chap. 6. For a bit more rigorous summary of movements like Deconstructionism, Structuralism, and Postmodernism, see chapters in May, *Continental Philosophy*.
 7. Rodney Clapp notes how travel has shrunk over the centuries: We have gone from horse drawn coaches and sailing ships with an average speed of 10 m.p.h. to jet passenger aircraft with speeds from 500-700 m.p.h. See his *Families*, pp. 17-21.
 8. See Rodney Clapp, “Why the Devil Takes VISA,” *Christianity Today*, October 7, 1996.
 9. Alan Ehrenhalt, *The Lost City: Discovering the Forgotten Virtues of Community in the Chicago of the 1950s* (New York: BasicBooks, 1995), p. 272.
 10. See *Foolishness to the Greeks*, p. pp. 13-14. A “plausibility structure” is defined as “a social structure of ideas and practices that create the conditions determining what beliefs are plausible within the society in question.” (p. 10, n.1)
 11. A caveat is in order here: As implied above, this autonomous Self has been shaped by a community. Autonomy does not mean self-constructed.
 12. Roger Lundin, “The Pragmatics of Postmodernity,” in Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, eds., *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), p. 38.
 13. Lundin, “Pragmatics,” p. 31.
 14. Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), pp. 15-16.
 15. See Clapp, *Families*, chap. 2.
 16. Alister McGrath, “A Particularist View: A Post-Enlightenment Approach,” in Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, eds., *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), pp. 206-208. McGrath is responding to John Hick’s pluralistic treatment of religions with this remark.
 17. See Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, pp. 19-24.
 18. For the metaphor of the Christian witness as the role of a witness (not the judge) giving testimony in a courtroom see Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness*, p. 64.
 19. While perhaps not the best sociological or statistical research, these figures can be found in George Barna, *What America Believes* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1991), pp. 83-85.
 20. John G. Stackhouse Jr., “From Architecture to Argument: Historical Resources for Christian Apologetics,” in Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, eds., *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), pp. 39-55.

Doubtful Disciples

by M. Craig Barnes

A sermon delivered at The National Presbyterian Church, Washington, DC on May 23, 1999. Reprinted with permission.
Text: Matthew 28:16-20.

The point of having faith is not to pretend you are certain. The point of faith is that it allows you to keep worshipping in spite of your doubts.

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It has been a while now since Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. According to Matthew, the risen Jesus is with the eleven disciples on a mountain in Galilee. He’s about to give them the Great Commission to make more disciples of all the nations. He’s about to trust the future of his church to these eleven men. And we are told that when the eleven disciples saw Jesus, they worshiped him, but some doubted.

Amazing! After all they had seen, some of Jesus' disciples still had their doubts. They had seen him heal the sick, feed the hungry, and cast out demons. Now they were seeing him alive after having been killed on a cross and buried in a tomb. But some still doubted. Amazing. Although the text is typically translated, "some of them doubted," it could also be translated, "they had some doubts." So maybe this means there are few who had doubts about Jesus. Or maybe it means that they all had a few doubts. It's amazing either way.

But it shouldn't amaze me. I also have a few doubts. Some of you here today do as well. We too have seen an awful lot of Jesus' faithfulness. We have more blessings than we can count. Jesus has saved our lives over and over. And yet, when faced with the questions or anxiety of today, we wonder if Jesus will save us again.

Some of us have intellectual doubts. The Bible creates a lot of questions for us. I learned this week that these questions start at an early age. The third grade Sunday School class came to visit me. They had some pretty tough issues they wanted to ask about. The first question I got was, "Where exactly is heaven?" Several wanted to know, "How do dinosaurs fit into the Bible?" I didn't have very good answers. In time, their questions will become even more sophisticated as they wonder about other religions, other planets, other values, and the postmodern loss of values. Society does a good job of teaching people how to doubt.

Others of us find that our doubts are rooted more in emotional concerns. Nicholas Wolterstorff is a professor at Yale Divinity School who taught faith to others. Then his son was killed in a mountain climbing accident. And then he discovered his own faith was riddled with doubt. In writing about his grief he said, "My life has been divided into before and after. Never again will anyone inhabit the world the way he did. Only a hole remains, a void, a gap. My son is gone. The ache of the loss sinks down and down, deep beyond all telling. How deep do souls go?" When Wolterstorff comes to the New Testament texts that describe the resurrection of God's son, he struggles to believe. He has his doubts. But he chooses to keep worshiping because he refuses to let death have the last word.

It is in that choice to worship that humanity reaches its most heroic moment. Because in the end, faith is not an intellectual struggle against skepticism, nor is it an emotional struggle against grief and heartache. In the end, faith is an act of the will, a choice to still come and bow down before Jesus. What is most amazing in this text, is that the disciples continued to worship Jesus in spite of their plaguing doubts.

It is also striking that Jesus does not condemn these men for their doubts, nor does he try to talk them out of their questions. According to the text, Jesus' only response to their skepticism is to come to the disciples. There is a wonderful movement here, which is the movement that is replayed in every worship service of the church. We come to Jesus with our doubts, and he comes to us. As we behold

him, we eventually lose sight of those doubts we brought along.

Worship is not about your doubts or your questions. Nor is it about your faith. In fact, it's not about you at all. It's not about the music you like. It's not about the preacher. It's not about whether or not you got anything out of the hour. It's not about you! Worship is about the risen Savior Jesus Christ who comes to us.

Standing in the presence of the risen Christ does not remove your doubts. In fact, he gives you new things to doubt. As you keep worshiping Jesus Christ, you'll start to doubt how seriously you should take the culture around you. You'll doubt how seriously you should take yourself. And you'll start to believe things you never thought you would believe.

Kathleen Norris has recently published a book titled, *Amazing Grace*. Frankly, the book is a little uneven, but it certainly has good moments, like when she is describing a heated exchange between a seminary student and an Orthodox theologian. The theologian had just finished his lecture on the development of the Church's Creeds. The student asked, "What can one do when one finds it impossible to affirm certain tenets of the creed?" The Orthodox priest responded, "Well, you just say it. It's not hard to master. With a little effort most learn it by heart." Thinking he had been misunderstood, the student tried again, "What am I to do when I have difficulty affirming parts of the creed like the Virgin Birth?" He got the same response. "You just say it. Particularly when you have difficulty believing it, you just keep saying it. It will come to you eventually." The student raised his voice. "How can I with integrity affirm a creed which I do not believe?" The priest responded, "It's not your creed. It's our creed. It belongs to the Body of Christ. We say it not because we are certain of it, but because Christ is."

Nothing could be further from the experience of contemporary culture than to commit yourself to something that does not well up from your heart. Why do we invite you to repeat the Creed Sunday after Sunday? Why don't we all stand up and say whatever we are feeling in worship. One person could say, "I'm feeling self-actualized today." At the same time another says, "My parents weren't very nice to me." Somebody else could be saying, "I doubt next week is going to be better" At least that would be relevant. But the goal of worship is not to make it relevant to you. The goal of worship is to make you relevant to the story of Christ's salvation that began before you and I started having doubts and feelings.

After Jesus came to the wavering, worshipping disciples, he said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." There it is again. The authority is not my experiences, not my doubts, and not my certainty. The authority is Jesus Christ. When we are afraid, we trust in his courage. When we have doubts, we trust in his certainty. When we are lost, we trust that he alone can bring us home to the Father, as he can our broken world.

“Go, therefore,” Jesus said, “and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the close of the age.”

This is the final movement of this great passage of the Bible. First, we come to Jesus as doubting disciples who choose to worship. Then he comes to us revealing his great authority in our lives. Thirdly, we go back out into all the world making others disciples of this great Savior.

It is always this third movement, that we have had the hardest time with. We don't want to impose our beliefs on others. We want to be sensitive listeners and learners who respect diversity. Well, diversity is a great thing, but all of us share some common needs that lie beneath the things that distinguish us. It is to these common core issues that the gospel of Jesus Christ speaks. Is a physician being sensitive when he or she thinks, “Well, I don't want to tell this patient that he has a disease. I need to honor his rights to be sick. The world needs sick people. It adds to the diversity.” No, the caring thing is when the doctor asserts with some authority, “I know how to make you better.”

“Pastor, are you saying that those outside of the church are spiritually sick?” Yes. But I am also saying that those inside the church are just as sick. We all suffer from the same common disease. The disease is called sin. It doesn't matter if you are Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, or Atheist. The disease will eat away at your soul until you learn to confess it and find healing.

Evangelism is one sick person telling another sick person, “I know one who has the authority to make us better.” We are not the physician of the soul. We don't have the

authority to heal. Our authority is simply to tell others what we have found at the feet of Jesus Christ.

Today is Pentecost, the day we remember when the Holy Spirit descended upon the frightened doubting disciples and pushed them out into the world with Christ's command to “Go ! “ You see, Christ didn't just leave the future of the church in the hands of us disciples. More importantly, he also left it in the hands of the Spirit. For the last 2,000 years everything good that has happened in the church has happened only under the Spirit's power.

If you are having trouble believing, only the Spirit can give you faith. You can't muster it up. If you are having trouble seeing Christ in worship, only the Spirit can open your eyes to see that Jesus has come for you. If you are having trouble going into your part of the world with this hopeful, healing message, only the Spirit can give you the power to speak up.

And the best news of Pentecost is that the Holy Spirit will do all of those things for you. It doesn't really matter if you want that, any more than it did for the timid disciples hiding in the upper room. It doesn't really matter how many doubts or how much fear you may have. The Creed tells us that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. Not from you or me. So the Spirit will do what only God can do—change us from doubtful disciples into people of vision.

There is no question of that. The question is will we keep worshiping at the feet of Jesus, until the Spirit transforms us into men and women who can change the world?

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Postmodernism: A Declaration of Bankruptcy

by Kathryn R. Ludwigson

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Only within the last two decades has the word postmodernism appeared as a label to identify the prevailing philosophy of the late twentieth century. The word “postmodernism,” however, does not reveal anything

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about the intellectual content of that philosophy. The word merely states that this worldview follows modernism chronologically, thus announcing the demise of modernism. Not introducing something new, it is simply a declaration of the bankruptcy of modernism.

Postmodernism declares that the basic belief of modernism—trust in human reason to lead to truth—is no longer tenable. Modernism with its rationalistic base has been the dominant philosophy of Western culture since the

seventeenth century. From the time of Christ until the seventeenth century, the traditional Western view was *theocentric/logocentric*, believing that God the Logos had revealed truth in Christ, in the Scriptures, and in nature and that words actually represent and connect with the things we talk about. God Himself was with the man in the Garden of Eden when words were first used. Thus, the Christian worldview believes the universe to be patterned by God who gave us minds—though not absolute like His—but sufficiently capable of grasping real meaning inherent in experience: revelation from God was the ultimate source of truth. Evangelicals still hold this view.

Even before Christianity, the classical Greek world claimed this to be a meaning-laden universe, its meaning to be available by reason and intuition according to Plato, to be available by reason and logic according to Aristotle.

But in the seventeenth century, Descartes' radical disjuncture of revelation and reason led away from the prevailing theocentric worldview and initiated trust solely in human sense-preempted reason—a strictly *anthropocentric* worldview—later known as naturalism, humanism, or modernism. Reason, thus, freed from God, became master of human destiny; sense-preempted reason had all the answers—at least eventually! The scientific method of modernism—observation and experimentation—exemplified the right use of reason: what is “out there”/the real/the sensible particulars are fixed and give valid objectivity. As Bertrand Russell put it, “What science cannot tell us, mankind cannot know.”¹

Postmodernists, however, say such faith in scientific objectivity is an impossibility. There is no such thing as objective knowledge/reality; science reveals no “facts,” no truth; we have only linguistic constructs. There is no reality “out there”: the world is a fiction.

Thus—as so aptly expressed by the title of an essay by Wilhelm Wurzer, “Postmodernism’s Short Letter, Philosophy’s Long Farewell,” in one fell swoop postmodernism wipes out all previous philosophies—Platonic epistemology with its trust in intuition and reason, Aristotelian trust in logic and reason, Christianity’s trust in revelation and reason, and modernism’s trust in sense-preempted reason. What is left? Only the *word* itself; nothing “out there” to write about, even no self, only the word.

But how then did language originate? Human beings playing word games with each other, enjoying a playful itinerary of words only, answer the postmodernists, for the imposition of meaning on a thing is really only an illusion, nothing more than an interpretation of some other thing. This in turn will be seen only as an interpretation as well: not mirrors (re)presenting reality as the modernists had said, but a labyrinth of mirrors reflecting neither the outer world of nature nor the inner world of subjectivity, reflecting only endless circularity—an *ex-centric* worldview. There are no facts, remember; the world is an illusion. Derrida, the most popular exponent of postmodernism, has said: “There is nothing outside the

text; all is textual play with no connection with original truth.”²

“Reality,” thus, is formed by the powers of language/the word. As an example, notice the slippery use of the word “free”:

- “I’m free.” TGIF day—free from the week’s work.
- “I’m free.” Single person—not married.
- “I’m free.” Divorcee—marriage was a bondage.
- “I’m free from pain”—I don’t have any.
- “He’s free with his money”—liberal, generous.
- “A free translation”—not literal nor exact.
- “Free verse”—not using traditional poetic structures.
- “Free admission”—doesn’t cost any money.
- “Free from slavery”—emancipation.

Another — rather humorous — demonstration of deconstruction: a new computer owner wanted to sue the manufacturer because the computer used language that was not politically correct; he said that the computer called him an *invalid* (invalid!!!).

By demonstrating in this manner how words “deconstruct,” the postmodernists shredded the modernists’ belief in reason’s ability to (re)present by words the reality “out there.”

So, postmodernists concentrate on how to express—or celebrate the destruction of old forms—their apprehension of a meaningless, irrational world of incoherent particulars. Hence, the incoherent, garbled gobbledegook of contemporary literature, the random collage of art and music, the subjective/ egocentric/nonjudgmental educational system with its attendant reader’s response, the dismissal of a traditional morality and the accompanying rising violence, and the alarming collapse of traditional jurisprudence. Let’s take a deeper look.

Manifestations of Postmodernism in Our Society

Contemporary fiction writers and playwrights have littered the literary landscape with the seeds of postmodern influence and philosophy. Notice an early manifestation from Ionesco’s *The Bald Soprano*:

- Mr. Smith: Dogs have fleas, dogs have fleas.
- Mrs. Martin: Cactus, coccys! crocus! cockaded!
cockroach!
- Mrs. Smith: Incasker, you incask us.
- Mr. Martin: I’d rather lay an egg in a box than go and
steal an ox
- Mrs. Martin (opening her mouth very wide): Ah! oh!
ah! oh!
- Let me gnash my teeth.
- Mr. Smith: Crocodile!
- Mr. Martin: Let’s go and slap Ulysses.³

Or take a look at John Barth’s short story “Title” in his anthology of postmodern pieces, *Lost in the Funhouse*:

Beginning in the middle, past the middle, nearer three-quarters done, waiting for the end. Consider how dreadful so far: passionless, abstraction, pro, dis. And it will get worse. Can we possibly continue?

Plot and theme notions vitiated by this hour of the world but as yet not successfully succeeded. Conflict, complication, no climax. The worst is to come. Everything leads to nothing: future tense; past tense; present tense. Perfect. The final question is, Can nothing be made meaningful? Isn't that the final question? If not, the end is at hand. Literally, as it were. Can't stand any more of this.

I think she comes. The story of our life. This is the final test. Try to fill the blank. Only hope is to fill the blank. Efface what can't be faced or else fill the blank. With words or more words, otherwise I'll fill in the blank with this noun here in my prepositional object. Yes, she already said that. And I think. What now. Everything's been said already, over and over; I'm as sick of this as you are; there's nothing to say. Say nothing. What's new? Nothing.⁴

Notice the willful randomness of language, its ambiguity, its "cheap, narrative collage"—unreadable fiction. As someone has said about this sort of literature: "One feels like a baffled child watching lunatics."

Or observe another early manifestation of the postmodern "philosophy" in Ionesco's drama *Chairs*. Two old people have hired an orator to deliver to an audience—which isn't there!—a message that will save the world, which the old man has spent his lifetime in writing. When the orator arrives, we discover that he is deaf and dumb.

[He turns around again, towards the invisible crowd on the stage, and points with his finger to what he has written on the blackboard.]

ORATOR: Mmm, Mmm, Guene, Gou, Mmm, Mmm, Mmm, Mmm. [Then, not satisfied, with abrupt gestures, he wipes out the chalk letters, and replaces them with others, among which we can make out, still in large capitals.]
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As he exits from the stage, the drama ends—significantly, I think!—with the words: "The main door is wide open onto darkness." I use the word "significantly" to point out that even those who deny a God-given universe laden with inherent meaning recognize that they are in the dark. "The message of the play is an antimessage," according to Rosette Lamont, "an ontological void";⁶ as Ionesco himself told Claude Bonnefoy, it is about the absence of people, the absence of God, the absence of living meaning, metaphysical emptiness.⁷

We would be remiss if we did not mention what is perhaps the ultimate dramatic expression of postmodernism's belief in nothingness—Samuel Beckett's ultimate drama, untitled of course. It has two acts. But in the first act the curtain rises on a bare stage; there are no actors. It runs for half an

hour, still no actors. And in the second act, the curtain doesn't rise at all.

T. S. Eliot's short lyric "The Hollow Men" was a very early recognition of where we now are.

We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together
Headpieces filled with straw. Alas!
Our dried voices, when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless
As wind in dry grass
Or rats' feet over broken glass
In our dry cellar.⁸

Consider postmodernism's influence on art: it is an expression of complete autonomy, an insistent banality which is nothing more than an "absurd conglomeration of debris." No longer does art represent the external world.

Consider postmodernism's radical effect on art criticism:

For the sense in which a work of art has no content is no different from the sense in which the world has no content. Both are. Both need no justification; nor could they possibly have any.⁹

Further, consider postmodernism's influence on music—the atonal, dissonant, even silent, perpetual variation, and sheer noise of contemporary mindless "music" with its non-resolution— "a rock band that sounds like a lawn mower with a beat." Or consider John Cage's "prepared" pianos jangling with inserted household items, a percussion orchestra of pots and pans—anarchic harmony and happenings—or his silent piano piece 4'33" where he sits for the designated time on a piano bench with the keyboard closed. As Solzhenitsyn has written:

If visitors from outer space were to pick up our music over the airwaves, how could they ever guess that earthlings once had a Bach, a Beethoven, and a Schubert, now abandoned as out of date and obsolete?"¹⁰

What about postmodernism's effect on education? Consider the new strategy of outcome-based education to deemphasize content in favor of programs of experience and growth, to replace formal classroom instruction with informal group activity sessions. Or a high school teacher's stating that what her students say in class is just as important as what she says. Or a literature professor in a state university telling his class that since words do not really communicate, they were, therefore, pursuing nonsense.

The collapse of traditional morality and the rise in violence, attacks, shakedowns, and robberies in the nation's public schools every day are indicators of the social effects of philosophical change. Even without instruction in the "philosophy" of postmodernism, our young people have caught its horrendous message

“blowing in the wind”: the absurdity, the nausea of life. Their natural—and logical—reaction is to “live it up,” or why live at all.

The closing lyrics of Nirvana’s pop hit “Smells Like Teen Spirit” were eerily prophetic not only of lead singer and Generation X antihero Kurt Cobain’s recent suicide, but representative of the malaise of his generation: “I found it hard, it was hard to find, oh well, whatever, nevermind.” Unable to any longer gain meaning from living it up, Cobain sadly chose to not live at all—the ultimate “nevermind” statement.¹¹

Or as Squeaky Fromme explained to her captors when she tried to assassinate President Gerald Ford in 1975: “If you have no philosophy, you don’t have any rules.” And that insight had been previously expressed by French existentialist Jean Paul Sartre in his drama *Flies*. Orestes, having just killed his mother and his stepfather, is boasting to the populace:

You see me, men of Argos, you understand that my crime is wholly mine; I claim it as my own, for all to know; it is my glory, my life’s work, and you can neither punish me nor pity me.¹²

Finally, consider the enthusiastic embracing of postmodernism by our law schools embracing the concept of “popular sovereignty.”

Popular sovereignty as a motif emphasizing the energy and moral authority of will (and willful desire) rather than the constraints of a common moral order to which the will was bound to submit has “become the view emphasized today at most major law schools.” “Law is stripped of any moral anchoring” and “political institutions thus become the forum for the triumph of the will.”

But despite all the risks, this liberation from the myth of “truth” (whether understood as grounded in God or in reason), clears the way for a new, Godless kind of “civil religion” or “constitutional faith;” and it is this prospect that Mr. Levinson and his colleagues find so captivating. . . .

If there are no permanent moral truths, then moral “truth” becomes whatever history temporarily proclaims predominant.

. . . history in our time is hurtling toward disintegration of all the old verities that once held us together. . . .

. . . this book should be for all of us an alarm bell ringing in the night. Something ominous is afoot in the teaching of the law of this land.¹³

Why Postmodernism Came into Existence

And now *why* has postmodernism come into existence? What are the provocative causes? Though there were earlier harbingers of the demise of modernism,

postmodernism—by that name—has been declaring bankruptcy of the old order for the past twenty years. But why? A number of reasons have been suggested.

1. The failure of sense-preempted reason as held by modernists to understand what quantum theory and microphysics have discovered: how can an electron travel two or more different directions simultaneously or move from one orbit to another without traveling the space between them? To try to find absolute truth is pointless.

Thus we have the postulates of Heidegger’s “Begin,” Jasper’s “final experience,” Sartre’s authenticity (to mention but a few modern attempts)—none of which regained meaningfulness in life; none have led to truth. Hence, the change from classical physics provoked postmodernism’s emphasis on noncontinuity, noncausality, and nonlocality.

2. The conviction that (post)modern people can have a revelation of their own and not be dependent upon antiquated traditional expressions, not be forced into traditional forms which stifle individuality. To be relieved of a sense of cosmic purpose, freed from God controlled system of rights and wrongs, is exhilarating freedom, releasing the creativity of the individual, shoring up an eroded sense of the autonomous self. Not locked into merely mirroring nature, postmodernists can create their own unique realm of infinite possibilities and can never be duplicated.

3. The loss of faith in modernism’s belief in evolutionary progressivism, painfully evidenced in the mass slaughters of the twentieth century. Derrida himself was a victim of anti-Semitism during the Nazi era.

4. The belief that cause and effect are illusory, intrinsically suspicious, hence the lack of sequence of plot in postmodernism’s fiction.

5. Two world wars, the death of 66,000,000 Russians in the Communist regime, and the extermination of so many Jews in the German Holocaust. The blankness of the postmodernists is a way of staving off anxieties produced by the unexpected for which there is seemingly no resolution.

6. A reaction to the dominance of a mechanistic/commercialized/technological culture, which dehumanizes human beings, wresting power from human beings and investing it in the things.

7. The desire to give up the idea of truth as something to which they are responsible.

8. The desire to express philosophically a multicentered cultural pluralism.

Criticism of the Postmodern Position And what is the answer to all of this? Let us consider several.

1. *Non-Sense*. Postmodernists said it themselves in denying the ability of the senses to convey truth. “We are at one of those historic junctures where we can only wonder,” comments Charles Newman, “how our common sense was beaten out of us.”¹⁴

2. *Contradiction!* Their statement that all concepts are illusory affirms a trustworthy, prior knowledge. Also, if words no longer communicate meaning, why do postmodernists continue to publish? And if there is nothing to know, how do they know there is nothing?

Obviously, the postmodernist’s theory about our being trapped by the word itself in a language game is an example of metaphysical truth standing outside language: to deny truth is at once and the same time to assert another truth. Total nihilism is an incoherent position.

And though postmodernists lock humans into a “prison-house of language,” as Nietzsche earlier stated, with no objective reality of language to express, they do not address the question as to the origin of language. Derrida, for instance, sidesteps the question of origin, declaring that language seems to have been “always already” everywhere.

3. *Ignoring a Universal Moral Law*. There is a law written in all of our hearts, one that crosses different civilizations and different ages, stating that we ought to behave in a certain way. Why would we be complaining about violence, sexual deviation, crime, if there is no universal morality? The law of God is written in our hearts (Rom. 2:15). They had the knowledge of God but “did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind” (Rom. 1:28, NIV).

4. *Freedom from Responsibility*. If postmodernism insists on the demolition of the remaining remnants of traditional theocentricity and of modernism’s anthropocentricity—an ahistorical stance—then it has an obligation to show how its own narcissistic position of responsibility to no one is an enhancement of civilization. As it stands, its position absolves everyone of responsibility, even begetting an unrestricted licentiousness; it is in reality “permanent revolution” such as Foucault’s postmodernism advocates. The end of that road is national suicide.

5. *Dementia*. “Depriving oneself of notions like rationality, objectivity, scientific method, rules of logic, is voluntarily to choose dementia since it is abandoning the only touchstone we have left to discriminate dementia from normality,”¹⁵ writes Bruno Latour. “By doing away with rationality, no reality is left. . . . There is no longer any possibility of distinguishing . . . between witchcraft and science. Everything is equal. All the cows are equally gray.”¹⁶

6. *Relative Pluralism*. Does anything that any individual “cooks up” go? Yes, says postmodernism. No, say evangelicalism and classical philosophy. Around 2,500 years ago Protagoras wrote that man is the measure of all things. However, “Not a single ancient Greek philosophy ever once defended Protagorean relativity.”¹⁷ Socrates and

his pupil Plato declared truth was absolute—something people lived up to, not some concept they created. And if, as postmodernism asserts, life is a patternless, meaningless, created fiction, then why don’t postmodernists reverse this notion and impose order and coherence in their works?

Confirmation of the Bankruptcy of Modernism by the Greats

A significant number of contemporary observers have seen the great emperor of postmodernism, and he indeed has no clothes: Kathleen Avena: “The reason for the malaise is no integrating world view; the enlightenment has been undone”;¹⁸ Harvey Cox: “The liberal era has drawn to a close”;¹⁹ Maurice Valency: “We have come to the end of ‘an art that does not heal’”;²⁰ Ihab Hassen: “Without some radiance, wonder, wisdom, we all risk, in this postmodern climate, to become barren”;²¹ Wallace Stevens: “for the listener, who listens in the snow/And, nothing himself, beholds/Nothing that is not there the Nothing that is”;²² Charles Newman: “its [postmodernism] dirty little secret is that Demystification does not finally alleviate their human or aesthetic problems, but seems only to deepen and further conceal them”;²³ Zbigniew Brzezinski: “a community which partakes of no shared absolute certainties . . . is a community threatened by dissolution.”²⁴ Even three of the prominent postmodernists—Rorty, Fish, and Derrida—have backed off from being identified with an extreme nihilism. Derrida, for instance, responded:

Deconstructing academic and political discourse doesn’t mean simply destroying the norms or pushing these norms to utter chaos. I’m not in favor of that sort of thing.²⁵

All that he meant to do, he affirmed, was to demonstrate the *finiteness* of the human intellect, its inability to gain the *absolute* by itself—“experiencing the impossible.”

“Great!” exclaims the evangelical. “Of course, we should always be humble, acknowledging our finiteness.” But evangelicals add that God has revealed absolutes in the Bible and through Jesus Christ, has written His law in our hearts, and has given us rational ability to see and to understand His eternal power and divine nature, “so that men are without excuse” (Rom. 1:20).

What Can We Do About Postmodernism?

Gertrude Himmelfarb in her book, *Looking into the Abyss*, states that we will outlive postmodernism, just as we have outlived other isms.²⁶ This too shall pass. However, postmodernism has destroyed the very apparatus of criticism. As evangelicals we opt out and reaffirm a theocentric/logocentric world, accepting the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us, whose glory we beheld as that of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth (cf. John 1:14).

More diligently, more fervently, more prayerfully than ever before we need to keep preaching the truth of the

Scriptures, inspired by God and suitable for instruction, correction, and reproof (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16). We must show the flaws of the postmodernist “thinking.” Recognize the lies of Lucifer in the Garden: “You will be like God” (Gen. 3:5). We have to diligently catechize our children, young people, and adults so that they really know what they believe. And we must make use of the plethora of multimedia available in our increasingly video-dependent culture.²⁷ The medium may not be the message, but for the MTV generation and beyond the medium must be one that rivals the vehicles of delivery in the popular culture.

In summary, the Apostle Paul’s admonishment is ever the more relevant in dealing with the postmodern context: “when they will not endure sound doctrine” . . . then “hold fast the form of sound words” (2 Tim. 4:3; 1:13, KJV).

NOTES

1. As quoted by Huston Smith, *Beyond the Post-Modern Mind* 2nd ed (Wheaton, Ill.: Theosophical/Quest, 1989), 163.
2. Jacques Derrida, *Prophets of Extremity* (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 1985), 3.
3. Eugene Ionesco, *The Bald Soprano* in *Four Plays* (New York: Grove, 1958), 40.
4. John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 105.
5. Ionesco, *Four Plays*, 160.
6. Rosette C. Lamont, ed. *Ionesco: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1958), 96.
7. Lamont, *Ionesco*, 69.
8. T. S. Eliot, “The Hollow Men,” in *The Complete Poems and Plays* (New York: Harcourt, 1971), 56.
9. Susan Sontag, “On Style,” in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Duell, 1966), 36.
10. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, “The Relentless Cult of Novelty and How It Wrecked the Century,” *New York Times Book Review* 2 (February 1993), 3.
11. Kurt Cobain, “Smells Like Teen Spirit,” in Nirvana, *Nevermind* (Geffen, compact disc, 1991).
12. Jean Paul Sartre, *Flies*, in *No Exit and Three Other Plays* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1955.), 11.
13. Thomas Prangle, “Post-Modernist Thought,” review of *Stanford Levinson’s Constitutional Faith*, *Wall Street Journal* (January 1989).
14. Charles Newman, *The Post-Modern Aura* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1985), 11.
15. Bruno Latour, “Clothing in the Naked Truth,” in *Dismantling Truth*, ed. Hilary Lawson and Lisa Appignanesi (New York: St. Martin’s, 1989), 101.
16. *Ibid.*, 106.
17. David Glidden, *Los Angeles Times* (26 March 1989).
18. Kathleen Agena, “The Return of Enchantment,” *New York Times Magazine* (27 November 1983).
19. Harvey Cox, *Religion in The Secular City* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984), 268.
20. Maurice Valency, *The End of the World* (New York: Schocken, 1980), back cover.
21. Ihab Hassen, *The Postmodern Turn* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio Univ. Press, 1987), 230.
22. Wallace Stevens, “The Snow Man,” in *Collected Poems* (New York: Random House, 1982).
23. Newman, *Postmodern Aura*, 197.
24. Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Out of Control* (New York: Scribner’s, 1993), 113.
25. Jacques Derrida, “Interview” in *Wall Street Journal* (27 July 1993).
26. Gertrude Himmelfarb, *Looking into the Abyss* (New York: Knopf, 1994), 161.
27. For more insight into this issue, see chapter 18 by William E. Brown, “Theology in a Postmodern Culture: Implications of a Video-Dependent Society.”

Some Suggested Books on Postmodernism:

Culture Shift: Communicating God’s Truth to Our Changing World by Rev. Dr. David W. Henderson, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1998). Henderson explains the characteristics of postmodernism and provides insights for sharing the Gospel in this postmodern culture. “The right tool for the job makes a world of difference. In the urgent and extraordinary challenge of communicating the gospel today, David Henderson’s *Culture Shift* is just such a resource.” Mark Labberton, pastor, First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley.

Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World edited by Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995). A collection of authors consider evangelical responses to postmodernism.

Bible Study of the Book of Revelation

Study 1: Introduction

by Rev. Mark Atkinson, Bunker Hill Presbyterian Church, Sewell, NJ

As the turn of the millennium approaches, there will be greater and greater interest in the biblical theme of the Last Days in general and the book of Revelation in particular. This interest is already evident in your local bookstore. Author Tim LaHaye has written several novels in the “Left Behind” Series. In them he is dramatizing the

unfolding events of Revelation as he understands them from his Premillennialist viewpoint. They are prominently featured in secular as well as Christian bookstores. There is a great deal of interest in our day in the meaning and purpose of the Book of Revelation.

Unfortunately, much of what is to be found in many Christian bookstores on the subject of Revelation tends to excite fanciful imaginations rather than encourage a sober interpretation of the text. G.K. Chesterton is reported to have said, “Though St. John saw many strange monsters

in his vision, he saw no creature so wild as one of his own commentators". How sadly true that is.

Admittedly, interpreting the Book of Revelation presents us with a number of challenges. Presumably, its first readers understood its meaning with little difficulty. The same is not true for today's reader. The centuries between ours and theirs has made its interpretation more problematic. John and his first century Asia Minor readers shared a common culture and background. For the modern reader, the reading of Revelation does entail a cross-cultural experience. And that in turn leads to many questions. What is the proper meaning of its symbolism? How are we to understand its many fantastic images? What is Revelation's genre? Is it a letter? Prophecy? Testimony? Apocalypse? Did John write to interpret events of his own day alone? Or, did he write of some far distant day of the church? Is the sequence of events in Revelation to be read chronologically? Or, is there a deliberate repetition and overlap? Perhaps the single most important question that must be answered is this: Are the symbols and images of Revelation intended to be understood as historically specific, that is, corresponding to events and persons in time and space as history unfolds, or, are they to be understood as symbolically representational of the experience of the church throughout all ages and in any particular time?¹

An additional interpretive challenge arises from the fact that the Book of Revelation draws heavily upon history and imagery, especially the apocalyptic imagery of Daniel, of the Old Testament. For that reason, more so than in any other book in the New Testament, a knowledge of the Old Testament is particularly helpful in unlocking the meaning behind many of Revelation's revelations. For this reason, the following study is a combination of commentary and question. The questions are included because unlocking the text for oneself is the most satisfying means of learning what the Bible has to say. The commentary is added to enable the average reader to have readily available the necessary background information.

Four Interpretive Methods

There are four basic ways of interpreting Revelation: the Preterist, the Idealist, the Historicist, and the Futurist. We will look briefly at each before we move to the text itself.

The Preterist method interprets the meaning of Revelation's images according to its historical first century setting. It is the history of the first century church encoded in symbolism. The Preterist sees Revelation as a letter to a church in a particular time and place. Its images are interpreted as symbolic of the contemporary historical reality the church faced in Asia Minor in particular and the Roman world in general.

The Idealist method is the opposite. The images of Revelation are understood not as particular to a past historical setting but as symbolic of the ongoing conflict

between good and evil; between the gospel and the church and the world and Satan. The Idealist recognizes that the symbolism of Revelation may have its roots in first century history. Did the original recipients understand Babylon the Great to be Rome? Certainly. Did they understand the Antichrist to be the emperor Nero? Probably. However, the Idealist interpreter does not close the door on the applicability of Revelation's images at the turn of the first century. Each age can have its Babylon the Great and Antichrists. The Preterist and Idealist are the two most common hermeneutical perspectives utilized by Reformed biblical interpreters.

The most popular interpretive method in the 20th century is the Historicist. The Historicist sees the book of Revelation as a forecast of church and human history. The images in Revelation are seen as symbolic of specific historical events or persons. The historicist interpreter seeks to fit the imagery to specific events, people or entities of history, usually events unfolding in the interpreter's time. Using this method, the Antichrist may be identified as being the pope², Saddam Hussein, or Boris Yeltsin. Or, the beast with 10 horns is the European Common Market, or the former Soviet Union. While this is the most common and popular method of interpreting Revelation today, there are two significant weaknesses to this method. The first is that it takes much of the meaning of Revelation out of the hands of the church. It makes the book irrelevant to those who received it initially, as well as the church throughout the centuries, until such time as the historical events prophesied actually begin to come to pass. The second problem is the highly subjective nature of the method that encourages ever changing popular opinion, but not the discernment of unchanging truth.

The Futurist method is similar to the Historicist, but manages to avoid its excesses. The futurist sees the book as eschatological, emphasizing the final victory of God over evil. Many futurist interpreters see everything from chapter 4 to the end as occurring after Christ's second coming. While this avoids the subjectivity of the Historicist method, it still reduces the meaning and vitality of Revelation as a book for the present.

The hermeneutical key I will use in this study is that of the Idealist. In addition to avoiding the excesses of some of the other methods, the Idealist method succeeds best in bringing out the pastoral applications of Revelation. The Book of Revelation was received by the early church with joy. It was read throughout Asia Minor. It was one of the earliest New Testament books to have commentaries written on it. What was the reason for its early and extensive popularity? Life was difficult for Christians during the first centuries of the church's existence and Revelation had a powerful impact because it spoke to the pastoral needs of believers. It addressed the practical issues of life in Christ in difficult and hostile times. Excepting chapters 21 and 22, which communicate prophecies of the far future, Revelation communicates truths that are always relevant. The word *revelation* means *disclosure*. John's intent was to reveal truth, not obscure it.

The Eight Scenes of Revelation

Revelation is best outlined as follows in eight scenes.³

Scene	Scripture	Dominant Symbol	Theme
Prologue	1:1 - 8		
1	1:9 - 3:22	Seven Letters Seven Churches	Church in the World
2	4:1 - 8:1	Seven Seals	Suffering for the Church
3	8:2 - 11:18	Seven Trumpets	Warning for the World
4	11:11 - 15	Seven Visions of Cosmic Conflict	Drama of History
5	15:5 - 16:21	Seven Bowls Poured Out	Punishment for the World
6	17:1 - 19:10	Seven Words of Justice	Babylon the Whore
7	19:11 - 21:8	Seven Visions of Ultimate Reality	Drama Behind History
8	21:9 - 22:19	Seven Final Revelations	Jerusalem, the Bride

These divisions are not perfect. But they represent a clear and accurate capture of the dramatic flow and movement of the work. It is important to note that these scenes do not tell history in a linear sense. Rather, each, except for the last, is telling the same story, but from a differing perspective. Each tells the story of God's salvation. Yet the totality of the story must be understood by laying the scenes one on top of another. One layer is that of the church militant. Another is of the church suffering. A third is an evangelistic warning to an unrepentant world. A fourth is the unfolding drama of human history, etc. Each layer is true. Yet each layer captures only a portion of the truth.

¹The majority of authors agree that chapters 21 and 22 describe the consummation of history under the Lordship of Jesus Christ occurring at some point in the future. However, there is a movement called "full preterism" which, being constrained by the imminency passages of the NT, sees the meaning of the entire NT, including the final chapters of Revelation, as fulfilled in the destruction of the temple in 70 AD.

²Historically, this has been the most popular identification of the Antichrist among Reformed commentators.

³Michael Wilcox, *I Saw Heaven Opened: The Message of Revelation*, Downers Grove, IL, Inter Varsity Press, 1975, pp. 15 - 18.

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