

The Road to Post Modernism

John Calvin started the first chapter of his Institutes of the Christian religion with this key statement: "Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves." When man does not know God, he cannot know himself. In the last generation, we have seen the de-Christianization of our world, and what we see is not encouraging. In present-day discussions, "the crisis of our times" has even become a cliché.

In the 19th century Biblical criticism undermined the authority of Scripture. The loss of the Bible led to the loss of authoritative standards of the good, the true, and the beautiful. Liberal protestantism became entangled in a long-term addiction to trendy theologies, gave stones for bread and emptied pews. The Christian view of God and the world lost its grip. Slowly but surely speculative philosophy in the West deteriorated into the belief that nature alone is real and that man is essentially only a complex animal. Atheistic forces began to take the initiative in universities, in the mass media, and in politics. Man became stranded in a world without God.

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) left as an inheritance a cynical critique of all moral striving. He viewed religion as an expression of personal weakness, and that egoistic self-assertiveness collapsed into nihilism, the destruction of all traditional values, a world completely without meaning and purpose. Nietzsche was right when he said: "What I am describing is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what must inevitably come: the dawn of nihilism." Nihilism has come! It subtly manifests itself in the late 20th century post modernism.

"The Chronicler compliments the men of Issachar, who came to make David king in Hebron, by saying that they "understood the times and knew what Israel should do" (1Chronicles 12:32). Do we understand the nature and character of the times in which we now live? As ambassadors for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20) we need to discern the times and pray for prophetic insight as to how to meet the challenges of the present as well as the future.

The demoralisation of our Western culture relentlessly continues its downward slide. All around us we see a cultural shift of immense proportions. Beliefs, ideals and traditions, which once both inspired and restrained the general public, are losing their grip. The mindset of our dangerous, bewildering and fascinating times is described as post-modern.

Why should we know about postmodernism? Because its philosophy has infiltrated every sector of our society. It is seen in the reluctance of post-modern educators to judge, test, and evaluate students. Gary DeLasmutt and Roger Braund comment in *The Death of Truth*:

"America may become the first country in the world afraid to tell its children that they got a wrong answer on a math problem"

The influence of postmodernism shows in the restriction of free speech on campuses in the name of political correctness, in the pro-abortion, pro-gay movements and in the phenomenal rise of the New Age Movement. Many have turned their back to organized religion but still consider themselves spiritual. They chart their horoscopes. They worship the god in their inner self, the god in their neighbour, the god in nature, gods in other religions, god in everything.

And we only have to look at popular culture to see the practical outworking of postmodernism. It exerts a powerful influence on contemporary culture. The immense popularity of lotteries, the horrific escalation of random violence, and the proliferation of media "victim talk" all testify to the moral bankruptcy of our times and post-modern despair.

What was considered novel a few decades ago is now accepted as normal. The combination of technological innovation with crass vulgarity had a destructive impact.

Rock music is probably the most representative form of post-modern culture as it focuses on both the global and the local, and on "live" performances of popular stars. Through the use of enormous video screens fans feel close to their favourite performers at concerts, despite the fact that their presence is artificial, mediated by a screen. Rock appeals to youth because of its "emotional candor, immediacy, an expressiveness." An observer of youth culture remarked that in the late sixties and the seventies rock became excessive in self-indulgence and outrageous in its anti-authoritarianism.

Television constitutes the most effective means for disseminating postmodernism. It fosters deliberate superficiality, banality, and a distorted view of the world. Stanley J. Grenz points out that it has become "the real world" of post-modern culture. And he observes:

"Many viewers don't think something is really important unless it shows up on CNN, Sixty Minutes, or made-for-TV-miniseries. Anything not submitted to the "ontological text" of being aired on television is relegated to the periphery of life in contemporary society."

The church has also been impacted by postmodernism. Mainline Protestants, reformed, and evangelicals are being evangelized by the world rather than evangelizing the world. Mainline denominations have drifted toward politically correct pluralism. Evangelicals and reformed increasingly stress self-help and success. And they tend to be enamoured with entertainment and market techniques for church growth - a consumer-oriented-psychologized gospel. The subtle influence of postmodernism is evidenced in evangelicals' attitude toward Scripture. Dennis McCallum mentions that one researcher found that although 88 percent of those in evangelical churches say the Bible is the infallible Word of God, 53 percent also say that there is no such thing as absolute truth! And the proportion doubting that absolute truth exists is even greater among evangelical church youth. A worrisome trend!

Post-modern culture is a reality, which is difficult to define. I consider it more as a mood than as a specific philosophy. Although Arnold Toynbee was the first one to use the epithet "post-modern", he used it to characterize the decline of Western civilization into irrationality and relativism since the 1870s. But the concept of postmodernism as such was not crystallized until about the mid-1970s.

At the heart of postmodernism is the rejection of and attacks on the premises and presuppositions of modernism. Postmodernists deny that reason and truth are always the same. They repudiate any appeal to reality and truth. (They don't reject science but rather the notion that science is value free - not based on world and life view.) They celebrate the many ways in which human beings celebrate their diversity. We are told to embrace and promote every form of cultural diversity, without any reference to universal principles. The post-modern motto is: "Long live diversity!" The world has no centre only different view points and perspectives. We must live in multiple worlds of our own. Our society must accept pluralism and multiculturalism so that we can be all free to live according to our world and life view. What is striking is the consensus in post-modern discourse that there is no longer any possibility of a consensus. There is no longer any final authority on anything (cf Judges 21:25).

You would think that postmodernism would glory in individualism. The opposite is true. They stress the community over against modernist individualism. They view people as the product of their culture. Human beings are primarily social beings. The difference between people is not the result of life decisions or directions chosen by individuals, but as the result of different cultural backgrounds or social forces. For example, an inner-city boy lands in jail because his culture and environment made him a certain way.

Why postmodernism? The rise of postmodernism is a decisive repudiation of modernism. Modernism stressed individualism and potent faith in objective human reason. Man was viewed as an autonomous rational subject. Human reason rather than God's Word became the starting point for knowledge and reflection. Reason and the scientific method were considered the only reliable means to attain knowledge necessary for making it through this life. God was dethroned. Men became like gods. Through reason people could understand the world, establish social peace and create a better world. Modernism gloried in science, accepted evolutionary naturalism, secular humanism, and historical criticism of the Bible.

Since the Nazi concentration camps and the Soviet gulags, modernism lost its appeal. Trust in human reason alone is no longer acceptable. Reason has not brought mankind one step closer to truth. It has not been able to provide a foundation for a universally valid view of the world or an understanding of God. Modernism gave rise to the Nazi holocaust, the Stalinist purges, the environmental crisis. It has been unable to usher in the promised utopia. What is left is a fragmented and oppressive society.

Although postmodernism rejects modernism, it doesn't show us a better way. It leaves us awash in a world without restraints. Society is left to its own devices. Human beings must create their own truth. That is why today moral questions are often resolved by opinion polls, which are then legislated into public policy. And many postmodernists are

actively engaged in creating a "socially constructed reality" through political and social activism. In *The Death of Truth*, Jim Leffel points out that people in the front ranks of the so-called politics of race, gender, sexuality, ecology, and religion are mostly affirmative postmodernists.

For the postmodernist there is no "meta-narrative", an all embracing ideology which interprets reality. There is no standard of truth left because nothing is true and everything is doubted and tolerated. No truth exists unless we create it. Truth is not absolute, but relational and personal. The focus is on what is held true in the community in which we live. The very idea of a universal standard is not only pointless, it is politically incorrect, arrogant, and imperialistic. All claims to truth are equally valid. Christianity is acceptable as it is believed to be true to some, not because it is true. Dennis McCallum perceptively commented, "Postmodernism is nothing less than the death of truth!"

Postmodernists boast in their tolerance. But how tolerant are they when it comes to Biblical Christianity? Postmodernists are not against religion. You may freely believe whatever, you want. But they are vehemently opposed to any religious teaching that holds to objective truth. The claim that Jesus is the only way to God (John 14:6) is a downright offence for them.

The post-modern view of truth raises many questions. Postmodernism suggest that something can be "true for me" but not "true" for others. But how consequent are postmodernists? Consider the custom of female circumcision. It is a common practice in some African countries. It is true for them. But can it be allowed to be practiced in Canada? The fact is that certain views just cannot be allowed to be true. There must always be criteria, standards of judgement, that allow to exclude certain viewpoints as unacceptable. Even post-modern politicians concluded that female circumcision was not a good practice in any culture. On April 18, 1996, the Criminal Code was amended to specifically clarify that the practice of "female genital mutilation" is a criminal offence in Canada.

Postmodernism celebrates relativism. Since there is no universal truth and all truth is relative, all religions are considered equally true. All religious traditions share a common outlook on justice and liberation. But this imposition of political correctness upon world religions makes mockery of the obvious fact that they have always differed significantly not only on religious ideas, but also on social and political ideas.

Post-modern pluralism is attractive for many in our contemporary society as it acknowledges a wide variety of beliefs and perspectives, but also because it seems to demonstrate tolerance and mutual respect. But this relativism is subtle, insidious, and a threat to the Christian faith. Instead of attacking Christianity as false, postmodernism grants it relative truth. And the latter cuts the heart out of the Gospel. When the uniqueness of Christ is denied, our Lord's Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20) becomes impractical nonsense.

Another post-modern feature is pluralism, which is closely related to relativism. Lesslie Newbigin notes:

"It has become a commonplace to say that we live in a pluralistic society-not merely a society which is in fact plural in the variety of cultures, religions and lifestyles which it embraces, but pluralist in a sense that this plurality is celebrated as things to be approved and cherished. "

Pluralism boasts that it gives equal tolerance to all religions and cultures. We must show respect and tolerance to all of them as they are all of equal value. A claim by one group or individual to have an exclusive hold on "the truth" is considered the equivalent of fascism. To defend the Christian faith is seen as belittling non-Christian religions, and unacceptable in a tolerant pluralistic society. Ironically, in this intolerance of the absolute claims of the Gospel, postmodernism denies the tolerance it wishes to promote. When dissenters don't want to conform to post-modern thinking, they are marginalized and relegated to the edge of society where they can be safely ignored. Pluralism's tolerance only extends to a private expression of one's faith. I wonder how accepting pluralists would be among head-hunters practicing their cultural beliefs and traditions. Pluralism cannot accept the Biblical claim that all areas of life must submit to the Lordship of Christ. It is obvious that pluralism exists. Yet this has never posed any difficulties for Christianity, in theory or practice. The Gospel has always transcended cultural barriers.

Tolerance is the highest virtue, also in morality. There is no higher tribunal than autonomous subjective opinion. Postmodernism denies the existence of objective moral standards. Ethical standards are no more than personal preferences. Postmodernism undermines the prospect of nourishing shared moral standards, which hold individuals responsible for their actions regardless of their cultural backgrounds. The Post-modern view of ethics has created enormous difficulties for Christians wanting to maintain the Biblical standards on homosexuality. When a Christian opposes redefining the family and granting spousal benefits to same sex partners, he is immediately accused of homophobic and imposing this moral agenda on society.

Postmodernism has also a peculiar view on language. For the postmodernist learning a language is also learning from a language. This is true of course. A language conveys a culture. Postmodernism argues that once we admit that different languages lead to different ways of thinking, we lose the ability to judge other cultures. Since we cannot say one language is superior to another, we cannot criticize the ideas and cultural customs that language conveys. For example, some post-modern education theorists in the United States regard standard English to be inappropriate for teaching African-American or Latino children. According to them, this amounts to cultural imperialism and Western oppression.

Postmodernism equates language with power. Language creates reality. Anything can be made to look good or bad by being described. It is social engineering through the use of language. To change society we must change our language. Political correctness and inclusive language are strongly supported by postmodernists. Postmodernism believes that we will never form a society free from prejudice, unless we control the words and language upon which that prejudice is based. Jim leffel states:

"The political-correctness movement is not just an attempt to keep from hurting people's feelings, but an attempt to create different kinds of people by changing the cultural environment. "

At its heart, postmodernism is the death of truth. This is why we should neither compromise with postmodernism nor soft-sell the Gospel. What should we do? In a world hostile to the Gospel, withdrawal into the safe fortress of the church is tempting. But we may not construct safe fortress communities to protect ourselves from the dangers of postmodernism. We must reach the post-modern world with the full Gospel, in the spirit of love, and in reliance on the Spirit of God Who alone renews hearts and enlightens minds.

Let us consider postmodernism as a challenge and a unique opportunity to apply the principles of our faith. Postmodernists acknowledge the validity of multiple perspectives. They believe that all facts are theory-laden and that everyone has a worldview. They assert that science is "not merely the neutral observation of data, as the modern outlook presumes." This is a positive feature. We are in agreement with this. Not everybody believes the same thing. There are no neutral facts. Scientific research is shot through with fundamental commitments and basic beliefs, both implicit and explicit.

Reformed Christianity has a unique contribution to make. The questions raised by post-modern Dutch neo-Calvinists have always strongly challenged the autonomy, neutrality, and self-sufficiency of human reason. The Reformed thinkers Abraham Kuiper and Herman Bavinck pointed to the fundamentally religious nature of man, which not only impacts the mind but all of life. They taught that reality must be viewed through proper lenses - God's Word. Calvinism, as a Christian worldview, wants to scan the totality of the world from a Biblical perspective. The Word of God addresses itself to the whole of man in every aspect of his existence. Calvinism also recognizes that sin has darkened the human mind and impedes its reasoning. Fallen human beings suppress the truth in unrighteousness. The Word of God also tells the story of Redemption. In Christ redemption came. His redemptive work is not limited to individuals. Christians are neither lone rangers nor islands by themselves. They are individual members of a body, officially represented by the head of that body, the second Adam -- Jesus Christ. They belong to the pilgrim community, free to do and hear again this word of the Lord:

"Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:4-6).

Our world may be constantly changing, God's Word does not change. Also in our post-modern world, we can give a defense for the hope within us. (1 Peter 3:15)
And the Gospel is still "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. " (1 Romans 1:16)

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September, 1994