Christianity and Culture

Christianity in a Postmodern World

Two competing views of the Christian response to Postmodernism:

The good news is that secular humanism is on the way out. The bad news is that something worse is taking its place. That something worse is called postmodernism.

David McAlister

Evangelicals have often uncritically accepted the modern view of knowledge despite the fact that at certain points the postmodern critique is more in keeping with Christian theological understandings Stanley Grenz “A Primer on Postmodernism”

**Our Outline:**

What is Modernism and why has it been rejected by most?

What is Postmodernism?

Postmodernism and Culture

A Christian Response to Postmodernism

**An extremely brief intellectual history** to set the table for our discussion:

Pre-modern Catholicism is a holdover of premodern Christianity

Renaissanace/Humanism

Early Modernism/Enlightenment Protestantism is the result of the modern movement.

Late Modernism/Deism and Skepticism

Postmodernism (What will be the church movement spawned by postmodernism?)

**The Pre-modern era** would roughly correspond to the Middle Ages. It was an era of Christendom. Knowledge was based on faith and authority of the church. Anselm: “I believe in order to know”

Emphasis of the corporate rather than the individual.

Toward end of the pre-Modern period was the period of Scholasticism with a strong emphasis on Aristotle and rationalism.

**Renaissance** was a period when the importance of the human began to be expressed over the importance of the “Church” This led to the Reformation.

Then came the **Scientific Revolution**, led by Galileo, Bacon Descartes and Newton.

Bacon (1561-1626): Nature, to be commanded, must be obeyed. *"The end of our foundation is the knowledge of causes, and secret motions of things; and the enlarging of the bounds of human empire, to the effecting of all* things possible"*.* Humans will conquer nature. “From knowledge comes power.”

Galileo and Kepler disproved geocentrism

Descartes I think, therefore I am. Only interested in things we can logically be sure about.

Newton: The mechanical Universe. The universe a machine—an understandable machine.

One definition of modernism: The autonomous rational human of Descartes meets the mechanical universe of Newton.

And thus modernism was born.

Modernism is essentially optimistic. We will understand the physical world and use it to improve life.

**Enlightenment: The Age of Reason**. Believed that through (human) reason we can answer definitively all important questions and improve the human lot.

Knowledge is certain, objective, good and accessible to the human mind.

Elevates the idea of freedom and the importance of the individual (John Locke)

(aside: Think about this will affect Christianity)

Began to be skeptical that religion was helpful toward this end. Deism prominent.

Common Sense Philosophy. John Locke Empiricism.

If I had time, I would discuss Immanuel Kant.

Modernism: The age of science. The age of Reason.

“Highest” form of modernism is Scientific Materialism or Scientism which rejects as unreal anything which cannot be measured.

**Modernism and Christianity:**

The Restoration Movement is a quintessential Modernist movement and Alexander is a quintessential modernist.

Command, Example and Necessary Demonstration.

Millenial Harbinger. Believed in progress and that we were working toward the Millenium. Believed that we could unite all Christians

C of C is the ultimate church in that it has a very strong dogmatic approach and they/we believe that we can answer any question with the “correct” answer.

Modernist Christian perspective. Christianity is a series of propositions which are either true or false.

Very analytical. Because of their stress on the rational, CoC greatly diminishes the importance of the Holy Spirit.

Strong on doctrine, but weak on principle.

Stress on miracles and prophecies as “proof” of Christian beliefs. Apologetics (what I do!!!) is a very “modern” thing to do.

Characteristics of a “modern” church:

1. Stresses doctrine over practice. Either/or approach to truth.

2. Stresses individuality over corporate aspects of Christianity.

3. Right belief leads to right practice.

4. A strength—rejects most forms of superstition.

**The Death of Postmodernism: What Happened?**

We did not get better and better.

WWI WWII Nuclear Arms Race. Also, greater exposure to Eastern philosophy and religion. The western mindset is NOT the only answer. More recently the rise of China as a world power.

Led to pessimism and a rejection of modern optimism that we are getting better and better.

Led to postmodernism and the rejection of propositional truth and metaphysics.

End of the correspondence theory of truth.

The correspondence theory of truth. A proposition is “true” if it corresponds to or is consistent with reality.

A brief outline of the rise of postmodern thinking (mainly from philosophy)

**Freidrich Nietzche** (1844-1900): The first philosopher who strongly rejected modernism. Thus Spake Zarathustra. God is dead. What he means is that truth and tradition are dead. Attached the enlightenment belief in truth. The world is fragmented. To proclaim a single truth is to destroy the richness and vitality of human experience.

Nietzche saw “truth” as intimately tied to our use of language. “Truth” exists in a language context. This is a very important aspect of how postmoderns think, but I will not go too deeply here, as it is not particularly relevant to postmodernism and culture.

Nietzche: What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms and anthropomorphisms—in short a sum of human relations which have been enhanced, transposed and embellished poetically and rhetorically and which after long use seem firm, canonical and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that this is what they are: worn out metaphors without any sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins.

Enlightenment: We discover truth.

Nietzche: We create truth.

**Martin Heidegger** (1884-1976) An existentialist. Rejected the correspondence theory of truth. Truth is relational. Truth is found in experience and in language.

**Ludwig Wittgenstein** (1889-1951) No proposition can be limited to a single meaning because its meaning is necessarily dependent on its context. Language (and therefore truth) exists in a social context.

I believe the ultimate goal of the human sciences to be not to constitute, but to dissolve man Claude Levi-Strauss. The individual fades into the social and linguistic structure. To understand humans, do not study humans but culture.

**The big three: Michael Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty.**

**Michael Foucault** (1926-1984) A cultural historian or Archaeologist of knowledge.

“Man is an invention of recent date, and one perhaps nearing its end.” There is no such thing as human nature or the common human condition.”

Self is constituted in and through language.

Truth is a fabrication or a fiction.

Truth is the product of the practices that make it possible.

Science is not a methodology but an ideology.

“Knowledge… creates a progressive enslavement to its instinctive power.”

We need to deconstruct apparent knowledge to determine the conditions that brought it into existence.

History has no meaning. It is socially produced.

About literature (including the Bible), “The author does not precede the works.” (therefore the text does not have a single meaning…its “meaning” is determined by the ones who read it rather than the ones who write it.”

1975 plunged into the gay community in San Francisco and more especially the consensual sado-masochistic activities in the bath houses. In 1984 he died of AIDS.

**Jacques Derrida** (1930-2004)

“When we write, our writing quickly becomes disengaged from us. It is no longer dependent on us for existence.

A word does not have a fixed meaning, but derives its meaning from its relations within the language system. In other words, the “book” is actually our “reading” of the text.

“Reading is a violent act of mastery over the text.” (in other words there are millions of

Books of Luke or John or Romans)

**Richard Rorty** (1931-2007) Pragmatic Postmodernism. A less pessimistic postmodernist. Married a Mormon woman.

Truth a matter of human convention.

Looks for coherence rather than correspondence Statements are “true” insofar as they cohere with the entire system of beliefs. Truth is what works. What is right is what is useful. Perhaps some bits of tradition might be useful. Truth is truth for us, but we should seek better kinds of truths by looking for coherence. “What matters is our loyalty to other human beings clinging together against the dark, not our hope of getting things right.”

**Postmodern thinking:**

Postmoderns have no worldview (except the view that there is no correct worldview)

Truth is found in the community, not in the individual.

Postmodernism rejects ontological truth and metanarritives. (in other words it accepts relativism)

“Post-modernism signals the death of such ‘metanarratives’ whose secretly terroristic function is to ground and legitimate the illusion of a “universal” human history. Terry Eagleton

Jean-Francois Lyotard Simplifying to the extreme I define postmodernism as incredulity toward metanarrative.

The goal of postmodern philosophy and scholarship is to “deconstruct” beliefs such as Christianity—to find out where it came from and its various parts—to destroy its violent metanarrative—to make it meaningless.

With postmodernism, the difference between truth and fiction has nearly vanished.

**Postmodernism and culture:**

Postmoderns prefer difference to uniformity heterogeneity over homogeneity

Postmoderns prefer the local to the universal “Think globally, act locally”

Postmoderns value the community over the individual.

The postmodernist is not searching for truth but is a collector of experience.

Modern pop culture is a reflector of postmodern thinking.

It values the eclectic. It joins disparate ideas and juxtaposes them. It uses irony. (Yes, I agree with that… no, wait a minute, no, I do not agree with that)

The postmodern values, above all, diversity and tolerance.

Modernism → Postdmodernism = Industrial Age → Information age.

The mobile device screen makes the difference between what is real and is not real murky. It merges the present and the past. Movies and books constantly move around in time and location. This is a postmodern thing to do.

Reality TV is the ultimate postmodern experience.

Postmodern is the centerless culture. It offers a heterotopia.

**An analysis of Postmodernism:**

**Strengths:**

1. Celebrates cultural and other kinds of diversity.

2. Open-minded.

3. Tolerant (of course tolerance is not always good, but it is generally good).

4. A more accurate view of history than the modern view.

5. Open to Eastern and other ways of thinking. Not married to Western thinking as the only good way to think.

6. Celebrates relationships and community.

7. Refutes the false and prideful claims of Modernism—especially the idea that humans can discover truth.

**Weaknesses:**

1. Denies the existence of truth when truth is real. Its most basic premise is simply not true.

 a. Surely science is on to something.

2. Circular reasoning. Are you absolutely sure there is no absolute truth?

3. No moral compass.

4. Dismisses the role of the revolutionary, the idealist

5. Reduces the importance of the individual.

**Postmodernism and Christianity:**

Fundamentally, we cannot accept postmodernism as a world view as Christians.

Christianity includes propositional truths. The Bible uses the term *truth* more than 200 times and the term *understand* about 300 times. Obviously, God says that his Word is truth and that we are expected to understand and obey it. Sanctify them in the Truth. Your Word is truth! (John 17:17)

Christianity tells us that History IS a story. There is a Grand Narrative—a metanarrative.

Postmodernists say that there is no “center.” We disagree, Jesus is the center.

Although postmodernism can be a helpful critique to modernist approach to scripture, postmodernism rejects the idea of truth and that a scripture has a single interpretation (2 Peter 1:21). This is absolutely unacceptable in the Christian context.

**Positives about Postmodernism viz a viz Biblical Christianity**

Allows us to recognize that in Christianity which is not strictly rational. Helps us to appreciate that which is “mysterious” in Christianity.

Helps us to know that principles have different applications in different cultures.

Helps us American Christians understand that American Christianity will not look like Nigerian Christianity. Helps us to recognize that much of what we call Christianity is really just Americananity.

Can help us at certain points in our hermeneutics to recognize that other world views are behind what is happening and what is being said in the Bible.

Rightly points out that the Enlightenment ideal of discovering universal truth through rational analysis is a chimera.

Helps us to understand that not all will interpret the Bible the same and why this is true. It will help us to be less judgmental when this might be a good idea.

Helps us to appreciate and celebrate the communal aspects of Christianity and to defeat the hyper individualism which has crept into the Church. Christianity and postmodernism agree that community is important and communities have beliefs and spiritual cultures.

Helps us to remember the need to do social good, to help and be involved in our communities.

Stanley Grenz: “Unfortunately, evangelicals have often uncritically accepted the modern view of knowledge despite the fact that at certain points the postmodern critique is more in keeping with Christian theological understandings”

**Characteristics of the postmodern church:**

1. Ecclectic. More open to a wide variety of ideas and beliefs.

2. More interested in community and relationships than in individual faith.

3. More socially aware and more oriented toward social justice.

4. Less interested in doctrine.

**A Case Study: The Emerging Church**

1. Reject propositional truth. Avowedly antidogmatic. Value broad-mindedness.

2. A response to dogmatic “modern” and fundamentalist Christianity and a response to the megachurch movement.

3. Reject leadership and authority. Spontaneous worship services. Judges 17:6 (also Judges 21:25): “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.”

4. Both/and rather than either/or approach to truth.

5. Avowedly postmodern

6. Emphasize life over truth orthopraxy over orthodoxy. Your life is a measure of your religion, not your beliefs.

7. Non judgmental. Christianity not primarily about salvation but about living correctly. Christianity more about a journey than a destination.

8. Strong emphasis on social justice.

9. Lean more left politically than evangelicals.

As with all postmoderns, they are self-contradictory.

Some common statements in postmodern religious thinking would be along these lines: “Christianity should be presented through loving attitudes rather than through doctrines.” “It is not what we believe that matters; it is what we do in serving others.” “The Bible is intended to teach us through narratives lessons about life, not through statements of propositional truth.”

No matter what the weaknesses of the emerging churches may be, reactions to traditional religion are not only understandable— they are called for by the teachings of the Bible itself! The question is whether the reactions of the Emerging Church are in fact biblical reac­tions producing biblical directions. Therein lay the deeper problems with this emerging movement. Gordon Ferguson.

This is a mixed bag. We can learn from the Emerging Church, but should not follow them down the postmodern hole.

**Advice to Christians for working in a postmodern world:**

Remember, neither Modernism nor Postmodernism is the enemy. Satan is the enemy.

We need to be well aware of how the postmodern mind thinks and be prepared to correct this thinking where that is needed.

We need to consider how we can adapt what we do to make Christianity more appealing to the postmodern person (without, of course, in any way watering down the truth!!!!!!!) We need to think about how the Christian message resonates with the postmodern person.

1. Emphasize service to the community—especially group outreach.
2. Include a variety of kinds of music and cultural influence in how you do church and in church activities.
3. Emphasize the communal and relational aspects of Christianity in your outreach.
4. Be prepared to deconstruct the deconstruction mindset. Certain aspects of the postmodern mindset needs to be identified and corrected. This will be an ongoing process.
5. While at the same time, stressing servant leadership and multiple points of view, explain carefully the need for strong leadership and organization in order for the church to be effective.
6. Be aware that, although doctrine is important and it must be taught carefully and emphasized, the emphasis on doctrine will not be what draws the postmodern person in to church. The same can be said for classic apologetics.
7. We need to remember that repentance is not a group activity. Personal, individual reflection and repentance for individual sins is required for salvation.

Summary:

Watch your life (postmodernism) and your doctrine (modernism). Be diligent in them, for if you do so, you will save both yourself and your hearers (1 Tim 4:16)

“There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false.”
― [Harold Pinter](http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/1197.Harold_Pinter)

“Whereas modern cynicism brought despair about the ability of the human species to realize laudable ideals, postmodern cynicism doesn't — not because it's optimistic, but because it can't take ideals seriously in the first place. The prevailing attitude is Absurdism. A postmodern magazine may be irreverent, but not bitterly irreverent, for it's not purposefully irreverent; its aim is indiscriminate, because everyone is equally ridiculous. And anyway, there's no moral basis for passing judgment. Just sit back and enjoy the show.”
― [Robert Wright](http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/57798.Robert_Wright), [*The Moral Animal: Why We Are the Way We Are: The New Science of Evolutionary Psychology*](http://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/668334)

“If relativism signifies contempt for fixed categories and those who claim to be the bearers of objective immortal truth, then there is nothing more relativistic than Fascist attitudes and activity. From the fact that all ideologies are of equal value, we Fascists conclude that we have the right to create our own ideology and to enforce it with all the energy of which we are capable.”
― [Benito Mussolini](http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/221166.Benito_Mussolini)

“Postmodernity is said to be a culture of fragmentary sensations, eclectic nostalgia, disposable simulacra, and promiscuous superficiality, in which the traditionally valued qualities of depth, coherence, meaning, originality, and authenticity are evacuated or dissolved amid the random swirl of empty signals.”
― [Jean Baudrillard](http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/1264.Jean_Baudrillard)

“We are living in a time when sensitivities are at the surface, often vented with cutting words. Philosophically, you can believe anything so as you do not claim it a better way. Religiously, you can hold to anything, so long as you do not bring Jesus Christ into it. If a spiritual idea is eastern, it is granted critical immunity; if western, it is thoroughly criticized. Thus, a journalist can walk into a church and mock its carryings on, but he or she dare not do the same if the ceremony is from eastern fold. Such is the mood at the end of the twentieth century. A mood can be a dangerous state of mind, because it can crush reason under the weight of feeling. But that is precisely what I believe postmodernism best represents - a mood.”
― [Ravi Zacharias](http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/3577.Ravi_Zacharias), [*Jesus Among Other Gods: The Absolute Claims of the Christian Message*](http://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/204101)

“The radical hermeneutic of suspicion that characterizes all of post-modernity is essentially nihilistic, denying the very possibility of creative or healing love. In the cross and resurrection of Jesus we find the answer: the God who made the world is revealed in terms of a self-giving love that no hermeneutic of suspicion can ever touch, in a Self that found itself by giving itself away, in a Story that was never manipulative but always healing and recreating, and in a Reality that can truly be known, indeed to know which is to discover a new dimension of knowledge, the dimension of loving and being loved.”
― [N.T. Wright](http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/38932.N_T_Wright), [*The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is*](http://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/207490)