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Ministry is Stranger Than it Used to Be: The Challenge of Postmodernism

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A common concern now seems to emerge wherever ministers gather—ministry is stranger than it used to be. Not that ministry is more difficult, more tiring, or more demanding . . . just different—and increasingly strange.

That sense of strangeness may well be due to the rise of postmodern culture and philosophy; perhaps the most important intellectual and cultural movement of the late twentieth century. What difference does postmodernism make? Just look at the modern media, pop culture, and the blank stares you receive from some persons when you talk about truth, meaning, and morality.

Postmodernism developed among academics and artists, but has quickly spread throughout the culture. At the most basic level, postmodernism refers to the passing of modernity and the rise of a new cultural movement. Modernity—the dominant worldview since the Enlightenment—has been supplanted by postmodernism, which both extends and denies certain principles and symbols central to the modern age.

Clearly, much of the literature about postmodernism is nonsensical and hard to take seriously. When major postmodern figures speak or write, the gibberish which often results sounds more like a vocabulary test than a sustained argument. But postmodernism cannot be dismissed as unimportant or irrelevant. This is not a matter of concern only among academics and the *avant garde*—this new movement represents a critical challenge to the Christian church, and to the minister.

Actually, postmodernism may not be a movement or methodology at all. We might best describe postmodernism as a *mood* which sets itself apart from the certainties of the modern age. This mood is the heart of the postmodern challenge.

What are the contours of this postmodern mood? Is this new movement helpful in our proclamation of the Gospel? Or, will the postmodern age bring a great retreat from Christian truth? A look at the basic features of postmodernism may be helpful.

The Deconstruction of Truth

Though the nature of truth has been debated throughout the centuries, postmodernism has turned this debate on its head. While most arguments throughout history have focused on rival claims to truth, postmodernism rejects the very notion of truth as fixed, universal, objective, or absolute.

The Christian tradition understands truth as established by God and revealed through the self-revelation of God in Scripture. Truth is eternal, fixed, and universal. Our responsibility is to order our minds in accordance with God's revealed truth and to bear witness to this truth. We serve a Savior who identified himself as "the Way, the Truth, and the Life" and called for belief.

Modern science, itself a product of the Enlightenment, rejected revelation as a source of truth and put the scientific method in its place. Modernity attempted to establish truth on the basis of scientific precision through the process of inductive thought and investigation. The other disciplines attempted to follow the lead of the scientists in establishing objective truth through rational thought. Modernists were confident that their approach would yield objective and

universal truths by means of human reason.

The postmodernists reject both the Christian and modernist approaches to the question of truth. According to postmodern theory, truth is not universal, is not objective or absolute, and cannot be determined by a commonly accepted method. Instead, postmodernists argue that truth is socially constructed, plural, and inaccessible to universal reason.

As postmodern philosopher Richard Rorty asserts, truth is made rather than found. According to the deconstructionists, one influential sect among the postmodernists, all truth is socially constructed. That is, social groups construct their own “truth” in order to serve their own interests. As Michel Foucault—one of the most significant postmodern theorists—argued, all claims to truth are constructed to serve those in power. Thus, the role of the intellectual is to *deconstruct* truth claims in order to liberate the society.

What has been understood and affirmed as truth, argue the postmodernists, is nothing more than a convenient structure of thought intended to oppress the powerless. Truth is not universal, for every culture establishes its own truth. Truth is not objectively real, for all truth is merely constructed—as Rorty stated, truth is *made*, not *found*.

Little imagination is needed to see that this radical relativism is a direct challenge to the Christian gospel. Our claim is not to preach one truth among many; about one Savior among many; through one gospel, among many. We do not believe that the Christian gospel is a socially constructed truth, but the Truth which sets sinners free from sin—and is objectively, universally, historically true. As the late Francis Schaeffer instructed, the Christian church must contend for *true truth*.

The Death of the Metanarrative

Since postmodernists believe all truth to be socially constructed, all presentations of absolute, universal, established truth must be resisted. All grand and expansive accounts of truth, meaning, and existence are cast aside as “metanarratives” which claim far more than they can deliver.

Jean-Francois Lyotard, perhaps the most famous European postmodernist, defined postmodernism in this way: “Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives.”⁽¹⁾ Thus, all the great philosophical systems are dead, all cultural accounts are limited, all that remains are little stories accepted as true by different groups and cultures. Claims to universal truth—the metanarratives—are oppressive, “totalizing” and thus must be resisted.

The problem with this, of course, is that Christianity is meaningless apart from the gospel—which is a metanarrative. Indeed, the Christian gospel is nothing less than the *Metanarrative of all Metanarratives*. For Christianity to surrender the claim that the gospel is universally true and objectively established is to surrender the center of our faith. Christianity is the great metanarrative of redemption. Our story begins with creation by the sovereign, omnipotent God; continues through the fall of the humanity into sin and the redemption of sinners through the substitutionary work of Christ on the cross; and promises an eternal dual destiny for all humanity—the redeemed with God forever in glory and the unredeemed in eternal punishment. That is the message we preach—and it is a glorious, world-changing metanarrative.

We do not preach the gospel as one narrative among many true narratives, or as “our” narrative alongside the authentic narratives of others. We cannot retreat to claim that biblical truth is merely true *for us*. Our claim is that the Bible is the Word of God *for all*. This is deeply offensive to the postmodern worldview, which charges all who claim universal truth with imperialism and oppression.

The Demise of the Text

If the metanarrative is dead, then the great texts behind the metanarratives must also be dead. Postmodernism asserts the fallacy of ascribing meaning to a text, or even to the author. The reader establishes the meaning, and no controls limit the meaning of the reading.

Jacques Derrida, the leading literary deconstructionist, described this move in terms of the “death of the author” and the “death of the text.” Meaning—*made*, not *found*—is created by the reader in the act of reading. The text must be deconstructed in order to get rid of the author and let the text live as a liberating word.

This new hermeneutical method explains much of the current debate in literature, politics, law, and theology. All texts—whether the Holy Scripture, the United States Constitution, or the works of Mark Twain—are subjected to esoteric criticism and dissection, all in the name of liberation.

Texts, according to the postmodernists, reveal a subtext of oppressive intentions on the part of the author, and so must be deconstructed. This is no matter of mere academic significance. This is the argument behind much contemporary constitutional interpretation made by judges, the presentation of issues in the media, and the fragmentation of modern biblical scholarship. The rise of feminist, liberation, homosexual, and various other interest-group schools of interpretation is central to this postmodern principle.

Therefore, the Bible is subjected to radical re-interpretation, often with little or no regard for the plain meaning of the text or the clear intention of the human author. Texts which are not pleasing to the postmodern mind are rejected as oppressive, patriarchal, heterosexist, homophobic, or deformed by some other political or ideological bias. The authority of the text is denied in the name of liberation, and the most fanciful and ridiculous interpretations are celebrated as “affirming” and thus “authentic.”

Of course, the notion of the “death of the author” takes on an entirely new meaning when applied to Scripture, for we claim that the Bible is not the mere words of men, but the Word of God. Postmodernism’s insistence on the death of the author is inherently atheistic and anti-supernaturalistic. The claim to divine revelation is written off as only one more projection of oppressive power.

The Dominion of Therapy

When truth is denied, therapy remains. The critical questions shifts from “What is true?” to “What makes me feel good?.” This cultural trend has been developing throughout the century, but now reaches epic proportions.

The culture we confront is almost completely under submission to what Philip Reiff called the “triumph of the therapeutic.” In a postmodern world, all issues eventually revolve around the self. Thus, enhanced self-esteem is all that remains as the goal of many educational and theological approaches. Categories such as “sin” are rejected as oppressive and harmful to self-esteem.

Therapeutic approaches are dominant in a postmodern culture made up of individuals uncertain that truth even exists—but assured that our self-esteem must remain intact. Right and wrong are discarded as out-of-date reminders of an oppressive past. In the name of our own “authenticity” we will reject all inconvenient moral standards and replace concern for *right* and *wrong* with the assertion of our *rights*.

Theology is likewise reduced to therapy. Entire theological systems and approaches are constructed with the goal reduced to nothing more than self-esteem for individuals and special groups. These “feel good” theologies dispense with the “negativity” of offensive biblical texts, or with the Bible altogether. Out are categories such as “lostness” and judgment. In their place are vague notions of acceptance without repentance and wholeness without redemption. We may not know (or care) if we are saved or lost, but we certainly do feel better about ourselves.

The Decline of Authority

Since postmodern culture is committed to a radical vision of liberation, all authorities must be overthrown. Among the dethroned authorities are texts, authors, traditions, metanarratives, the Bible, God, and all powers on heaven and earth. Except, of course, for the authority of the postmodern theorists and cultural figures, who wield their power in the name of oppressed peoples everywhere.

According to the postmodernists, those in authority use their power to remain in power, and to serve their own interests. Their laws, traditions, texts, and “truth” are nothing more than that which is designed to maintain them in power.

So, the authority of governmental leaders is eroded, as is the authority of teachers, community leaders, parents, and ministers. Ultimately, the authority of God is rejected as totalitarian and autocratic. Ministers are representatives of this autocratic deity, and are to be resisted as authorities as well.

Doctrines, traditions, creeds and confessions—all are to be rejected and charged with limiting self-expression and representing oppressive authority. Preachers are tolerated so long as they stick to therapeutic messages of enhanced self-esteem, and resisted whenever they inject divine authority or universal claims to truth in their sermons.

The Displacement of Morality

Ivan, in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov* was right—if God is dead everything *is* permissible. The God allowed by postmodernism is not the God of the Bible, but a vague idea of spirituality. There are no tablets of stone, no Ten Commandments . . . no rules.

Morality is, along with other foundations of culture, discarded as oppressive and totalitarian. A pervasive moral relativism marks postmodern culture. This is not to say that postmodernists are reluctant to employ moral language. To the contrary, postmodern culture is filled with moral discourse. But the issues of moral concern are quite arbitrary, and in many cases represent a reversal of biblical morality.

Homosexuality, for example, is openly advocated and accepted. The rise of gay and lesbian studies in universities, the emergence of homosexual political power, and the homoerotic images now common to popular culture mark this dramatic moral reversal. Homosexuality is no longer considered a sin. *Homophobia* is now targeted as sin, and demands for tolerance of “alternative lifestyles” have now turned into demand for public celebration of all lifestyles as morally equal.

Michael Jones described modernity as “rationalized sexual misbehavior,” and postmodernity is its logical extension. Michel Foucault, who argued that all sexual morality is an abuse of power, called for postmodernism to celebrate “polymorphous perversity.” He lived and died dedicated to this lifestyle, and his prophecy has been fulfilled in this decade.

Christian Ministry in a Postmodern Age

Postmodernism represents the unique challenge facing Christianity in this generation. Walter Truett Anderson described the postmodern reality in his clever book, *Reality Isn't What it Used to Be*(2) This is the central claim of postmodernism—reality is not what it used to be, and never will be again. Humanity now come of age, we will make our own truth, define our own reality, and seek our own self-esteem.

In this culture, ministry *is* stranger than it used to be. Postmodern concepts of truth now reign in the postmodern age—and even in the postmodern pew. Research indicates that a growing majority of those who claim to be Christian reject the very notion of absolute truth.

The “death of the text” is evident in the resistance to biblical preaching in many churches. Postmodern ears no longer want to hear the “thus saith the Lord” of the biblical text. Since truth is made, and not found, we can design our own personal religion or spirituality—and leave out inconvenient doctrines and moral commands. Postmodernism promises that the individual can construct a personal structure of spirituality, free from outside interference or permission. Under the motto, “There's no truth like my truth,” postmodernism's children will establish their own doctrinal system, and will defy correction.

Gene Veith, dean of the School of Arts and Sciences at Concordia University, tells of a young man who claimed to be a Christian and professed belief in Christ and love for the Bible, but also believed in reincarnation. His pastor confronted this belief in reincarnation by directing the young man to Hebrews 9:27. The text was read: “It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment.” The young man looked back at his pastor and replied, “Well, that's your interpretation.”(3)

In the name of postmodernism, *anything* can be explained away as a matter of interpretation. Games played with language mean that every statement must be evaluated with care. A statement as clear and plain as the first line of the Apostles' Creed, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth,” must be evaluated in terms of the speaker's intentions. Does this confession assert belief that God is actually the maker of heaven and earth, or is this a statement of mere personal sentiment?

The strangeness of ministry in a postmodern age can be seen in Bible studies which do not study the Bible, but are

psychological exercises in self-discovery; in the cafeteria-style morality practiced by so many church members; and in the growing acceptance of other religions as valid paths to salvation.

Modern culture is revolt against the truth, and postmodernism is but the latest form of this revolt. Ministry in these strange times calls for undiluted conviction and faithful apologetics. The temptations to compromise are great, and the opposition which comes to anyone who would claim to preach absolute and eternal truth is severe. But this is the task of the believing church.

We must understand postmodernism, read its theorists and learn its language. This is much a missiological challenge as an intellectual exercise. We cannot address ourselves to a postmodern culture unless we understand its mind.

By its very nature, postmodernism is doomed to self-destruction. Its central principles cannot be consistently applied. (Just ask a postmodern academic to accept the “death of the text” in terms of his contract.) The church must continue to be the people of truth, holding fast to the claims of Christ, and contending for the faith once for all delivered to the saints. Postmodernism rejects any “once for all” truth, but the church cannot compromise its witness.

The Christian ministry *is* stranger than it used to be. But this is an era of great evangelistic opportunity, for as the false gods of postmodernism die, the church bears witness to the Word of Life. In the midst of a postmodern age, our task is to bear witness to the Truth, and to pick up the pieces as the culture breaks apart.

Endnotes:

1. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, “Theory and History of Literature,” vol. 10 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. xxiv.
2. Walter Truett Anderson, *Reality Isn't What it Used to Be* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990).
3. Gene Veith, “Catechesis, Preaching, and Vocation,” in *Here We Stand*, ed. James Boice and Ben Sasse (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), pp. 82-83.

