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Truth-Telling is Stranger Than It Used to Be, Part One

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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 individual Christian.

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 presentation 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.” 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 bear—and it is an individual-transforming and world-changing metanarrative.

We do not present 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.

