



This material has been provided by Asbury Theological Seminary in good faith of following ethical procedures in its production and end use.

The Copyright law of the United States (title 17, United States code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyright material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to finish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specific conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be *“used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research.”* If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excess of “fair use,” that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law.

**By using this material, you are consenting to abide by this copyright policy. Any duplication, reproduction, or modification of this material without express written consent from Asbury Theological Seminary and/or the original publisher is prohibited.**

### **Contact**

B.L. Fisher Library  
Asbury Theological Seminary  
204 N. Lexington Ave.  
Wilmore, KY 40390

**B.L. Fisher Library’s Digital Content**  
[place.asburyseminary.edu](http://place.asburyseminary.edu)



**Asbury Theological Seminary**  
205 North Lexington Avenue  
Wilmore, Kentucky 40390

800.2ASBURY  
[asburyseminary.edu](http://asburyseminary.edu)

CHRISTIAN POSTMODERNISM:  
A Constructive Proposal  
for an Incarnational Theology  
for Contemporary America

Scott Hardaway

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Divinity degree from  
Asbury Theological Seminary

Summer 2001

# DEDICATION

In Loving Memory  
of

Virginia Evelyn Hardaway,

who never paused to rest  
in her spiritual journey.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Dedication</b>		<b>i</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>		<b>ii</b>
<b>Preface</b>		<b>v</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>“An Unholy Alliance?”</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter One</b>	<b>“What Are Modernism and Postmodernism?”</b>	<b>13</b>
	I. The Modern Age	14
	II. The Postmodern Age	22
	III. Christian Postmodernism: Do We Need It?	28
<b>Chapter Two</b>	<b>“The Postmodern Ethos: A Skeptical Longing”</b>	<b>35</b>
	I. Skepticism	35
	A. The Reason for Skepticism	35
	B. The Performance of Skepticism	39
	II. The Longing for Transcendence	43
	A. Transcending Space	44
	B. Transcending Time	45
	C. Transcending Life	46
	D. A Note on Artificial Transcendence	47
	III. Christian Postmodernism—A New Hermeneutic, Part I	48
	A. How Modern Hermeneutics Overestimates Its Worth	48
	B. Westphal’s Hermeneutical Method	51
	1. The Hermeneutics of Finitude	52
	2. The Hermeneutics of Suspicion	54
	C. Gadamerian Dialogical Hermeneutics	56
	IV. Conclusion	60
<b>Chapter Three</b>	<b>“Postmodern Spirituality”</b>	<b>64</b>
	I. The Advent of Psychology	64
	A. The Challenge of Romanticism	65
	B. Modern Man Masters Mind	66
	1. Who We Are	66
	2. Why We Do What We Do	67
	3. How We Can Change What We Do	68
	II. The Psychological Spirituality of Postmodernism	69
	A. Private	71
	B. Unorthodox	74
	C. Self-Oriented	76
	III. Christian Postmodernism—A New Hermeneutic, Part II	78
	A. Ricoeurian Narratival Hermeneutics	79
	B. Unifying Gadamer and Ricoeur	83
	IV. Conclusion	84



<b>Chapter Four</b>	<b>“Postmodern Ethics”</b>	<b>91</b>
I.	The Impact of Psychology on Ethics	91
II.	A Postmodern Ethical Appraisal of Biblical Christianity	99
III.	Christian Postmodernism—An Ethics of the Other	100
	A. Other Races	104
	B. Other Religions	105
	C. Evangelizing the Other	107
IV.	Conclusion	112
<b>Chapter Five</b>	<b>“Postmodern Pop Culture”</b>	<b>117</b>
I.	The Rise of Pop Culture	118
II.	The Power of Pop Culture	120
III.	Pop Culture as Ontology	124
IV.	Christian Postmodernism—A Theology of Images	127
	A. Examining Images	127
	B. Appropriating Images	130
	1. The Image of Home	130
	2. The Image of Incorporation	133
	C. Using Images	136
V.	Conclusion	138
<b>Chapter Six</b>	<b>“Misappropriations of Postmodernism”</b>	<b>141</b>
I.	Possibilities for Misappropriations	142
	A. Denigration of the Past	142
	B. Denial of Authority	143
	C. Departure from Orthodoxy	145
	D. Denunciation of Deep Thought	147
	E. Deference to Relativism	148
II.	Conclusion	149
<b>Bibliography</b>		<b>152</b>

## PREFACE

According to architectural historian Charles Jencks, modernism “died in St. Louis, Missouri, on July 15<sup>th</sup>, 1972, at 3:32 p.m. (or thereabouts),”<sup>1</sup> when the Pruitt-Igoe housing project, a symbol of the rationality of modern architecture, was destroyed. That structure had received fulsome accolades in 1951, when the plans were revealed, for its innovative design, which accentuated functionality and rationality. It was hoped that the purism of the style and the hospital-like, concrete-slab atmosphere would inspire its inhabitants to rational and virtuous behavior, but instead this and many other like-minded utopian architectural endeavors of the modern period became breeding grounds for the inner-city drug business. The buildings had to be razed because of vandalism wrought by the inhabitants themselves out of their despair, which was not ameliorated by their inadequate, soulless concrete abodes. Since that time, claims Jencks, we have inhabited a *postmodern* world, a world as nebulous and inchoate as its moniker.

Having been born in 1974, I began life in a postmodern reality (according to Jencks, at any rate), but my exposure to the term is actually quite recent. I recall first hearing the word in college and experiencing a sensation of dismissiveness. “Isn’t modernity the most recent period of history?” I wondered. “How can we be beyond the present?” I attributed the term to be simply the tool of someone who wanted to sound profound by saying something self-contradictory and decided not to give the notion any credence.

In college, I began to explore some areas of interest, which, at the time, I had no idea might be related to each other in any meaningful way. The first of these was history. I entered college as a history major with intent to pursue a law degree, but early on in my academic career I became soured on that profession. After a period of struggling and trying to reestablish a direction for my life, I decided to study theology in my postgraduate work, but since I still

greatly enjoyed my history classes, I continued in the history major, with an emphasis on European history. My second area of interest was in Christian theology, which was initially a broad interest in all aspects of Christianity, but in time my main concern in that field came to lie with practical theology—that is, how the Christian life should be worked out in the lives of Christians. Though I found systematic theology to be interesting and provocative, to me it was also ultimately reductionist because of its separation from the text of scripture and too abstract its all-inclusive systematization. I think this judgment sprang from engagement with my third interest, which was cultural analysis. As long as I can remember, it has been central for me to know my place in whatever larger structures in which I find myself—whether in my family, my school, a musical group, my church, The Church, or the larger society. Therefore, it has been important to me to observe how these various entities operate, what the value systems are of each, and what sorts of competing loyalties might arise. I began to read books about the culture, especially those that portrayed worldviews with which I was unfamiliar, such as *Culture Wars*<sup>2</sup> by James Davison Hunter, and *Hollywood vs. America*<sup>3</sup> by Michael Medved. Such books prompted me to deep concern about the direction of the larger culture and its attitude toward Christians.

When I came to seminary, it was with a fairly harsh appraisal of postmodernism and its deleterious effects on society—rampant relativism, the new “tolerance,” bankruptcy of morals, denial of absolute truth, political correctness, and the like. However, because of my interest in the larger patterns of the culture, it was something I wanted to understand better. This I was able to do because of my background in history, as postmodernism defines itself in contradistinction to the ethos and heritage of the Enlightenment. One cannot understand postmodernism without an appreciation for its historical situation and the historical impetuses which brought about its

rise. As I began to understand more of postmodernism and its critique, I began to see correlations between the postmodern appraisal of the Enlightenment Project and what I considered to be a Christian evaluation of the same. Thus, it became important for me to determine a practical theology for living in a postmodern world—that is, what attitude should a Christian have toward the cultural realities brought about by postmodernism?

The Church has historically not been comfortable with a nuanced portrayal of anything; either a person or idea is an unmitigated evil or a pure representation of the divine. But this accords neither with the facts of our world in which good and evil are often mixed, nor with Scripture, which declares that “we have this treasure in jars of clay” (2Co. 4:7) and that on earth “we see but a poor reflection” (1Co. 13:12). I believe that Christians can find value in the ideas of postmodernism, but, conversely, thoughtless, reflexive acceptance can lead to disastrous consequences in the life of the Christian. The question, then, is how to walk the line that divides the extremes. This thesis is an attempt to answer that question.

**ENDNOTES**

---

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Stuart Sim, ed., *The Routledge Critical Dictionary of Postmodern Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 290.

<sup>2</sup> James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> Michael Medved, *Hollywood vs. America* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).

## INTRODUCTION AN UNHOLY ALLIANCE?

It has often been noted lately that Western society is in the midst of a profound transformation, that the culture is reconstructing itself around a new set of beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and priorities. There is a sense that this transition is not simply a transient phenomenon, nor is it an addendum to the status quo, but a radical departure from its predecessors. On the whole, it is the young who display this new way of being, but they are not merely the latest manifestation of the familiar generation gap, now in new garb. No, they are the harbingers of things to come, the heralds who scout in front and sound the signal call that warns of the new territory ahead.

Their call is translated by the media into statistics and distilled blurbs that report items of change with regard to religious practices, participation in democracy, faith in government, sexual and drug-related behavior, respect for authority, confidence in educational institutions, belief in God, and attitudes toward marriage. Fundamentalist and evangelical leaders then often translate the statistics and blurbs of the media into apocalyptic (or sometimes apoplectic) pronouncements of despair and woe, and the church is galvanized against the new evil manifested in the latest cultural expressions of worldliness.

Postmodernism, as this movement has come to be known, has reached to all parts of the earth, crossing the oceans in waves of globalized capitalism, international Hollywood blockbusters, and the ubiquitous Internet. As the cultures westernize, they invariably “postmodernize,” and we are now closer than ever before in human history to a one-world culture.

To give a summary of postmodernism is, in a word, impossible. Not only is it multifaceted, variegated, and subtle, but some expressions of it even resist the idea of definitions in the first place, as naïve pretensions to objectivity that brutalize the independence of the word being defined. Thus, the word itself remains elusive and non-committal to any uniform characterization.

A second difficulty arises as a result of our proximity. As David F. Wells has noted, modernity and postmodernity are too fresh, too many-sided, and too complicated to have produced a clear consensus on what has happened. When one enters this world of cultural analysis, one is entering a murky swamp in which little is settled and much is unexamined or unexplained.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, we lack sufficient perspective on modernity and postmodernity to describe them accurately. Such an endeavor is necessarily doomed to incompleteness and inexactitude, as we wander among the trees and thus try to map the forest.

A third problem stems from the character of postmodernism itself. To a degree equal that of any other philosophy ever produced before, it is not primarily intellectual but experiential. It must be felt to be really understood at all. One must enter into its world and appreciate its concerns before one can perceive the arguments it produces, not the other way around. That is not to say that one must be a convert, a full-fledged postmodern, before one can comprehend postmodernism—like a contemporary incarnation of gnosticism in which the secret knowledge of a community is imparted to the initiate—but rather, that an attack on postmodernism from outside its sympathies fails to take into account the subtlety and sophistication of a postmodern way of being and thinking.

So, given the difficulties, why should we try to contend with postmodernism at all, especially since so many of the articulators of postmodernism are so opposed to the church and even to the very idea of truth? Is it not better to insulate ourselves and our children from their

negative influence, ensuring that the values of the Bible are perpetuated in our progeny? Such a view, in my estimation, fails on several counts. First, it undermines the Great Commission, given to the church by Jesus, to *go* and make disciples (Mt. 28:19-20). This going is not only a geographical going, but an intellectual one as well. There is no philosophy, no ideology, no academic system, no population that should be denied the shining light of the gospel. The love of Christ compels us to reach beyond barriers, whether physical or intellectual, to provide the good news to all people in all places. But the gospel is always enculturated; though the heart of the message is the same, the point of contact and the presentation may differ markedly, depending on the context. We are not allowed to present the gospel only on our terms, in ways with which we identify best and are most comfortable to us; we are obligated to understand our audience and to give good news in ways that are intelligible to them. Therefore, the church has an obligation to wrestle with postmodernism, to value postmoderns, and to craft a presentation of the gospel that communicates God's love to them.

Second, an isolationist approach is counter to the examples given us in Scripture by Jesus and Paul. Jesus took his message of the kingdom beyond his homogenous group, breaking barriers of race, class, gender, and party affiliation in order to display God's gracious inclusion of all humanity. Similarly, Paul not only took the gospel to Gentiles, he entered into their intellectual world so that they would have a chance to understand it. One of the best examples given us is in Paul's interaction with the people of Athens in Acts 17, where Paul "reasoned... in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there" (v. 17 NIV)—this included Epicureans and Stoics, representatives of the preeminent philosophic schools of his day. His apologetic sought to frame the gospel in a way that would resonate with what the Athenians understood, yet without taking away its difficult edge. We will come back to this passage again



in chapter four to look at it in more detail, but it is sufficient to note here that Paul engages his conversationalists on their intellectual turf.

Third, the impetus of a protectionist approach, namely, the desire to shelter oneself or one's progeny from unsavory influences, in the end, is simply specious because the method will not accomplish the objective. To deny the force of postmodernism in our culture is to play the ostrich in willful ignorance of the societal realities that affect our world. Furthermore, it is inevitable that if we do not craft a Christian response to the secular postmodernism that holds sway among the populace, then later generations will become exposed to postmodernism not on our terms but on those of secular postmodernism. We will have failed to equip them to interpret their world in a Christian way, and we will have left them naked with no means to protect their faith.

So we are obligated by the message and example of Scripture and compelled by the dictates of reason to interact with postmodernism rather than withdraw. If you ask, "How is this to be done?" then you have discovered the purpose for this thesis. For this is a momentous challenge. At first blush, it would appear that Christianity and postmodernism would have nothing to say to each other, that the only kind of "dialogue" that we could enter would be an exercise in talking past each other. Where can we find any point of agreement? What do we hold in common? Following are simply a few of the difficulties that emerge in such a conversation.

Jean-François Lyotard, one of the few postmodern philosophers that accepts, let alone deals with, the term *postmodern*, defines postmodernism as "incredulity toward metanarratives."<sup>2</sup> His claim is that much suffering can be traced back to clashes between competing ideologies, or metanarratives—stories of a culture that explain its place in the cosmos, as well as others' places.

These grand stories, in providing a matrix against which all phenomena may be catalogued and placed to fit within the greater scheme, in turn, produce a sense of understanding and belonging for those who adhere to it. The unfortunate result, according to postmodern theorists, is that when the metanarratives of two competing groups enter into conflict, the result is always violence, for each group tries to place the other under its own grand narrational system, which invariably serves to elevate the culture to which it belongs and to denigrate those who fall outside. One example is the metanarrative of modernism that envisioned unfettered human progress, which is to say, progress as defined by those with modern sympathies of rationalism, objectification, and systematization. Unless a culture acceded to the value of these ideals, it was rejected as uncivilized, barbaric, and savage. Consequently, conquest, colonialism, and coerced conversions were justified as “the white man’s burden” to civilize the world. Christianity is itself a metanarrative with an explanation for all phenomena of life and an inviolable divine goal, so it is therefore rejected *a priori* by postmoderns, who discern therein a desire to subjugate the world through “evangelism,” i.e., pressure to abandon one’s views in favor of adopting the views of the privileged, elevated group, in this case, Christianity.

Another point of conflict arises around the foundational issue of truth. Friedrich Nietzsche put forth this account of truth:

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 about which one has forgotten that this is what they are.<sup>3</sup>

Though Nietzsche wrote before the period generally agreed to comprise postmodernism, his philosophy anticipated that of the postmodernists in many significant respects, and more than one postmodern thinker has claimed to owe him a considerable debt; therefore, many consider

him the first postmodern philosopher.<sup>4</sup> With regard to this expression of what truth is, Nietzsche is at his most postmodern. Essentially, he points to the ungroundedness of what we call truth. We each have only our own sensations and personal experiences—which may or may not have any connection with the sensations and experiences of others—upon which to construct a notion of truth. It is only social convention that allows us to call anything “true,” according to postmodernists, because none of us has the ability to transcend our own limitations and to take a peek at reality “as it really is.” Thus, Richard Rorty can claim that “truth... [is] ‘what it is better for us to believe,’ rather than... ‘the accurate representation of reality.’”<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, for postmodernists, our grounding for truth comes from what counts as truth *in our worldview*, which is socially constructed; therefore, *truth itself* is socially constructed. This is problematic for Christians who believe in an omnipotent, omnipresent God, who has revealed Truth both in His spoken word and in His incarnated Word, who Himself claimed to be the Way, the Truth, and the Life. What can it mean in a postmodern setting to say that Christianity is true?

Another area of contention accompanies this concern with truth, and that is the meaning of a text. Postmodern theory largely grew out of the discipline of literary analysis, particularly the discipline of structuralism, which was based on the study of semiology (or semiotics), or the functioning of signs. Many of the most prominent postmodern thinkers, such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Jacques Lacan, were originally structuralists, who gradually produced a new approach to textual interpretation that eventually undermined the whole system of structuralism. Ferdinand de Saussure invented the study of semiotics, and according to his linguistic system, a word is composed of a material component—such as a verbal noise, a physical movement, or a visual pattern (e.g., on a page)—called the *signifier*, and a mental component—the concept or idea represented by the signifier—called the *signified*. The union that

takes place in an individual's mind between these two constitutes a *sign*. Poststructuralist theorists, Derrida in particular, have concentrated on the tenuous relationship between the signifier and the signified, emphasizing instead the role of difference between words as the producer of meaning. This difference is an unstable, indefinable entity that makes the presence of the full meaning of a word impossible to the author or the reader alike. Thus, Derrida dismantles not only Saussurian linguistics but all of Western thought; he claims instead that all claims to language as a neutral vehicle for the transmission of truth are merely attempts to grab power. Christians, however, have a vested interest in the meaning of a text, at least the meaning of the biblical text. If the text of the Bible does not transmit meaning, then of what value is it to the Christian who wishes to abide by its teachings?

In addition to the problems of metanarrative, truth, and meaning, we find further potential for antipathy between Christianity and postmodernism under the rubric of authority. Postmodernism largely follows an ethos of autonomy, which it inherited from its modern predecessor, borne out of a distrust of authorities, who are maligned as restrictive, obstructive, and discouraging of creativity and innovation. In postmodernity, authorities are perpetrators of a status quo that legitimates their positions of power and influence, so the system and the beneficiaries of that system feed off each other in a continual quid pro quo. Nietzsche considered human history to be no more than “the story of petty malice, of violently imposed interpretations, of vicious intentions, of high-sounding stories masking the lowest of motives.”<sup>6</sup>

Foucault has followed him in this stream and has waded even deeper. Foucault's *oeuvre* consists primarily of a series of historical investigations into various particular “discursive formations,” or categories into which people have been classified. His first such study was *Madness and Civilization*, which examined the taxonomy and treatment of the insane. By probing the ever-

adjusting concept of reason, he was able to discern what counted as madness, or unreason, in Western history from the Middle Ages to the present.<sup>7</sup> He demonstrated that even though we think ourselves nowadays to have a more enlightened policy toward the mentally ill, it is only superficially so compared to the “great confinement” during the Age of Reason, whereas the Middle Ages were a period of relative freedom.<sup>8</sup>

In his second major work, *The Birth of the Clinic*, he analyzed both the discursive practices that distinguish health and disease and the quarantining of the sick in institutions known as hospitals. His next archeological analysis in this vein, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, explored the transformation of the brutal treatment of criminals under feudal regimes to the more effective forms of social control in contemporary culture. His last great project, unfinished at his death, was what was intended to be a six-volume *History of Sexuality*, though only the first three were completed. In the first volume, he considered the modern “sciences of sex,” such as psychoanalysis and biology, delimiting them as nothing more than the continuation of the will to power through knowledge (these two ideas were nearly identical for Foucault). The second and third volumes did little to advance the argument of the first, but they did give evidence to Foucault’s case, opposing the view that there is anything inherently natural about any expression of sexuality, by investigating the shift from classical man-boy sexual behavior to the Christian concerns of marriage and heterosexuality.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the similarities between these works, both in method and in interest, one must resist the temptation of classifying Foucault’s thinking, as his production spans traditional disciplinary bounds. “Foucault’s thought is quintessentially postmodern, blurring boundaries between disciplines, theory, and practice, and disrupting fundamental Western truths.”<sup>10</sup> He described his work as a “history of the present,” meaning that his various historical investigations were each

motivated by what he found to be the insupportable stances of those in power in his contemporary world.<sup>11</sup> Thus, in his analyses of insanity, health, confinement, and sexuality, Foucault rejected the definitions and controls of the powerful, which had served to squelch the voices of the marginalized, in a protest against their authority to wield that power. For Foucault, authority is *always* self-interested authority.

Such a vehement anti-authority bias is unnerving for Christians because the whole Christian endeavor is one of submitting to the Lordship of Christ by acceding to the dictates of Scripture. Furthermore, a church community, part of whose job is to establish mutual accountability in areas of doctrine and behavior, has been integral to the structure of Christianity from the very beginning. In addition to the local communities, leadership positions within the church also materialized early, such as the apostles, pastors, elders, and deacons. Authority has been an essential component of Christian life from its inception; thus, a movement that seeks to supplant all authority raises special problems for the church. Nietzsche noticed this problem as acute for the church. “‘Sins’ become indispensable in any society organized by priests: they are the real handles of power. The priest *lives* on sins, it is essential for him that people ‘sin.’ Supreme principle: ‘God forgives those who repent’—in plain language: those who submit to the priest.”<sup>12</sup>

So, with such a seemingly unbridgeable gulf between Christianity and these expressions of postmodernism, the question grows even more urgent, How is any rapprochement to be attempted? What in the world can the church say to postmodernism or vice versa? It may be tempting at this point to throw up our hands and despair of ever finding any point of entry where a conversation might take place. Perhaps we should just accept the consequences that accompany exiting the marketplace of ideas and hope for the best. Or maybe we should hike up the ideological hill beyond

the bounds of postmodernism and lob rhetorical grenades at the citizens below us on the chance that somehow some of them will want to join us.

Of course, I believe that such measures are unnecessary and, indeed, injurious to the cause of Christ. The evangelical church has barely begun to provide a thoughtful response to postmodernism, but this response is vital if the church is to be relevant to its cultural context. My contention here is that the church does indeed have a message for the postmodern culture that does not consist in simply hurling deprecatory salvos, yet which also preserves the integrity of the church. That is, I believe in a *via media*, that both avoids unconscious capitulation to the deficiencies of postmodernism and moves beyond wholesale denunciation of postmodernism, and which addresses fully each of the impasses enumerated above.

Following, then, is my method for effecting this dialogue. In the first five chapters, I set out in the beginning of each to probe into the collective phenomena of postmodernism and to gain a handle thereby on what it is that is happening in postmodernism, to discover—to whatever extent this is possible—what postmodernism *is*. This part of each chapter is an attempt at a portrait of “postmodern America” and an evaluation of the resultant outcomes and implications of postmodernism’s presence. Each of these chapters closes with one or more suggestions for how the church can either learn from or appropriate various aspects of postmodern thinking raised in the first part of the chapter. This Christian internalization of listening to the postmodern world sketches a broad picture of what a postmodern Christianity might look like, especially in contrast to the modern models to which we have become accustomed. Involved in this endeavor is an evaluation of the way we have come to understand these tasks in the modern era, in light of the postmodern critique and the requirements of Scripture.

Starting in the more philosophical, theoretical realm, I examine in chapter one the intellectual roots of postmodernism and its strained (yet existent) relationship with its estranged parent, modernism. Then, I progressively move into the more concrete manifestations of those philosophies, such as the postmodern ethos, postmodern spirituality, postmodern ethics, and postmodern pop culture. Chapter six closes the thesis with a cautionary note on possible *misappropriations* of postmodernism.

We began by noting that pollsters ask people specific questions, extracting tidbits about their lives. This is followed by media sensationalization and promulgation, which is in turn taken up by religious leaders to make whatever points they wish based on such statistics. For most of us, this composes the totality of our understanding of postmodernism. Rather than be content with a version of a version of a version, however, I believe that it is incumbent upon the Christian community to examine the roots of these phenomena and to judge them on their own merits against the testimony of Scripture. This is an attempt to do just such a thing, and subsequently to expose to the evangelical church to a new world, a new way of being a faithful witness to the love of God in this place at this time.



## ENDNOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> David F. Wells, *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Theory and History of Literature Series, vol. 10 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lie," in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann, Viking Portable Library Series, no. 62, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 46-47.

<sup>4</sup> See Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 83-105.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 10.

<sup>6</sup> Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 108. This quote is the authors' appraisal of what Foucault thinks of Nietzsche.

<sup>7</sup> Mary McClintock Fulkerson and Susan J. Dunlap, "Michel Foucault (1926-1984): Introduction," in *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader*, ed. Graham Ward, Blackwell Readings in Modern Theology Series, ed. L Gregory Jones and James J. Buckley (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 117.

<sup>8</sup> Stuart Sim, ed., *The Routledge Critical Dictionary of Postmodern Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 245.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>10</sup> Fulkerson and Dulap, p. 116.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>12</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Antichrist: Attempt at a Critique of Christianity," in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann, Viking Portable Library Series, no. 62, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 598, aphorism 26.

## CHAPTER ONE

# WHAT ARE MODERNISM AND POSTMODERNISM?

Broadly speaking, postmodernity is the period of time that follows the modern era, just as post-Elizabethan England deals with England since the time of Elizabeth, and a postscript comes at the end of a book. Of course, this only begs the question, “What is the modern era?” This is especially confusing if we understand *modern* in its everyday usage, which means “contemporary, current, up-to-date.” How could anything ever be *post-modern*? It is vital to note that in discussions of modernity and postmodernity, *modern* is used in a rather specific way to refer to a way of thinking and being that—for better or worse—is on its way out the door.<sup>1</sup>

These labels, then, are distributed according to whichever style of thinking is revealed by any particular phenomenon. The Empire State Building is symmetrical, functional, organized, rational, and ambitious, a perfect example of modern architecture. MTV is chaotic, emotion-oriented, visually stimulating, and experiential, an exemplar of postmodern impulses. But the labels are applied to far more than simply buildings and TV channels. All conceivable forms of art are in view, including of course the visual and performing arts, as well as cinema, television, architecture, and literature. To these we may also add every kind of academic pursuit—all types of science, history, education, social science, philosophy, etc.—as well as any aspect of daily life—such as bureaucracy, technology, transportation, entertainment, family structure, religious practices, and so on. Each of these may be labeled either *modern* or *postmodern*, depending on the way in which it manifests itself in any particular instance. Some cultural expressions are considered to be inherently modern or postmodern; that is, no matter what form they take, they are unable to escape their category because of the inextricable way in which they are bound to it. It would be hard, for example, to conceive of a postmodern bureaucracy because of its hierarchical structure and

mechanistic, routinized methods and procedures; some say that all television is postmodern because of the ephemerality and disjunction of its various offerings. We will now turn to a closer investigation of modernity and postmodernity and the relationship between the two, as a means of wrapping our minds around them.

## **I. The Modern Age**

To explicate modernism here in any definite way is indeed a daunting task. It is, after all, a thoroughgoing worldview, and one whose presence is not yet absent from our culture, the lack of distance which makes it hard for us to approach it with sufficient perspective, as we have already noted. However, to achieve an understanding of the revolution of postmodernity, some point of reference must be laid; to comprehend the radicalism of postmodernism requires some level of familiarity with the roots from which it springs and against which it revolts.

Broadly speaking, the seed of the modern era was planted in the medieval period, as the Church had become the oppressor of human freedom. This seed of discontent sprouted incipiently in the Renaissance and further in the Reformation, as the importance of humanity and of the individual became key themes in Western culture. The religious wars of the 1600s between the Catholics and Protestants concluded with no winner, and a divided Christianity resulted after scores of bloody conflicts, undermining the viability of ever again synthesizing Christianity with political powers.

Into this picture stepped René Descartes (1596-1650), who is often considered the originating figure of modernity—many historians mark the year of his death as a convenient date for the beginning of that period. It is no understatement to say that his epistemological stamp is present over all subsequent developments in science, medicine, technology, and philosophy.

Cartesianism is at the basis of European history and European philosophical and scientific thinking throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and even after the romantic reaction of the early nineteenth century its influence is still felt in all fields of thought...Cartesianism was long in possession of the modern mind, and the effects of its tenancy are only today wearing thin.<sup>2</sup>

René Descartes, in surveying his world, noticed that there were separate spheres of knowledge, each with its own foundation. Some things rested on divine revelation, others on tradition, but mathematics was a sphere of knowledge all to its own. “Of these,” he wrote, “I delighted most of all in mathematics because of the certainty and the evidence of its reasonings... I was astonished by the fact that no one had built anything more noble upon its foundations, given that they were so solid and firm.”<sup>3</sup> Mathematics was a system that, when followed rigorously without error, would yield only exact, correct answers. His goal for humankind was for all knowledge eventually to become unified upon the solid foundation of mathematics, so that all knowledge would be indisputable and infallible. Of course, he knew that some assumptions would need to remain conjectural, at least until the truth could be discovered indisputably, but he wanted to be able to draw a line between that which is certainly known and that which is simply hypothetical. Thus, he became the first person to ask *how* we know what we know and whether our manner of knowing things is legitimate.

Descartes’ method for achieving this aim was to wrest the quest for knowledge away from its theological entanglements and to claim that quest solely for the realm of philosophy: “I have always thought that two issues—namely, God and the soul—are chief among those that ought to be demonstrated with the aid of philosophy rather than theology.”<sup>4</sup> Previously, tradition had played a large part in solving philosophical questions—Aquinas, for example, had appealed not only to Scripture but also to the Church Fathers and to Aristotle for support of his arguments in the *Summa Theologica*—but Descartes’ new rationalism created a different system, one which rejected prior

tradition and found its authority in the autonomous, rational self, a transition that reached its zenith in Immanuel Kant and has continued unabated. In fact, the individual has become so highly regarded today as the sole arbiter of truth that the heritage of Cartesian thought has been to equate the appeal to authority with a sign of an absence of solid reason. Alasdair MacIntyre comments, “This concept of authority as excluding reason is... itself a peculiarly, even if not exclusively, modern concept, fashioned in a culture to which the notion of authority is alien and repugnant, so that appeals to authority appear irrational.”<sup>5</sup>

Upon the dissemination of Descartes’ ideas, it was immediately clear that a radically new agenda had been launched. In 1642, only five years after the publication of his sketchy *Discourse on Method* and only one year after the completion of the larger, more detailed *Meditations on First Philosophy*, the teaching of Cartesian philosophy was banned at the University of Utrecht because “the professors feared [it] would isolate their students from tradition [and that] they would no longer be able to read philosophical literature or understand concepts of the other sciences.”<sup>6</sup> It was manifest that Cartesianism was not only a new answer to old questions but an entirely different way of doing and teaching philosophy.

Though he denied any hostility toward the church and even believed that he had done a great service to Christianity by unequivocally proving, apart from revelation, God’s existence, Descartes, by beginning the path of suspicion and pitting the individual against the tradition of the community, actually undermined the authority of religion. He legitimated the search for knowledge apart from the context of the Bible and initiated the separation of the secular realm from the spiritual. From that point on, philosophy and science, removed further and further from the context of Scriptural Christianity, increasingly became perceived as the only valid loci for the quest for truth.

At precisely the same time that Descartes was questioning the authority of the Church to serve as a ground for knowledge, there emerged a new way of knowing things, namely science. As new knowledge came pouring in to the western world in a manner unparalleled up to that point in human history, the modern spirit started to seek human emancipation from myths, superstitions, and enthrallment with mysterious powers and forces of nature by means of the progressive operations of a critical reason.<sup>7</sup> As Stanley Grenz succinctly states, “The modern human can appropriately be characterized as *Descartes’s autonomous, rational substance encountering Newton’s mechanistic world.*”<sup>8</sup>

Though the Scientific Revolution had already begun with the astronomical work of Copernicus in the 1500s, it was Francis Bacon (1561-1626) who systematized the world of science with his Scientific Method, the basic structure of which is still used in scientific endeavors today. Bacon criticized the premodern view that nearly all truth had been discovered and needed only to be explained and organized; he saw a world that contained untapped potential and hidden troves of knowledge. Consequently, he offered a new vision of hope and progress for human society, based on the advances through science. He became one of the first thinkers to encourage innovation and change as a desirable presence in society, challenging others to believe in their own abilities rather than in the traditions of the past.

No longer content with the Bible or the tradition of the Church as sources for guidance and grounds for ethics, and increasingly reliant on science for the acquisition of knowledge, the philosophers of the Enlightenment sought a stable ground for ethics in human existence, the embodiment of so-called “natural religion.” After powerfully proving that morality could not rest on reason, Hume tried to build on the foundation laid by Diderot’s attempt to base morality on the desires and passions. Though Hume successfully produced a more sophisticated argument than

Diderot's, it was ultimately an insufficient solution to the problem, as Hume applied an already present—though unacknowledged—normative standard to judge what passions would and would not count as acceptable for serving as a grounds for moral decisions (in the case of competing passions). Furthermore, he was unable to answer why, if moral rules were to be kept only because they served our long-term interests (as he had claimed), we should not be justified in violating them if in any particular situation we should perceive that they would not serve our long-term and/or compelling short-term interests.<sup>9</sup> While he did not firmly ground a system of ethics, as he had hoped, Hume did succeed in enforcing the separation between reason and religion by asserting the authority of the individual over and against the authority of religion, society, tradition, or community.

The chasm widened further with the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Whereas Descartes had simply claimed that human reason was *useful* for grounding our epistemology, Kant effectively argued that no other grounding was even *possible*. Having established the validity of knowledge in the domain of mathematics through the analysis of *a priori* synthetic judgments, and that of physics through the analysis of the categories of understanding, he set out to show that metaphysical knowledge was to be ruled out completely. “When we apply reason to the objective synthesis of appearances, where reason thinks to make its principle of unconditioned unity valid with much plausibility... it soon finds itself involved in such contradictions that it is compelled to relinquish its demands in regard to cosmology.”<sup>10</sup> “Reason falls of itself and even unavoidably” into these contradictions, or antinomies.<sup>11</sup> According to Kant there are four such antinomies, four sets of theses and antitheses, each of which can be arrived at with equal necessity. The antinomies lay at the heart of Kantian epistemology<sup>12</sup> because, in order to accept their non-resolution, we must renounce the validity of metaphysical reasoning—it is reasoning beyond the scope of our

experience. Hence, according to Kant, metaphysics performs a regulatory function in regard to our epistemology. We have no way of knowing that what we observe here in the phenomenal realm is transferable to the noumenal realm; therefore, the latter is inaccessible to our pure reason. The widespread acceptance of such a structure rendered the languages of science and of religion completely incommensurable.<sup>13</sup> In response to his dissatisfaction with Humean ethics, built on human desires, Kant set out to ground his ethics on the basis of the “practical reason,” but this too has been found to be highly problematic, mostly for the reasons that Hume pointed out originally in his arguments concerning why ethics could not be grounded on reason.<sup>14</sup> Hume, realizing the instability of an ethics grounded on reason, argued for one based on the passions, while Kant, aware of the inadequacy of the passions as an ethical foundation, advanced a reason-grounded ethics. Though neither thinker saw the deficiencies of his own system, they each effectively undermined the attempts of the other.

When the leading thinkers of modernity dethroned the authority of previous scholars, they operatively positioned themselves in their place; the modern hubris was to conceive of modernity as the apex of human achievement, not only up to that time but of all times—past, present, and future. Jean Le Rond d’Alembert, a principle editor of the *Encyclopédie*, provides a splendid summary of the Enlightenment attitude in his introduction entitled, “The Human Mind Emerged from Barbarism,” which he penned for the first volume of that work. In his description of “the illustrious Descartes,” d’Alembert notes that

what has especially immortalized the name of this great man was his application of algebra to geometry, one of the most far-reaching and felicitous ideas which the human mind *ever* had, and which will *always* be the key to the most profound research, not only in sublime geometry but also in *all* the physico-mathematical sciences.<sup>15</sup>

Similar sentiments are expressed concerning Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton, and John Locke.

Concerning the latter, d’Alembert exults:



We can say that he created metaphysics almost as Newton had created physics. He understood that abstractions and ridiculous questions that had until then been debated, and even comprised the very essence of philosophy, had to be especially forbidden in its practice. He looked for the principal causes of our errors in these abstractions and in the abuse of symbols, and found them there in abundance. In order to know our mind, its ideas and affections, he did not study books, because they would have instructed him poorly: he was satisfied with examining himself intently; and after having contemplated himself for a long time, he merely offered to mankind in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* the mirror in which he had seen himself.<sup>16</sup>

So modernity was not just a rejection of authority but a substitution of authority, placing its own ideas, values, standards, and assumptions on the pedestal that had once been occupied by those of Scholasticism.

The Enlightenment was inaugurated fully at the end of the eighteenth century by the Industrial Revolution and the democratic revolution.<sup>17</sup> As incarnations of the progress of society and the importance of the individual, these forces instantiated the ethos of modernity: optimism, humanism, scientism, hedonism, materialism, capitalism, individualism, reductionism, demystification, and secularization.<sup>18</sup> In the nineteenth century, modernity began to expand from the intelligentsia to compose the general assumptions of Western society. By the twentieth century, these attitudes had become the *zeitgeist* of the culture.<sup>19</sup>

It is an error, however, to collapse modernity simply into Enlightenment ideals. Romanticism challenged the validity of the Enlightenment's claims to unlimited, universal progress and the sufficiency of Reason as the basis of human existence by reaffirming the need for recognizing and legitimating the affective aspects of humanity, while still situating itself within the bounds of modernism. Instead of beliefs, opinions, and intentions, the Romantics conceived of the self in terms of passion, soul, creativity, and moral fiber, all of which resonated with a depth of being that the Enlightenment did not.<sup>20</sup> Especially popular among artists and writers, Romanticism found the Enlightenment characterization of personhood anemic—though perhaps

not inaccurate, insofar as it went. Their main protest was that the Enlightenment failed to explain reality accurately. That is, they saw that people did not make decisions simply based on abstract, rational logic; rather, there were emotions, loyalties, obligations, passions that resided somewhere other than the analytical, cerebral part of the process. Love, life, death, the depth of being—these were their themes precisely because they felt that these had been excluded from the modern account of reality. They were pessimistic about grand claims of progress and objectivity and often pointed out the dark side of life. Interested in folklore, folk songs, and fairy tales, they were also fascinated by dreams, hallucinations, sleepwalking, and other phenomena that suggested the existence of a reality beyond empirical observation, sensory data, and discursive reasoning.<sup>21</sup>

Charles Dickens exemplified this reaction against the Enlightenment, most poignantly in *Hard Times*. Perhaps an allusion to Luke 10:42, where Jesus tells Martha that only one thing is needed—full devotion to God—Dickens’ first chapter is titled, “The One Thing Needful” and opens with these instructions to a schoolmaster:

Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts; nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir!.... [They] swept with their eyes the inclined plane of little vessels then and there arranged in order, ready to have imperial gallons of facts poured into them until they were full to the brim.<sup>22</sup>

Dickens’s satiric tone is hard to miss, but he drives his point home even further in the next chapter, “Murdering the Innocents,” where he pictures the inquisition received by a young girl whose father works in the circus.

[having shown distaste for mentioning the circus] ‘you mustn’t tell us about the ring here. Very well, then, Describe your father as a horsebreaker. He doctors sick horses, I dare say?’  
 ‘Oh, yes, sir.’  
 ‘Very well, then. He is a veterinary surgeon, a farrier, and horsebreaker. Give me

your definition of a horse.'

(Sissy Jupe thrown into the greatest alarm by this demand.)

'Girl number twenty unable to define a horse!' said Mr. Gradgrind, for the general behoof of all the little pitchers [students]. 'Girl number twenty possessed of no facts in reference to one of the commonest of animals! Some boy's definition of a horse. Bitzer, yours. . . . Bitzer,' said Thomas Gradgrind. 'Your definition of a horse.'

'Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth.' Thus (and much more) Bitzer.<sup>23</sup>

Sissy, who has grown up her entire life around horses, receives the disapprobation of the schoolmaster because she lacks Facts about them; Bitzer, on the other hand, who perhaps has never seen a horse in his life and possibly could recognize one only by counting its teeth and inspecting the marks in its mouth, passes the test with his rote, materialistic definition.

But Romanticism was a revolt that kept itself within presuppositions of modernity—harmony, humanism, secularism, individualism, and Nature—for the Romantics did not deny these key points of Enlightenment thought. They fostered a strong affinity, even an obsession, with Nature, which made many of them as antagonistic toward traditional religion as the other modernist thinkers. They also affirmed modern humanism, which placed humanity at the pinnacle of Nature as its greatest product, as well as the modern emphasis on individualism.

On the other hand, it is possible to trace Romanticism to the development of existentialism, which emphasized many of the same concerns, though with a significantly different force. The latter largely dispensed with notions of harmony and progress; in fact, the general society largely fell out of view altogether as the individual was pictured alone in front of reality. From such a viewpoint, morality became a mere cultural imposition on the individual, and the only moral "ought" became the free choice. To atheistic existentialists, human freedom is the ultimate good, and any free decision is a good decision if it does not impinge on the freedom of another. This is barely around the corner from postmodernism at the intersection where modernity and

postmodernity blur, so we now turn to the latter.

## II. The Postmodern Age

Postmodernism defines itself by what it is *not* (i.e., modern), rather than what it *is*. Therefore, if the explication of modernism was a difficult task, that of postmodernism is even more so. This is compounded by the (unavoidable) fact that postmodernism has not made such a clean break with modernism as it sometimes claims (or others sometimes claim) that it has; in fact, postmodernism holds several key features in common with its ideological predecessor. Given these obstacles, I believe the clearest place to start is with postmodernism's origins, which may help to give further understanding for the impetus in the movement from modernism to postmodernism.

As we have already noted, postmodernism grew largely out of the discipline of literary and linguistic analysis, particularly the branch of analysis called structuralism. Language is basic to humanity, forming the components of all interpersonal and even intrapersonal communication. Again, some of the groundbreaking work in this regard was done by Saussure, a Swiss linguist who invented the study of semiotics and the school of structuralism. To recap, Saussurian linguistics is based on the system of the *sign*, composed of a *signifier* (the material component, such as a printed word) and a *signified* (the mental concept or idea called to mind by the signifier). Semiologists after Saussure have used structuralist theory to show the ubiquity and power of signs, often to unmask the subtle messages they convey, particularly those that serve to perpetuate the power structure of the status quo.

Structuralists later hypothesized that underlying all phenomena—not just language—was a deep structure that dictated how such phenomena developed and that the world was composed of a set of interlocking systems, each with its own unique “grammar,” or system of operation. The structuralist project then expanded into a quest for uncovering the hidden operations of every

system of culture; in theory, any system was amenable to structural analysis, since all grammars operate according to similar structures.<sup>24</sup> This style of debunking continued in the tradition of Nietzsche, uncovering the hidden agendas veiled behind the ostensible objectivity and neutrality of language and organizational systems. The meaning of a text in the postmodern era is no longer to be found “behind the text,” that is, in the mind of the author, but rather “in the text” itself. The result is that the generator of a text no longer controls the meaning of that text, and the possibility arises that the text contains potential meaning(s) not related to its intended meaning(s), necessarily.

Here, the break between modern and postmodern is not so clean, as there are aspects of structuralism that conform to the postmodern ethos, but others clearly support the spirit of the modern project. The totalizing character of structuralism, its assertion to place all human systems under its design, is clearly a modern claim. But the denial of language as an objective, neutral vehicle for the dissemination of truth certainly resonates with postmodern sympathies, especially as it exposes language games as attempts to perpetuate the preferred status of the power brokers in a culture.

Such an impurity of sentiments has meant that Saussurian linguistics has fallen on hard times. Poststructuralist theorists, such as Derrida, have demonstrated that the stability of the relationship between the signifier and the signified is highly tenuous and dependent on individual perspectives. Derrida regards the sign “as a fractured entity which can never capture the ‘full’ meaning of words,” open to a wide range of interpretations, depending on the individuals doing the interpreting. Hence, all attempts to convey messages are fraught with ambiguity and inexactitude.<sup>25</sup>

Derrida was particularly dissatisfied with what he saw as the oppressive nature of structuralist theory, which seemed to diminish human agency, relegating individuals merely to the channels through which structures operate.

He further argued against the whole vein of Western thought, which assumes—illegitimately, according to Derrida—that the full meaning of words is present to us in our minds when we think them and that there is no “slippage” between the signifier and signified. This “metaphysics of presence” is simply an ungrounded and unjustifiable assumption that posits an identity of being and meaning as a foundation, or a justification, for discourse and regards equivocation as a regrettable, avoidable deviation.<sup>26</sup> But Derrida counters that in fact such equivocation can never fail to exist. As a result, there is no regret or avoidance of equivocation in Derrida because there is no “fall from ‘presence,’” but rather a failure ever to attain it.<sup>27</sup> Poststructuralists conceive of a much more anarchic and chaotic world than structuralism would allow, with many gaps and paradoxes within the systems.

Some even go so far as to draw the existence of meaning into question. After examining such questions as, “Where does meaning lie?” “Who controls the meaning of a given text?” and, “What does *meaning* mean?” philosophers such as Derrida, Lyotard, and Rorty find that they can arrive at no satisfying answers. The postmodern deconstructionist declares that meaning no longer resides “in the text,” but “in front of the text,” that is, in the mind of the reader. For the most radical, any reaction at all to a text is a good reaction. With a kind of anti-epistemology, these radical poststructuralists claim that hermeneutics and rhetoric have become the claimants to the seats once occupied by communication, as every attempt at communication is seen to be simply a case of manipulation and deceit with hidden interests and agendas.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, even the concept of truth, as it has historically been understood in the West, is illegitimated. Nietzsche understood the quest for truth as an expression of motives of desire for power; consequently, metaphysical systems that claimed to be representations of truth, were instead, for him, merely substitutions for truth in the name of truth. In his introduction to Gianni

Vattimo's *The End of Modernity*, Jon R. Snyder explains that "the project of nihilism," begun by Nietzsche, "is to unmask all systems of reason as systems of persuasion... All thought that pretends to discover truth is but an expression of the will-to-power—even to domination—of those making the truth claims over those who are being addressed by them."<sup>29</sup>

Truth, meaning the system of universal reason that tells us what reality is "out there," is no longer a tenable concept in postmodernity. All truth is embedded truth; in other words, each description of truth is inseparable from the narrational context in which it emerges. As the modern, objective, independent, knowing subject has been deconstructed, both objects and subjects are seen to be only as they are narrated in a story. Outside of the "plot," that is, the experiences and beliefs they bring to each encounter, it is impossible to know how such objects and subjects would be, or even if they would be at all. Instead of a modern concern with a core essence or character, what matters to postmodern truth claims are the constantly shifting relations that bind subject and object to each other.<sup>30</sup> As Snyder indicates, "the disinterested, scientific, wholly rational search for the objective, neutral truth of a proposition is an illusion produced by metaphysical thought for its own benefit. In the perspective of nihilism, Nietzsche points out, the difference between error and truth is *always* a delusory one."<sup>31</sup>

Taking this altered view of truth, two avenues of exploration have emerged. One leads one to the denial of any human capacity for comprehending or expressing truth, following the standards of the correspondence theory, the construal of truth advanced by modernism that accepts a statement as true to the extent that there is equivalence between the statement and the actual reality.<sup>32</sup> Since there is no way to gain access to the "real" reality, except by means of our contextualized perspectives, there is no way to know whether we have represented reality as it truly is, and thus no reason for trusting our representations. This is the position most associated with

postmodernism and argued by Nietzsche, Derrida, and Foucault.

Following this track, Lyotard undermines the human quest even to understand or process reality in any meaningful way. In his appendix to *The Postmodern Condition* entitled, "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?", Lyotard concludes that the "business" of postmodernism is "not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented."<sup>33</sup> That is, the various proponents of postmodernism in art, literature, philosophy, or any arena at all, have a common task. They must avoid what he terms "the aesthetic of the sublime," which consists of the portrayals of reality that provide solace and pleasure to the recipient through a recognizable, consistent form. Instead, they should point to the unrepresentable in defiance of the standard, comforting forms, in protest to the shared taste, so that such portrayals may not be enjoyed but gleaned for the strength of their presentation of the unrepresentable. However, he warns, "it is not to be expected that this task will effect the last reconciliation between language-games,"<sup>34</sup> or the completion of the Enlightenment Project, the bridging of the great divide between the disparate realms of knowledge, particularly the phenomenal and noumenal realms,

(which, under the name of faculties, Kant knew to be separated by a chasm)... Only the transcendental illusion (that of Hegel) can hope to totalize them into a real unity. But Kant also knew that the price to pay for such an illusion is terror. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience. Under the general demand for slackening and for appeasement, we can hear the mutterings of the desire for a return of terror, for the realization of the fantasy to seize reality. The answer is: Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name.<sup>35</sup>

This type of postmodern philosophy accepts the modern criteria for what counts as truth, namely that a statement is true if it accurately corresponds to the external realities it purports to describe. This line of postmodern reasoning, which flows from Nietzsche, does not undermine the modern correspondence theory of truth; rather, it demonstrates that we cannot achieve its



requirements, rendering truth, therefore, humanly unattainable. Thus, the anti-epistemology of much postmodernism is a critique waged from the foundations of modernism, not as much a repudiation of those foundations, as often presented.<sup>36</sup>

However, the second postmodern understanding of truth, largely pioneered by Paul Ricoeur, undermines both the modern objectivism and the radical postmodern reduction, by dismissing the correspondence theory altogether and embracing a new definition for what constitutes truth. In what Ricoeur termed the “narrative identity,” the specific “situatedness” of life and the relations to past, present, and future constitute an emergent truth, a dynamic truth that is determined in the context of the narrative of one’s own life. For Ricoeur, it is the narrative, not the self that is the arbiter of truth, though the self is free to act and to will in an effort to effect change in the narrative. Such a narrative may or may not be positioned within a larger framework, such as God.<sup>37</sup> We will discuss Ricoeur in more detail in chapter three. However, for our purposes here, it is significant to note that, regardless of which tack is taken, both descriptions of human possession of truth pose a substantial challenge to the previous modern conceptions—the former claiming that true knowledge is impossible, the latter modifying the definition so that truth may be retained.

We can see now how postmodernism came to be, as a protest against the hubris of modern objectivism, neutrality, comprehensiveness, and systematization. There certainly is a line of division between the two, but it is not as solid as some proponents or critics claim. In fact, that what has gone before should shape what comes after is inevitable. Postmodernism has largely attacked its predecessor precisely on modernism’s terms and with modern values, using the standards of modernity to expose the latter’s hypocrisy. It is through the use of reason that it finds reason to be biased and unreliable; it is by means of logic that it deconstructs logical constructs. In other words, postmodernism has uncovered its own antimonies, a new frontier of knowledge that is

now much closer than Kant's noumenal realm. It lies at the border of our own perceptions, and anything beyond is unknowable by definition. Though modernism debunked such notions as Christianity, magic, and superstition, postmodernism has played the trump card, arguing for the inviolability of language, meaning, truth, unity, and reality. Just as modernism denied the authority of tradition and the church, postmodernism denies the authority of moderns to define reality. Foucault observes, "since Kant, the role of philosophy is to prevent reason from going beyond the limits of what is given in experience."<sup>38</sup>

### **III. Christian Postmodernism: Do We Need It?**

Most expressions of evangelicalism in America can be accurately characterized as products of modernism. They use various adaptations of the scientific method, empiricism, and commonsense realism to articulate the gospel against the challenges of secular humanism and naturalism, which are themselves purely modern threats. Their apologetics has proceeded along the lines of propositions and rigorous logic, aimed at a culture that glorifies reason and deifies science.<sup>39</sup> The alliance between the Enlightenment and the modern church produced a dichotomy in the lives of Christians between the faith that they held privately and a publicly acceptable way of thinking, leaving the church anemic, worldly, and helpless.<sup>40</sup> Thomas Oden writes, "It is just because we have tried to become successful on modernity's terms that we have contracted theological vertigo."<sup>41</sup>

Such an approach to the Christian life is clearly out of step with the way most Americans think and act today, and is getting more and more so all the time. If Christianity were inseparable from this form of expression, then these would certainly be non-negotiables, but in truth they are simply the remnants of a modern Christianity that was enculturated during the modern period. Therefore, as these societal shifts that constitute the emergence of postmodernism take place, it is

now the church's responsibility to reassess its relationship with the culture, affirming and adopting what is compatible with the gospel in these emergent philosophies and attitudes and gently (but firmly) refusing what is not. Thus, my appropriation of postmodernism is both a verification and a denial.<sup>42</sup> Merold Westphal describes this approach as a "double challenge," which opposes both the secular postmodernists, who see postmodernism as the means for destabilizing human belief in God, and the religious modernists, who believe postmodernism represents an unmitigated danger to Christianity and Western culture, "forgetting that Balam's ass once spoke God's word... The link between pious intentions and genuine insight is not tight in either direction."<sup>43</sup>

What sorts of messages might God be trying to get through to the church through the ass of postmodernism? What can Christianity affirm in postmodern thinking? First, *postmoderns get the fallen condition*. Though they do not frame their discussion in terms of a fall from primordial purity, postmoderns *do* realize the limits under which human beings now suffer, which we describe as a result of the radical infestation of sin in the very fiber of our beings. No matter what we do, we are incapable of extracting this bent toward ourselves, with no prospect of deliverance in this world.<sup>44</sup> While Christianity cannot accept power and interpretation as *ultimate principles*, nevertheless it can comfortably assert with postmodernism that this transvaluation frequently takes place, for self-interest is often not entirely eradicated even in otherwise sincere followers of Christ.<sup>45</sup>

Second, the *postmodern insight* into the difficulties of the correspondence theory of truth *opens us up to the possibility of new understandings of truth that can still cohere with the testimony of scripture*. It has become common to make a distinction between the "Hebrew concept of truth" and the "Greek concept of truth," the former referring primarily to faithfulness, reliability, and the trustworthiness of a saying or a person, and the latter alluding to a timeless Truth that transcends the

material world, which provides mere appearances. While this second notion of truth, the so-called Greek concept of truth, is present in some Greek philosophers, the distinction in scripture is quite often oversimplified.<sup>46</sup> Very often, even in the New Testament, the focus is not on saying the truth or possessing the truth, but on *doing* the truth, that is, living it out in one's life (cf. Jn. 3:21; 1Jn. 1:6; etc.).<sup>47</sup> Throughout the biblical writings, truth is neither timeless nor abstract, as in Greek philosophy or in modern science. The truth of God proves itself repeatedly in relationships; it has personal force and character.<sup>48</sup> Postmodernism gives the church the opportunity to free itself from the Cartesian quest for indubitable, timeless, propositional truth and to experience the relational truth that seems to lie behind the words of scripture.

Finally, *postmodernism can remind the church of the often forgotten care that Christians ought to have for the powerless and marginalized of society.* Throughout the Old Testament, the Israelites are instructed to take care of the orphan, the widow, and the alien—those who would otherwise have no protection. These were the members of the community without resources of their own, forced to rely on the beneficence of their society. In the New Testament, Jesus cared for the sick, the lame, and the deformed; he touched lepers and ate with sinners. He showed compassion for the people at the lowest level of the social order, and held up women and children as examples of true spirituality (cf. Lk. 7:44-50; Mt. 18:3). The evangelical church has largely adopted the modern impulse toward individualism and has consequently abandoned the scriptural command to practice authentic hospitality. But postmodernism is characterized by a deference to the “other,” the point of view that is foreign to me, and it demands that I seek to understand rather than to be understood.

The Protestant passion to *understand* the scriptures made it susceptible to the rationalism of the Enlightenment,<sup>49</sup> and consequently the tendency of conservatives has been to reduce religious

truth to propositions, which are themselves merely the conclusions *we* make from actual revelation.

Dogmas and doctrines, however important, are still only the “tradition of men” (Mk. 7:8). With the advent of postmodernism, the church stands at the threshold of a great opportunity. As the culture reinvents itself, the church too faces the prospect of striking a new posture with respect to the culture. Instead of denouncing the culture’s agenda as evil (while nevertheless supporting it and cooperating with it), as it did in the modern era, the church can push for Christ’s agenda, even as it affirms the positive aspects of the postmodern world.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> To be fair, this contention is actually a matter of significant debate. Some thinkers, such as Jürgen Habermas, believe that there is nothing significant in postmodernism and that it will never be a substitute for modernism, of whose project he still hopes to see the conclusion. See *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987). Others claim that postmodernism is simply a subsection of modernism, that it is simply the latest incarnation of modernism. See Lloyd Spencer, "Postmodernism, Modernity, and the Tradition of Dissent," in *The Routledge Critical Dictionary of Postmodern Thought*, ed. Stuart Sim (New York: Routledge, 1998), 158-169. These perspectives, however important they may be, do not represent the dominant view of scholars, nor do they represent my understanding of the subject. Consequently, in view of space considerations, this is one argument I do not take up here.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas P. Neill, *Makers of the Modern Mind* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing, 1949), 71.

<sup>3</sup> René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and First Meditations on Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 4-5.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>5</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 42. MacIntyre's comment should not be understood to exclude postmodernism from the judgment of the notion of authority as "alien and repugnant." "Modern" in this work refers to the time from the beginning of the Enlightenment onward.

<sup>6</sup> Theo Verbeek, "Tradition and Novelty: Descartes and Some Cartesians," in *The Rise of Modern Philosophy: The Tension between the New and Traditional Philosophies from Machiavelli to Leibniz*, ed. Tom Sorell (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 168.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Docherty, "Postmodernism: An Introduction," in *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. Thomas Docherty (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 5.

<sup>8</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 3, Original italics.

<sup>9</sup> MacIntyre, 47-49.

<sup>10</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 459-460.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 460.

<sup>12</sup> Justus Hartnack, *Kant's Theory of Knowledge*, trans. M. Holmes Hartshorne (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1967), 112n.

<sup>13</sup> Nancey Murphey, *Anglo-American Postmodernity: Philosophical Perspectives on Science, Religion, and Ethics* (Boulder: Westview, 1997), 105-106.

<sup>14</sup> MacIntyre, 49

<sup>15</sup> Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, "The Human Mind Emerged from Barbarism," trans. Stephen J. Gendzier, in *The Portable Enlightenment Reader*, ed. Isaac Kramnick, Viking Portable Library Series (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 10. My italics.

- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., 14.
- <sup>17</sup> Claude Geffré and Jean-Pierre Jossua, eds., *The Debate on Modernity* (London: SCM: 1992), vii.
- <sup>18</sup> Thomas C. Oden, *Agenda for Theology: Recovering Christian Roots* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 36-38.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid., 35.
- <sup>20</sup> Kenneth J. Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 6-7.
- <sup>21</sup> Donald Kagan, et al., *The Western Heritage*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1983), 696.
- <sup>22</sup> Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*, ed. George Ford and Sylèvre Monod, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Norton, 1990), 7-8.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid., 9.
- <sup>24</sup> Stuart Sim, ed., *The Routledge Critical Dictionary of Postmodern Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 341-342, 356.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid., 358.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., 341-342.
- <sup>27</sup> Kevin Hart, "Jacques Derrida (b. 1930): Introduction," in *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader*, ed. Graham Ward, Blackwell Readings in Modern Theology Series, ed. L. Gregory Jones and James J. Buckley (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 161.
- <sup>28</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self: On Meaning, Manipulation and Promise* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 41. See also Walter Jost and Michael J. Hyde, eds., *Rhetoric and Hermeneutics in Our Time: A Reader* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).
- <sup>29</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture*, Trans. Jon R. Snyder (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), xii.
- <sup>30</sup> John Millbank, "Postmodern Critical Augustinianism: A Short *Summa* in Forty-two Responses to Unasked Questions," in *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader*, ed. Graham Ward, Blackwell Readings in Modern Theology Series, ed. L. Gregory Jones and James J. Buckley (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 265.
- <sup>31</sup> Vattimo, xii. His emphasis. Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann, Viking Portable Library Series, no. 62, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 402: "And if truth was victorious for once, then ask yourself with good mistrust: 'What strong error fought for it?'"
- <sup>32</sup> Lee Hardy, "Postmodernism as a Kind of Modernism," in *Postmodern Philosophy and Christianity*, ed. Merold Westphal (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1999), 33.
- <sup>33</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Theory and History of Literature Series, vol. 10 (Minneapolis: University of

Minnesota Press, 1984), 81.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 81-82.

<sup>36</sup> Hardy, 28-43.

<sup>37</sup> Thiselton, *Interpreting God*, 73-78.

<sup>38</sup> Michel Foucault, "Afterword: The Subject and Power," in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 210. From the first part of the afterword, subtitled, "Why Study Power: The Question of the Subject," which was composed originally in English.

<sup>39</sup> Grenz, 161.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas C. Oden, *Agenda for Theology: Recovering Christian Roots* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 33.

<sup>42</sup> It is my contention that this should be every Christian's attitude toward every culture. Because people are created in God's image, they inevitably grasp some things about the world correctly, but because people are finite and, furthermore, have been marred by sin, they are unable to avoid mistakes and inevitably skew their perceptions to match up with their own benefit. Every culture is partly right and partly wrong, and the task of the church is to be salt that preserves the good and light that illumines the bad.

<sup>43</sup> Merold Westphal, "Appropriating Postmodernism," in *Postmodern Philosophy and Christian Thought*, ed. Merold Westphal (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1999), 2.

<sup>44</sup> Most branches of Christianity can support such an idea without reservation. For Wesleyans, however, the possibility of earthly perfection is an asterisk on the postmodern appraisal. But even Wesley acknowledged that Christian perfection was extremely rare before death.

<sup>45</sup> Thiselton, *Interpreting God*, 14.

<sup>46</sup> See Anthony C. Thiselton, "Truth, *Alētheia*," in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown, 3 vols., 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 3:874-902.

<sup>47</sup> Thiselton, *Interpreting God*, 36.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>49</sup> James M. Houston, "Spiritual Life Today: An Appropriate Spirituality for a Postmodern World," in *The Gospel in the Modern World: A Tribute to John Stott*, Martyn Eden and David F. Wells, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1991), 185.



## CHAPTER TWO

# THE POSTMODERN ETHOS: A SKEPTICAL LONGING

As we noted before, postmodernism is a philosophy that is not primarily thought but felt, experienced, lived.<sup>1</sup> So, in one sense, to begin, as we did in the last chapter with the philosophical origins and underpinnings is somewhat disingenuous. It violates the spirit of postmodernism and does not really yield the sort of experiential encounter that is at the heart of the postmodern critique. On the other hand, in such a format, hardly any other approach is feasible, so I am reduced to disingenuousness.

Nevertheless, we have laid the foundation for understanding the postmodern experience by our journey through its philosophical groundings and relationship to modernism. By understanding what these words mean and their affiliation with each other, we are now equipped to get a sense of what the concerns of postmoderns are and why they have them.

### **I. Skepticism**

#### *A. The Reason for Skepticism*

Whatever postmodernism is, it is fair to say, skepticism is at its heart—skepticism about our abilities, our motivations, and our true intentions. It is, indeed, a philosophy that denies rather than affirms, that criticizes rather than commends, that deconstructs rather than constructs. It can be distrustful, cynical, and even snide, having no confidence in any representation of reality as true. Sometimes this skepticism devolves into a nihilistic pessimism that pulses throughout the culture. We can hear this in the “grunge” music on the radio, see it in the dark comedies in the movie theaters, and perceive it in the sad school shootings that yield their place on the front page only for the next tragedy in line. I contend that these phenomena are the

ultimate outcomes of a despair that hangs over the country, which finds its origin in the skepticism of ever again laying claim to anything certain, the realization that true knowledge of a real world will never be held again—that, in fact, it never has been held.

This pessimism, however, is not an arbitrary outcome of some ideas connected with postmodernism. In many ways it is the warp and woof, the very threads woven to create the fabric of its thought and behavior patterns. For postmodernism is a philosophy of disillusionment. It did not fall from space and crash into a hillside in a hermetical package, insulated from its environment, but from a community who had lived in modernity, had breathed its air deep into their lungs, had hoped with it, clung to it, and feared with it, but who had, in the end, been left wanting. They saw that modernity had been only an empty shell that had promised discovery but had brought only betrayal, resulting in disillusionment.

Once again, we must go back to René Descartes. Remember, he is the one who impressed new requirements on information for it to attain to the level of knowledge. True knowledge was now only that which was clear, distinct, and indubitable. His aim was to solidify our knowledge so that we could bring to an end our interminable disagreements and arguments about theology and politics, but the actual consequence has deviated markedly from the intended one.

In the postmodern age, we have discovered that he placed the bar too high. As the boundaries for what we felt we could prove with absolute certainty closed inexorably in on us, suddenly we realized that there was nothing certain beyond our own existence. Descartes had said, “I think; therefore, I am,” and had then constructed what he perceived to be an airtight case for the reality of God and of the universe. It has long been realized that Descartes made a false step in his reasoning, but most modern philosophers have argued that God is an unnecessary

premise in any event. They have taken the reliability of reason to be self-evident and have in this way simply co-opted Descartes' agenda without dealing with his concerns. Postmodernism has exposed the bias that inheres in the use of reason, has belied reason's "disinterested" position, and has thus pushed the question back one level more, asking how we can know that we do indeed think, as Descartes has insisted that we do. For in fact what we have called thinking more often has been simply convincing manipulation, as we refuse to allow ourselves to confront what cannot be comfortably assimilated into our systems of being. Or, in the words of Simon and Garfunkel: "Still a man hears what he wants to hear/ And disregards the rest."<sup>2</sup> At the very best, what we find sitting alone at the bottom of Descartes' project is the last resident of the world of Cartesian certainty, the maxim, "I have sensations; therefore, I am." Anything more is conjectural at some level.

Even the most intuitive and seemingly self-apparent aspects of daily life cannot be taken for granted. We assume an external universe, but what direct contact do our minds experience with it? All we know *directly* are our sensations. Even when we see a truck, we do not have direct contact with a truck, only our sensations. When we eat green beans, we perceive heat and taste, but, at the root, these are only the brain's interpretation of sensors from within the body itself, only an indirect experience of green beans. Now, it is true that nobody lives as if the reality of these incidents were a point of controversy; such a view of the world is absolutely impractical. But if we are interested in Cartesian certainty—and the West has been very interested indeed throughout the modern age—then we grasp the importance of having a solid foundation for knowledge. Without it, literally everything falls into doubt. Because we have failed to discover any sufficient foundation, all scientific, historical, theological, and any other mode of inquiry has been delegitimated. It has become impossible to be *sure* of anything at all.

On a practical level, this has not led to a loss of faith in physical laws and the like—it is impossible to live in any sense that we call living without assuming that rain will fall down rather than up, or that we move in three dimensions. But there *has* been a significant loss of faith in politicians to have the public's interest in mind, in historians to provide accurate representations of the past, in leaders to work for the aims of an organization rather than their own benefit, in any ideology to systematize the world in a truthful way. Our culture has gone from not trusting anyone over thirty to not trusting anyone at all. If America seems cynical, it is only because Nietzsche, Foucault, Derrida, and the like have shown us how blind people have been in the past to various manifestations of their own self-interest, so why should anyone else—including you and me—be any different? How can anyone extricate themselves from the irresistible lure of acting in their own benefit?

This avenue of thinking is indeed skeptical, but the proclivity toward skepticism is driven even further by the realization that our Western culture has been on a misguided crusade for centuries now. The search for stable knowledge was not an esoteric practice engaged in by ivory tower scholars only on rainy weekends but rather the consuming quest of such culture-forming thinkers as Thomas Hobbes, Adam Smith, John Locke, Immanuel Kant, G.W. Hegel, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and many others. They searched for the most perfectly rational incarnations of politics, philosophy, education, religion, ethics, business, and everything else related to life, and they inspired the people of the West to have faith in their search. New disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, economics, and political science, were launched and established in the academy in the confidence that one day they would become bona fide sciences with laws as predictable and as sure as those of physics.<sup>3</sup> The entire academic enterprise revolved around providing warranted grounds for the methods—and for the knowledge

uncovered by those methods—of each discipline’s mode of inquiry. Some thinkers, such as Hegel and Marx, even believed that they had found the ultimate, unifying rubric for all disciplines and all knowledge.

But the entire project was in vain, or at least the efforts were misdirected. The only point that they have led to is one of seeing that such a project is doomed to failure. Cartesian doubt as a method could never yield an understanding of *purpose* of the world because purpose remains shrouded in the mind of the one whose purpose it is—only when it is realized or revealed can the purpose be known.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the result of the failure to understand the purpose of the world is a world without purpose, the postmodern world. It has been an expensive lesson, not only economically, but also in terms of the human lives, the hopes for humanity, and the resulting disillusionment that have extracted their toll on the psyche of the culture. In essence, we hoodwinked ourselves; we believed that we were driving—now and again getting out to polish the fender and straighten the mirrors—but when we looked under the hood, we discovered that there was no engine.

### *B. The Performance of Skepticism*

Of course, we have seen advancement in transportation, medicine, manufacturing and home appliances, all brought about by modern impulses, but this technological progress has not led to a better society as promised. While technology has subdued nature to a large extent, our society has grown more impatient, more consumeristic, and more violent, and even the conquest of humans over nature has come at the price of widespread concern for the effects of this process on the environment.<sup>5</sup> Technology has become a significant contributor to the incoherence and instability of postmodern life. In previous times, persons remained in a small geographical area their entire lives, and even short distances of travel were difficult and time-consuming.

Relationships were fixed and stable, and strangers from outside the community were rare. If someone did leave the community, a meaningful relationship became impossible because of the difficulties of communication. Today, however, with interconnected highway systems, supersonic jets, cellular telephones, automated voice mail, personal computers, and modems, these barriers have been erased, resulting in an endless parade of people and information. The multiplicity of incoherent and disconnected relationships pulls postmoderns in myriad directions with a variety of roles, resulting in a fragmentation of the self that compounds the instability of knowledge mentioned above. Private self-doubt and internal incoherence produce anomie, a feeling of disconnect from the external world, which is relentless in its ever-marching urban sprawl, daily-doubling technology, increasing specialization, and unmanageable onslaught of information.<sup>6</sup>

In the postmodern world, then, “there is no individual essence to which one remains true or committed. One’s identity is continuously emergent, re-formed, and redirected as one moves through the sea of ever-changing relationships.”<sup>7</sup> Commitment to an objective identity becomes arduous because reality continually assails the individual with the consciousness of the artifice of life, that one’s being is a matter of contingent and constructed contrivance, custom-tailored to fit the immediate situation. Consistency ceases to be a virtue; flexibility that adapts to the innumerable choices is what is admired.<sup>8</sup>

This contemporary *experience* of reality collaborates with the *philosophical* critique outlined in the previous chapter, resulting in many of the same impulses. The first of these involves the decline in the belief in our ever *achieving* rationality (which is to say nothing about unbridled faith in the efficacy of our use of it). As postmodern life is characterized by a proliferation of obligations and concerns and the self feels the pull of multiple competing

loyalties, one consequently has many objectives to pursue on a number of fronts, with a correlating number of ways to evaluate each objective. In such a context, the idea of rational decision-making is difficult; nearly *everything* is reasonable from *some* perspective.

Furthermore, many decisions demand to be made even before rational thought can be given to them, forcing postmoderns often to succumb to utter arbitrariness. When one realizes that one's perspective shapes one's concept of reality and that one's experiences shape one's perspective, it must then be acknowledged that it is impossible for any two people ever to share the same concept of reality. Furthermore, since any act, situation, or object is subject to multiple perspectives, and validated only by appealing to other perspectives, it seems that no single position can be the only rational one. In fact, the idea of rationality itself is exposed as merely an attempt to legitimate one's own position over and above others'!<sup>9</sup>

With the disappearance of rationality, truth becomes much less important of an issue. Broadly speaking, truth (such as it is) exists only in an interpretive community; many communities produce many truths. Thus, postmoderns live with an attitude of relativism and pluralism, which is no longer just to be tolerated but *celebrated*, as diverse perspectives create diverse truths. Consequently, in postmodern circles, there is a rejection of the authority of the historically dominant culture—Western, bourgeois, patriarchic, rational, linear, etc.—to have controlling power over the definitions of terms (such as sane, normal, moral, reasonable, noteworthy, true, etc.), the articulation of human history, or the policy of government. In the broad language of “multiculturalism,” postmodernists defend the rights of “minority voices” in society that have historically been considered unimportant by the dominant culture. This explains the widespread proliferation of new academic departments in many major universities, dedicated to investigating African-American Studies, Latino Studies, Women Studies, and other such areas. It

also accounts for the exploration of revisionist history, which seeks to overturn the prevailing views of history with the aim of accenting the achievements, contributions, and situations of those neglected by the prevailing view, without any eye toward traditional standards of veracity or evidence.

As postmoderns look at *all* truth claims as true in their corresponding contexts, they are more apt to be sanguine about the combination of incompatible belief systems, which often appears to someone outside of postmodern sympathies simply as illogical or less systematic thinking. Arguments no longer proceed along the lines of *right* and *wrong*, but rather each person assesses his or her own context and chooses a collection of beliefs that “work” for him or her.<sup>10</sup> Any construction or reconstruction of reality that can be negotiated by an individual is considered a viable one.<sup>11</sup>

With all truth claims on equal footing and the individual in charge of constructing a workable belief system, authorities have seen a marked decline in influence and input. Though modernity demanded that all knowledge come from science or rigorous rationalism and thus undermined the authority of law, government, and religion, postmodernity has played the trump card, deconstructing the subject of knowledge itself. In principle, there is no *true* or *false*, humanly speaking; ergo, *all* claims to authority are, again, simply a grab for power.<sup>12</sup> Without commonly regarded authorities, there are no common standards across the culture, and a feeling of “centerlessness” permeates. Society becomes a conglomerate of societies.<sup>13</sup>

In the end, the postmodern problem is that there is nothing to hang one’s hat on, no foundation, no self-evident truths, no absolute, no cosmic authority, no non-negotiables, no stability, no surety, beyond one’s own mind. There is nothing we all hold in common. The Enlightenment Project that sought secure, objective knowledge outside the context of divine



revelation has hopelessly failed. Therefore, the mind is never convinced, existing in an everlasting state of flux, unsure, yet compelled nevertheless to act and to choose from among an unrelenting barrage of information and options, with no standard with which to judge between them. Rationality and objectivity are denied. Optimism becomes impossible. Emperor Modernism is seen to be naked.

## **II. The Longing for Transcendence**

Yet, there is a seldom noted facet of postmodernity that prevents it from spiraling completely into utter nihilism. I would argue that this is a God-given, natural human impulse, akin to the survival instinct, bestowed on us to prevent the complete ruin of any society. And that is an inexplicable longing to transcend the meaninglessness inherent in secular postmodernism, which the culture simply cannot accept. At the root, it is the desire to connect at a deep level with others, to belong to a community of people who value our stories, to have a workable—yet flexible—understanding of the world, the hope that there is a cure somehow for the postmodern malaise. There is an awareness even in postmodernity that the postmodern vision of the world is not satisfying, even though the arguments in its favor are strong. So the postmodern is left, perhaps characteristically, in limbo—compelled by argument and experience to deny human meaning and desperately yearning to believe it can be had.

There are several manifestations of this inclination in contemporary American culture, which all depend on the ability to “get away” from the struggles of life, to transcend the realities of the chaotic, meaningless, hectic postmodern world. It is through this getting away that we feel we can leave behind an untidy existence that assails us with more information and demands than we can assimilate. Through the fleeing of the pressures of life, there is a sense for the postmodern of a return to a world that one has never known, yet about which one feels as if it

should have been there all along. There is a sense of “rightness” in these getaways, which hinges on the sensation of control that comes through simplification. Suddenly, the cosmos becomes manageable and therefore intelligible, as it must have been for people in “simpler times.” Certainly, escapist pursuits are not unique to a postmodern world—they have been a noted part of the human experience for centuries, since the Roman Coliseum and before—but the inimitable quality of this postmodern era is the *magnitude* and *fervency* with which such activities are pursued,<sup>14</sup> and the new *importance* they have for what makes a full life. They have ceased to be a luxury of leisure time, a restful engagement when no work is required, and have become instead a quest in their own right.<sup>15</sup> Many postmoderns seem to be happy only when they are diverted.

### A. *Transcending Space*

The first getaway is the vacation, the escape from space. As America has become more affluent and more technologically advanced, mobility has become easier, resulting in an accompanying rise in the incidence of recreational travel. In the last thirty years, airplane travel, ocean cruises, and car rentals have climbed exponentially, as prices have remained steady or fallen.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, the hotel and motel industry has undergone massive proliferation in recent years.<sup>17</sup> Although business travel is on the rise, it is the leisure vacation that has been the major impetus behind this trend. Tourism gives postmoderns the opportunity to leave their everyday surroundings—along with their attendant drudgeries—on a regular basis. Indeed, it has emerged as such a major force in our society that sociologist Dean MacCannell has suggested that the concept of “the tourist” should be used as a model for the contemporary American person.<sup>18</sup>

Closely related to the vacation for our purposes here as an escape from space is the occasion of permanent relocation. Many people move as a means of fleeing some undesirable

relationship or other situation in the hopes of making a clean break and a new start on life. If one has made too many mistakes or has too many negative associations with his or her surroundings, a move can allow the individual to therapeutically “leave it all behind.” The life is simplified by forgetting about the problems and relationships and obligations in the former place. Alternately, some people at pivotal moments of life move in order to “find their identity”; it is believed that a change of surroundings will help them to understand who they are. Ironically, in former times, it was precisely one’s community that formed the identity of a person.

### *B. Transcending Time*

The second getaway is the practice of nostalgia, the escape from time. Postmoderns seem to want to enter alternate worlds that take place in a time removed from the present. New baseball stadiums are constructed with the express purpose of evoking the feel of parks built around the turn of the century, including liberal use of brick, irregular field dimensions, and natural grass. Often these new arenas replace massive steel and concrete structures, which are still structurally sound but whose multipurpose rationality overwhelms the postmodern baseball fan.

Additionally, a new breed of museum has come into being, the heritage museum, which relates to its visitors a former way of life, one which was defined by a relationship with a particular work, such as the production of coal, furniture, or cotton. For people who lived during this time, their identities were rooted in the local region around the workplace and in the industry for which they labored. Now the land, which used to house the factories and mines, has been developed for housing and shopping and perhaps a heritage museum, which

epitomizes the postmodern process whereby a past is nostalgically recreated as a form of substitute reality. Ex-miners are employed to inform the rest of us about mining in a time in which they did not live, while the need for ‘real’ mining has all but disappeared.

We pay our money and are entertained by consuming second-hand experiences which once formed the basis of social life.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, although the possibilities for the enumeration of “retro” phenomena are perhaps endless, as this type of postmodern styling and design encompasses catalogues of consumer goods from telephones and radios to bathroom fixtures and furniture, this desire to transcend time is not limited to a journey to the past. Science fiction, which depicts the future, has emerged as a new genre in the postmodern age. The open-ended possibilities of the future serve as a vehicle for a playful and imaginative communication of possible universes, replete with extra-terrestrial life forms, interstellar travel, fantastic new technologies, and often an egalitarian society that embodies the highest human ambitions of justice and social integrity.

### *C. Transcending Life*

The final getaway is the world of entertainment, the escape from life. Our culture has become an entertainment culture, endlessly absorbed with being amused and satiated, adoring the technologies that undo our capacities to think.<sup>20</sup> This a-musement<sup>21</sup> finds its expression in such mindless activities as professional wrestling, banal TV sitcoms, and the exploding pornography industry. These leisure interests a-muse by releasing the participant’s mind from the realities of life and allowing it simply to absorb stimuli without having to analyze, evaluate, or interact with them in any meaningful way.

The negative effects of many hours of television viewing, for instance, are well-documented, even as the daily average intake of television continues to rise.<sup>22</sup> One more example among seemingly infinite options is the world-wide web. For far too many, the internet has become a reality substitute as web surfers pass hours—even days—in virtual community chat rooms, mixing facts with fantasies, while their marriages crumble and their children are neglected. As the problems of life accumulate, the a-musement dispensed by the computer

becomes increasingly important to the consumer of distraction, so that he or she will not be forced to address the developing crisis. Many postmoderns have latched onto entertainment with *insatiable* desire as a means for escaping life.

#### *D. A Note on Artificial Transcendence*

Each of these quests for transcendence is an expression of the yearning of the postmodern person for a manageable life, an intelligible world. In each of these fantasies, we can pretend that relationships are stable and information is controllable because we limit the amount of information considered (or it is limited for us). On vacations, or in old-time ballparks, or in the world of television, events are packaged for us in easily digestible chunks; we do not have to think about many of life's drudgeries or our responsibilities at work or the challenges facing humanity. These quests for transcendence are needed retreats for postmoderns that satisfy the yearning for an intelligible universe—though only partially and temporarily, which is why they are pursued incessantly. In the end, any meaning derived from them for life is illusory and ephemeral because it cannot be carried back into “the real world”; it is only the resident of the artificial world created for the temporary respite.

It is interesting to note that each of these getaways is even more artificial than the constructed worlds we inhabit on a daily basis. It is not, then, a need to get away from the *manufacturedness* of life that creates this yearning in the postmodern self (for there is no escape from artifice)—rather it is the desire for a manageable world that seems to energize the getaway mentality. It is a telling facet of our culture that this can be gotten only in an entirely unreal context.

### III. Christian Postmodernism—A New Hermeneutic, Part I

So far, we have addressed the uniqueness of the postmodern life and, in doing so, have painted a picture of how postmoderns navigate their way through what has become for them an incomprehensible world. With this understanding of postmodern doubts and postmodern hopes, we have learned that while postmodernism can be said to be characterized by skepticism, it is also punctuated by an undercurrent of aspiration to transcend the skepticism. For the postmodern church, it is possible to unite these divergent impulses, acknowledging the hermeneutical legitimacy and wisdom of the skepticism while offering a complementary vision of hermeneutics that promises a way through it; for the postmodern ethos is largely the result of a loss of a hermeneutic, a faithful way to interpret the world, as the myths of modernity crumble in absurdity.

#### A. *How Modern Hermeneutics Overestimates Its Worth*

Before constructing a postmodern hermeneutic, however, it is important to establish in light of the postmodern critique the weaknesses of the currently dominant method of interpretation among evangelicals, which is firmly grounded in the assumptions of modernity, namely, the historical-critical paradigm.<sup>23</sup> Though often associated with secular and liberal scholars, who have employed redaction and form criticism to produce interpretations outside of orthodoxy, the historical-critical paradigm has also dominated the evangelical church, which has merely applied it within predetermined “acceptable” boundaries. The characteristics of this method are as follows:<sup>24</sup>

- It assumes two churches: the one originally written to and the one today.
- It locates a text’s meaning in the past.

- It assumes that once the historical meaning of a text is settled, the exegetical task is complete.
- It assumes that there is one singular, historical meaning to any text.

In Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart's *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth*,<sup>25</sup> such a paradigm is presented clearly and proudly.

The biblical texts first of all *mean what they meant*. That is... God's Word for us today is first of all precisely what his Word was to them. Thus we have two tasks: First, to find out what the text originally meant...Second, we must learn to hear that same meaning in the variety of new or different contexts of our own day.<sup>26</sup>

This short description of their method reveals that it follows the historical-critical paradigm as outlined above. 1) It assumes that the biblical texts were not intended for the church through time, but instead are exclusively historical documents, to which we have the fortune of being privy. 2) The meaning of the text is determined in the past; that is, "*A text cannot mean what it never meant.*"<sup>27</sup> 3) The process of exegesis is coextensive with Fee and Stuart's first task, which is exclusively historical—this is all they require before going on to applying the text. 4) The meaning of the text is controlled by "*the original intent [behind] the biblical text.*"<sup>28</sup>

This "what-it-meant/what-it-means" approach to the text fails under the scrutiny of the postmodern critique on several counts. First, it denies that the community reading the text is connected to the community who first received the text. In actuality, the church today shares all of the same hopes, agendas, and concerns as the primitive church—they are both the church. Thus, we must understand the Bible as having been written *to us*. We are not "reading someone else's mail"; we are part of the community intended to be formed by what was written. Sometimes Christians lament that we do not have apostles in the church today; under a postmodern conception of community, the apostles to the church today are the same as those in the first century—Paul and Peter are *our* apostles too.

Second, to locate the meaning of a text in the past, whether in the mind of the author, in the occasion of the text itself, or, even further back, in the event described by the text, is to render it inaccessible to us in the present. To claim that we can accurately discern the mind of the author, for example, is to postulate a ledge of neutrality upon which we can stand that denies our prejudices, assumptions, experiences, and beliefs, all of which, in actuality, we bring with us to the hermeneutical task. We are unable to extract ourselves from our situatedness in order to peer inside the mind that produced the text; it is unavailable to us. If meaning must be found behind the text, then we must say that we can never be sure of what any text means (though we may have theories).

Third, to define exegesis simply as historical investigation is to truncate it and to objectify the text as something “out there” to be manipulated. Therefore, its primary purpose is description, wherein the original meaning is transformed into a new, “modern” application, but because it is the biblical message that is transformed and the contemporary cultural assumptions are left untouched, that application is necessarily geared toward modern thought forms. Such an exegesis will rarely bring the reader into a new understanding of a text because the text is not permitted the opportunity of challenging his or her culturally established assumptions about it. The text is not considered as a conversation partner that might challenge a reader’s culturally inherited notions about justice, truth, stewardship, or sin; instead, it is controlled and tamed through scientific processes that ensure that its message will accord with and confirm the assumptions of the interpreter.

Finally, the assumption that a text has only one meaning, which is regulated by historical-critical considerations and which can be simply downloaded into the contemporary context, actually denies the historical situatedness of the text, despite the system’s obsession with the



past. This method postulates a propositional netherworld into which “eternal principles” go after they are extracted from the text. They are then ready to be instantiated in the contemporary milieu, applied to whatever specific situation demands them. Such a hermeneutic strips the text of its historical and cultural concerns that led to the occasion of the text in the first place. It also tends to prefer the didactic texts over the narrational (which incidentally comprise the bulk of scripture) because they are more amenable to such manipulation.

With the advent of postmodernism, we can see that the hermeneutical approach of the modern church is open to a variety of valid criticisms. Following is the beginning of my suggestion for a postmodern hermeneutic that addresses these concerns, while still maintaining faithfulness to scripture.

### *B. Westphal's Hermeneutical Method*

As we noted in the last chapter, postmodernism accurately describes humanity's limited condition since the fall. It behooves the church to incorporate such an understanding into our hermeneutics, not only as a matter of expediency to connect with the postmodern culture, but also as a matter of principle to remain faithful to the witness of scripture. Merold Westphal has proposed the twin hermeneutical principles of *the hermeneutics of finitude* and *the hermeneutics of suspicion*,<sup>29</sup> which together affirm the postmodern attitude of skepticism toward human capacity and human motivations, respectively. They serve as safeguards to prevent a practitioner of biblical interpretation from becoming overconfident in his or her ability to lay claim to absolute truth. Any sufficiently postmodern hermeneutical strategy must take seriously these twin hermeneutical principles.

## 1. The Hermeneutics of Finitude

Much of postmodern philosophy centers around just how much is unknowable in a Cartesian sense, which entails a certain amount of affinity with a modern philosophical framework. Lyotard asks and responds, “What... is the postmodern? It is undoubtedly a part of the modern.”<sup>30</sup> As we noted in passing in chapter one, it is in many ways an extension of the modern, the natural and inevitable result of the modern, since the postmodern agenda of debunking modernity has proceeded under the original standards of Enlightenment thought and attitude, turned back in on themselves. Taking the Enlightenment view of Reason, we can see that philosophy itself is unreasonable and illegitimate. By “objectively” analyzing discourse, we can discover that there is no such thing as objective neutrality. By continuing in the modern traditions of rejecting authority and debunking myths, we can reject and debunk even the myths of the Enlightenment. Whereas Descartes believed that everything could be subsumed under his system of knowing, and Kant roped off the noumenal realm from human understanding, postmodernism has shown that the whole endeavor is pointless, since nothing beyond one’s own sensations can attain Cartesian certainty.

For the biblical hermeneut who is sensitive to the concerns of postmodernism, then, a strong sense of one’s own finitude is essential in entering into an encounter with the scriptures. The postmodern critique is correct in ascertaining that we do not see the world from “a God’s eye view” or “a view from nowhere.” Westphal maintains that, in this regard, postmodern philosophies, which have richly plumbed this subject of inquiry, can be extremely helpful and illuminating—without forcing us to accede to their atheism. In fact, such a humility and acceptance of finitude is a proper outcome of the doctrine of creation.<sup>31</sup> This line of thinking is further developed by Steven Bouma-Prediger in the same work, where he identifies finitude as a necessarily good aspect of our persons since we were created finite in our original state and God pronounced us “good.”<sup>32</sup>

We Christians, while accepting postmodernism's warnings about finitude, do not need to follow certain postmodernists in seeing the finitude as a dead end. Such an appraisal is much too obsequious to the modern agenda, which sought to know everything and to categorize everything. To continue in the lament over our finitude is to perpetuate the first sin anew. Although there is a juridical aspect to the fall—the transgression of a clear, stated law—it is also much more than that. The first sin was an expression of the human penchant for wishing to exceed our God-given boundaries, a dissatisfaction with limited knowledge. The desire of the first humans was to know good and evil, to be like gods, to rise above their limited perspective and to lay hold of divine knowledge. They exceeded the boundaries laid out for them by the one who made them and knew all about them. Such an attitude was also the spirit of the Enlightenment Project.

To continue in the desire for sure, concrete, unambiguous knowledge is a symptom of our longing for power and control over our circumstances, instead of a readiness to trust God. In any given situation, when we do not have knowledge, we are forced to rely on others—such as lawyers, doctors, pilots, and tour guides—who do possess that knowledge. When we try to grasp at our own forbidden fruit, the knowledge that lies beyond our limited condition, it uncovers a lack of trust in God, who knows everything we do not. To be satisfied with finitude and aware of its limitations is to express faith in God, who has already demonstrated his trustworthiness.

One important practical implication of a hermeneutics of finitude is a readiness to respect the Other. If we have truly internalized an awareness of our limitations, we are reticent to insist that we are indubitably correct, even while we maintain strong convictions about the rightness or wrongness of any position. Any belief, no matter how firmly held, still falls under the caveat of human finitude. Such a disposition frees us to engage humbly in conversation with an unlimited range of partners and allows us to coexist harmoniously without the harmony being purchased at

the price of dominating the Other or converting the Other through coercion. Otherness is acceptable because difference is a part of the creation itself.<sup>33</sup> More will be said about the ethics of the Other in chapter four.

## 2. The Hermeneutics of Suspicion

Another chief avenue of inquiry of postmodern philosophy is the uncovering of the proliferation of ulterior motivations, disguised attempts at self-aggrandizement, and participation in systems that raise oneself at the expense of diminishing others—often with little conscious awareness on the part of those on the benefiting end. Postmodernism challenges the modern concept of the autonomous self who is the center of knowledge; the possessor of rationality; the author of his/her own words; and the creator, decider, manipulator, and intender of his/her own destiny. Postmodernism instead emphasizes one's role as that of a participant in a complicated social web of relationships, experiences, and influences that is bigger than the self.<sup>34</sup> As a result, there is an unremitting skepticism in postmodernism that never accepts the *prima facie* portrayal of any action or belief; rather, it constantly searches for the self-promoting motivation that invariably lurks in the dark dungeons of the self.

Once more, we see that modernism has been naïve in its pretensions to laying hold of ultimate reality; whereas modernity saw only the goodness of creation without the corruption of the fall—or even limitation—much of postmodernity trumpets the tragedy of the fallen human condition and the insidious effects of sin for human knowledge without any hope of redemption or restoration.<sup>35</sup> To our humble hermeneutics of finitude, Westphal further suggests that Christian interpreters of the Bible need to incorporate a hermeneutics of suspicion in order to take seriously the consequences of our fallen nature. However, as with the hermeneutics of finitude, though most

articulators of postmodern suspicion are atheists, such a hermeneutics need not take an atheistic form in our expressions of it to be both helpful and illuminating.<sup>36</sup>

Anthony Thiselton cautions, “A Christian account of human nature accepts the capacity of the self for self-deception and its readiness to use strategies of manipulation.”<sup>37</sup> This warning is one fully in line with scripture. 1 John 1:8 counsels, “If we say we have no sin, *we deceive ourselves*, and the truth is not in us” (RSV; my italics). The prophet Jeremiah also witnesses to this fact. “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it?” (Jer. 17:9 RSV; see also Ro. 1:21; 12:3; 1Co. 3:18; 13:8-12; Heb. 3:13). The scriptures give ample testimony to the fact that there is a force within us that works against us to conceal from us even our own motivations and ultimate desires. If we are to be honest in our capacity as biblical hermeneuts, we must affirm with postmodernism that “our interpretations are necessarily and hopelessly bounded by the presuppositions and prejudices” in which we have been instructed,<sup>38</sup> for they are the water in which we swim, indeed, in which we learned what swimming *is*.

But such a reality does not entail that there is no rising above such a state, and here is where Christianity must part company with most expressions of postmodernism. Appropriation is both a “yes” and a “no,” both an acceptance and a recontextualization,<sup>39</sup> so here Christianity has something unique to offer the culture. Romans 6-8 is perhaps the most eloquent exposition in the Bible of the power of God over sin in the heart of the Christian. Elsewhere, Paul develops this theme that such a sorry state as that described above is incompatible with the new creation that comes as a result of the transforming power of Christ (cf. Eph. 4:11-5:20; 1Th. 5:4-8). Even for those without Christ, the application of human reason seems to penetrate at least some of the artifice. Otherwise Freud’s work of psychoanalysis, let alone therapy and later development in psychological diagnosis and treatment, would have been impossible.<sup>40</sup>

Yet it must be remembered that we live our Christian lives inside a framework of “already/not yet”; while Christ in our hearts gives us some protection from a bent toward sin, it is not eradicated in us fully, and we are still subject to its influence on our lives. Even adherents of Wesleyan perfection must admit to unconquerable “infirmities.” Therefore, we have an obligation never to drop our guard against our own capacity for self-deception. We can affirm to a certain extent Emmanuel Levinas’s assertion, “In the beginning was the interest,” since it is within the confines of interest and desire that any thinking occurs.<sup>41</sup>

### *C. Gadamerian Dialogical Hermeneutics*

With these hermeneutical safeguards of finitude and suspicion in place to guard against overconfidence, we are now free to proceed to a constructive approach to postmodern hermeneutics that fulfills the postmodern longing to transcend the mire of suspicion. I suggest that the dialogical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer represents one potentially rewarding path of exploration. In chapter three, we will add to this discussion the hermeneutic of Paul Ricoeur.

Gadamer, in noting the limitations of science for the discovery of truth in a variety of settings, set out to develop a theory of interpretation for the non-scientific relationships of human life, which compose the vast majority of human relationships. By using as an example the interpretation of art, whose truth—consisting in an encounter between the observer and the work of art—is not even able to be captured through verbal description (let alone scientific investigation), Gadamer set out to describe the kind of truth we *can* know with regard to such endeavors, particularly in the areas of philosophy and history.<sup>42</sup> We can notice right away that this approach differs from the historical-critical paradigm, which proposed the biblical text to

fall, indeed, under the regime of scientific investigation, and therefore hypothesized an illegitimate objectivity. There is no such hypothesis in Gadamer.

Gadamer's hermeneutic can best be described as dialogical because of the emphasis that he places on the role of the dialectic in the realization of non-scientific truth. Gadamer asserts that authentic conversation between two or more participants is the only protection against a manipulative presentation and use of truth because only in conversation can something really new arise that does not reflect the prior agenda of one or more of the speakers.<sup>43</sup> "To reach an understanding in dialogue is not merely a matter of... successfully asserting one's own point of view, but being transformed into a communion (commonality) in which we do not remain what we were."<sup>44</sup>

With regard to biblical hermeneutics, we can see this conversation taking place on two levels. First, in order to rightly understand the text, our community, our situation, or ourselves, we require others who are beyond the boundaries of our inquiry. Only then can we receive a perspective that is not merely self-confirming. Though there is no obligation to accept the assessment of the outside voice, nevertheless, we *are* obligated by the rules of authentic conversation<sup>45</sup> to give the new perspective a fair hearing and to consider the merits of its appraisal. This principle applies not only to various conversationalists within one's temporal orientation, but also those who, throughout history, have been contributors to the formation of the community. In this way, Gadamer affirms the importance of authority for community.

The authority of persons is based ultimately, not on the subjection and abdication of reason [as Descartes and other moderns seemed to think], but on recognition and knowledge—knowledge, namely that the other is superior to oneself in judgment and insight and that for this reason his judgment takes precedence, i.e., it has priority over one's own.... It rests on recognition and hence on an act of reason itself which, aware of its own limitations, accepts that others have better understanding.<sup>46</sup>

Despite the concern for authority and tradition, however, in contrast to scientific truth, dialogical truth is not determined beforehand, since the tradition is itself only one participant in the conversation and does not receive special favor or status.<sup>47</sup> Thus, the potential exists for transformation of the self—and even the tradition—as a result of this encounter.

On the second level, the hermeneut enters into a conversation with the text itself, encountering it as a fellow interlocutor with the capacity for original claims and demands on the reader. Vattimo explains, “Our encounter with the work of art [or, in this case, a text] is not an encounter with a determinate truth...; it is rather, in the last analysis, an experience of our belonging, and of the work’s belonging, to... the tradition that it continues.”<sup>48</sup> For the Christian reader of scripture, it is imperative to experience the text as a conversation partner in the context of an ongoing tradition, namely, Christianity, with an expectation that the text, when its meaning is truly grasped, holds the potential for a surprising word for the reader. This does not discount, however, the “pre-understanding” of the interpreter, as if he or she came to the text as an empty vessel. Rather, Gadamer describes the process of textual encounter as one of “the fusion of horizons,” which refer to the horizons of meaning belonging to each of the interpreter and the text, as these potentially diverse perspectives are brought into agreement.<sup>49</sup>

In a Gadamerian world, difference is not necessarily inimical to community (as in the modern age, which demanded conformity), nor is it just a play toy (as represented in some postmodern deconstructionists); rather, it is the basis of human existence, created by God.<sup>50</sup> The diversity of experiences necessarily produces a diversity of perspectives, which are not to be flattened out, but engaged—whether in the Christian community or in the biblical texts.<sup>51</sup>

At the heart of Gadamer’s hermeneutic is the concept of *relationality*. The encounter with the unfamiliar, an Other, is a precondition for interpreting and understanding oneself and



others. If our world were truly solipsistic, we would have no way to know even ourselves, for understanding comes from the distinctions we make. If everything is undifferentiated unity, there can be no understanding of what it is not, nor of what it could be, and thus no understanding of what it is.

To apply the point, before I ever seek to know how a text relates to me, or how another person's experience relates to mine, it is not good enough simply to approach that text or person with supposedly value-neutral *observation*. For then, as Hume and Kant perceived, we shall at once begin to impose upon what we seek to understand prior categories of thought and stereotypification. The *first* requirement is *respect for the otherness of the Other as Other*. This invites *not observation but listening*.<sup>52</sup>

Thus the direction of the current of thought from the interpreter to the text, which characterized modern exegesis, is reversed, and Gadamerian hermeneutics allows God to address his followers through dialogical encounters with the text.<sup>53</sup>

Gadamer's dialogical hermeneutic holds great potential for the church in a postmodern age. First, it takes the text of the Bible seriously, permitting it to make even stronger claims on the reader than the "what-it-meant/what-it-means" hermeneutic of modernism. Second, it expects transformation in the world and life of the interpreter as a result of an encounter with the text, a process which lies at the heart of the scriptures, the original purpose of which were to serve as formative documents for the community of God. Third, it fully acknowledges the postmodern concerns about finitude and manipulative self-interest by appealing to tradition and by adopting an attitude of dialogue, respectively, thus doing away with the need somehow to uncover objective, certain, and accurate knowledge of a person's thoughts thousands of years ago. Fourth, it offers hope to the postmodern of achieving truth and meaning, despite the above concerns. Fifth, it locates the interpreter within the context of a supportive community that provides stability, identity, and belonging, all cures for the postmodern malaise. Sixth, it is

applicable only within community, which is a central facet of the spiritual life portrayed in the Bible.<sup>54</sup>

#### **IV. Conclusion**

In describing the postmodern ethos as one of skeptical longing, we have uncovered the sources for much of the motivation behind this powerful force of change in our culture. We have further identified this ethos as the result of a loss of hermeneutic, which renders the world incomprehensible for many postmoderns. This situation serves as a substantial opportunity for the church to offer to postmoderns a way to understand their world which affirms their skepticism yet does not permit it to spiral into nihilism. Further, such a hermeneutic is consistent with scripture regarding the biblical themes of creation, the fall, and community—all foundational issues for the church. This discussion has further provided us a context within which we may place the phenomena of the postmodern world that constitute the rest of our examination in this thesis: postmodern spirituality, postmodern ethics, and postmodern pop culture.

## ENDNOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> Incidentally, this sentiment harkens back to the origin of philosophy, as practiced by the ancient Greeks. It was never intended to be an exercise in endless speculations and irresolvable disputes but an avenue for examining one's life and, if necessary, changing one's life. So much of what has passed for philosophy has been only this interminable conjecture.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Simon, "The Boxer," *Bridge Over Troubled Water* (1970), on-line, available at The Simon and Garfunkel Lyrics Archive at <http://www.angelfire.com/music/sandglyrics/bridge.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> That is why a graduate in any of these fields receives a B.S., a bachelor of *science* rather than a bachelor of arts.

<sup>4</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, Christian Mission and Modern Culture series (Valley Forge: Trinity, 1996), 75-76.

<sup>5</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 13.

<sup>6</sup> David F. Wells, *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 76.

<sup>7</sup> Kenneth J. Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 139.

<sup>8</sup> Wells, 95.

<sup>9</sup> Gergen, 128. The French philosopher, Michel Foucault, identified three errors of modernity: 1) that objective knowledge exists and can be discerned, 2) that such knowledge is possessed and is value-free, and 3) that pursuit of knowledge benefits all humanity, not just a special class. He rejected all these errors and advanced the now-common postmodern idea that all knowledge is power. See Grenz, p. 131.

<sup>10</sup> Grenz, 14-15.

<sup>11</sup> Gergen, 7.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 123-124.

<sup>13</sup> Grenz, 19-20. Foucault calls this "heterotopia."

<sup>14</sup> By the 1980s, aggregate spending on leisure reached \$300 billion, approximating the amount spent on both public education and national defense. It has now surpassed even these and has emerged as the number one industry in America. Richard Kraus, *Leisure in a Changing America: Multicultural Perspectives* (New York: Macmillan, 1994), 70-78.

<sup>15</sup> It is only in postmodernity that leisure has emerged "as a significant area of academic study." *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 220-227.

<sup>17</sup> PwC, "Online Hotel Industry Data Trends and Research—Global Hotel Trends, Global Hotel Data," on-line, available from [www.lodgingresearch.com](http://www.lodgingresearch.com).

<sup>18</sup> Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976).

<sup>19</sup> Nigel Watson, "Postmodernism and Lifestyles (or: You Are What You Buy)", in *The Routledge Dictionary of Postmodern Thought*, ed. Stuart Sim, (New York: Routledge, 1999), 55.

---

<sup>20</sup> Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), esp. vii-viii, 155-163.

<sup>21</sup> The etymological root of this word is *muse*, “To reflect, meditate, wonder.” The affixation of the *alpha* at the beginning, of course, denotes a negation of such an activity. Thus, *amusement* is the prevention of someone from reflecting, meditating, or wondering, that is, from engaging in intellectual activity. See Jess Stein, ed., *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, unabridged ed. (New York: Random House, 1966, 1967), 51, 943.

<sup>22</sup> See Douglas Grootius, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000), 281-295. While I do not accept the general thesis of this book at all, Grootius does do a good job of collating the data on the deleterious consequences of too much television.

<sup>23</sup> I am here making a distinction between the historical-critical paradigm, which I take to be a child of modernism, and historical-criticism as a method, which is often helpful in biblical interpretation.

<sup>24</sup> I am indebted for the following characterization to Joel B. Green, which he elucidated in class December, 1999.

<sup>25</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 11. Original emphasis.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 26. Original emphasis.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 25. Original emphasis.

<sup>29</sup> These terms, while not unique to Merold Westphal, are a major theme in his thought, and it is from him that I appropriate their use here. See Merold Westphal, ed., *Postmodern Philosophy and Christian Thought* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1999), and *Suspicion and Faith: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998).

<sup>30</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?” in *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. Thomas Docherty (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 44.

<sup>31</sup> Merold Westphal, “Appropriating Postmodernism,” in *Postmodern Philosophy and Christian Thought*, ed. Merold Westphal (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1999), 3.

<sup>32</sup> Steven Bouma-Prediger, “Yearning for Home: The Doctrine of Creation in a Postmodern Age,” in *Postmodern Philosophy and Christian Thought*, ed. Merold Westphal (Bloomington: University of Indiana, 1999), 191-192.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>34</sup> Gergen, 156.

<sup>35</sup> Bouma-Prediger, 191.

<sup>36</sup> Westphal, “Appropriating Postmodernism,” 3.

<sup>37</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self: On Meaning, Manipulation, and Promise* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 13.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

---

<sup>39</sup> Westphal, "Appropriating Modernism," 2.

<sup>40</sup> Thiselton, 67.

<sup>41</sup> Norman Wirzba, "Love's Reason: From Heideggerian *Care* to Christian *Charity*," in *Postmodern Philosophy and Christian Thought*, ed. Merold Westphal (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1999), 247.

<sup>42</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1975), xi-xv. The application of his method should not be limited to these two fields, however. Disciples of Gadamer have carried his principles and applied them successfully to such areas of inquiry as literature, theology, cultural studies, jurisprudence, and sociology, among others. Hugh J. Silverman, ed., *Gadamer and Hermeneutics*, Continental Philosophy Series, no. 4 (New York: Routledge, 1991), 2-3.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 345.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Thiselton, 71.

<sup>45</sup> See Gadamer, 330-362.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 345.

<sup>48</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture*, Trans. Jon R. Snyder (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 134.

<sup>49</sup> Gadamer, 272-274.

<sup>50</sup> Bouma-Prediger, 193.

<sup>51</sup> One result of the use of the historical-critical paradigm among evangelicals is the tendency to steamroll the disparate voices within scripture, as if each writer understood himself as contributing to the identical metanarrative that every other writer did, and had the same conception as every other writer of what is most important for the community, etc. In reality, they were simply contributing to an ongoing dialogue about what it means to be the people of God in their own particular context, a conversation much larger than that represented by scripture, the "authorized" portion of that discussion. Postmodernity allows us to speak comfortably about Luke's perspective on salvation, for example, in distinction to that of Paul, without forcing us to judge one of them "wrong." There can be many ways to conceive of and to describe salvation—many ways to *interpret* salvation.

<sup>52</sup> Thiselton, 50-51.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>54</sup> See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1954).

## CHAPTER THREE

# POSTMODERN SPIRITUALITY

One of the hallmarks of the postmodern era is a renewed focus on the internal life. Modernism emphasized outcomes and results—whether considering the utilitarian value of a new technology or the aesthetic merit of Romantic poetry—but part of the postmodern critique has been a concentration on process. Since, for the postmodern mind, the external world has lost much of its former significance, it is now the internal sensations and thoughts that receive the attention formerly given to the products of those sensations and thoughts.

Consequently, there has been a tremendous growth in interest among Americans in the spiritual aspects of life.<sup>1</sup> According to Gallup, 78% of Americans now feel a need to experience spiritual growth, up from 20%, even as recently as 1994.<sup>2</sup> Barna concludes, “The failure to understand the role of spirituality in our culture renders a social analyst incapable of ... comprehending the dynamic of American life.”<sup>3</sup> But this resurgence of interest in things spiritual is not a revival of classical Christian spirituality; the advent of a postmodern spirituality is the emergence of a secular spirituality, a *psychologized* spirituality—rather than a *theological* spirituality—that permeates the culture, including much of even the evangelical church.

### I. The Advent of Psychology

This new type of secular spirituality differs from its religious rival in several essential aspects, which we will examine below, but first we must explore some of the characteristics of psychology in general, in order to achieve a broader perspective on the spiritual landscape. Since both theology and psychology deal with the internal life and share many of the same objectives, it is perhaps inevitable that the boundaries between them have blurred. It is central to both disciplines to define what constitutes a human being, to determine the internal processes

that produce actions and patterns of behavior, and to develop ways of effecting positive change viz. those patterns of behavior. Each of these two fields has advanced certain claims and assertions about people, however, that conflict with insights deemed essential by the other, creating a cognitive dissonance in those who understand themselves and others to any extent both in theological and in psychological terms.<sup>4</sup>

Reconciling such antipathetic notions is indeed a daunting task, and yet a struggle that did not exist until very recently. The language of psychology was not even present only 200 years ago, and now to think outside of a psychological framework is all but impossible. Thus has the Freudian idiom of psychoanalysis and its descendants come to revolutionize language (and subsequently, worldviews) in the West to an extent rivaling—or even exceeding—that of the computer. American society has largely turned to psychology to answer what were formally “religious” questions: “Who am I?”; “Why do I do the things I do?”; and “How can I change the things I do?”<sup>5</sup> Consequently, the therapeutic outlook has displaced the religious as the organizing framework of American culture. How this transition took place is the key to further understanding.

### *A. The Challenge of Romanticism*

As we have already noted, Romanticism emphasized the emotions and affective aspects of life in protest to the overly rational and mechanistic Enlightenment priorities, and there was a mysterious, almost mystical, fascination with these inexplicable experiences. The Romantics insisted that life, love, death, and being were not reducible merely to empirical observation.

The spirit of the Enlightenment found its answer to the Romantic challenge in Sigmund Freud. In him, modernity had found a way to address the concerns of the Romantics from within the language and worldview of the Enlightenment. By subjecting the deep interior of the self (a

Romantic concern) to rigorous objective analysis (an Enlightenment methodology), Freud unified the opposing discourses of Romanticism and Enlightenment. He concluded that this deep interior consisted essentially of the energy of desire, especially desire for sexual expression; the heretofore mysterious Romantic passions had now been explained in biological language accompanied by a mechanistic worldview.<sup>6</sup> It was nothing less than a revolution in the understanding of human nature, “the single most important set of ideas whereby men and women in the twentieth century have come to understand themselves and their civilization.”<sup>7</sup>

Enlightenment sentiments emerged from the confrontation with Romanticism stronger than ever. So promising were the possibilities that, by the mid-twentieth century, science had eclipsed all other forms of academic inquiry. Ethics, metaphysics, theology, and such all but disappeared from university curricula. Failing to treat “observables,” it was argued that they were merely empty speculations—like so many angels dancing on the head of a pin.<sup>8</sup> Darwinism had already raised questions about the viability of the continuance of human life, and these were answered by wave after wave of calls for more science, more technological advancement, and the complete conquest of the natural world—a reassertion of Enlightenment idealism.<sup>9</sup>

## *B. Modern Man Masters Mind*

### 1. Who We Are

Enlightenment ideals once again dominated the modern cultural landscape, and as the concerns of the Romantics quietly slipped away from the cultural consciousness, “Freud’s cauldron of seething and repressed motivational forces, so central to the Romantic definition of the person, slowly dropped from view. In its place the ego, the beleaguered and obfuscated center of rationality for Freud, gained centrality.”<sup>10</sup> Subsequent generations of psychiatrists focused on cognitive development (rather than psycho-sexual) and proposed the possibility of rational self-analysis, with the result that now problems were not seen as buried deep within the



recesses of the self but were actually in the easily accessible realm of thought. The consequent assumption was that people could achieve meaningful self-knowledge without any referent to God, His image on us, or the human sin nature.<sup>11</sup>

## 2. Why We Do What We Do

With the triumph of psychology as the final arbiter in determining the definition of the self, human evil, the fact that we fail to live up to our aspirations, is attributed to environmental and physiological (i.e., genetic, chemical, biological) factors; the assumption behind psychology is that humans are basically good.<sup>12</sup> As a result, the most recent century has seen a tremendous growth in ways of talking about *psychological* deficits of the self, in contrast to *moral* deficits: low self-esteem, over-stress, obsessive-compulsive disorder, self-alienation, anorexia/bulimia, voyeurism, anti-social tendencies, bipolar disorder, attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder, light-affective disorder, etc. It is incontestable, certainly, that the labeling of some of these conditions as psychological diseases (bipolar, for instance) has led to the empowerment of many to modify what were once experienced as uncontrollable conditions; similarly, the introduction of medication that rectifies chemical imbalances in the brain are a tremendous help in many situations. On the other hand, the trend in recent years has been to distribute the label of mental illness to what were widely once considered moral faults with the result that the psychological label has often become an excuse for the behavior, masquerading as a cause. We have developed countless ways of discussing our faults and the faults of others in a language that entirely avoids connotations of sin or responsibility, creating a need for professionals to help us arrive at solutions to the problems of life. This trend of diagnosis and treatment requires a steadily increasing vocabulary of psychological disease, which produces a corresponding increase in the perceptions of illness, creating a continuous spiraling cycle of enfeeblement and infirmity.<sup>13</sup>

### 3. How We Can Change What We Do

Even though religious explanations of reality have been replaced by psychological ones, there still remains an understood need for salvation, redefined as deliverance from our enfeebled, infirm conditions. Instead of sin, however, we have sicknesses, problems, issues that we must “deal with”; instead of guilt, we contend with anxiety and instability. Christopher Lasch identifies such a person as “psychological man,” who seeks, above all, peace of mind; he pursues “happiness” at any cost. Therapists replace priests as his model for a vehicle to this salvation because the therapist will tell him the blame for his problems are outside of himself, while the solutions lie within himself; a priest would tell him that the problem is inherent to him, while the only solution exists in the activity of God in his life. For psychological man, the need for love—a pregnant theological concept—is reclassified as the need for fulfillment of the patient’s emotional requirements, leading not to an admirable character, but “psychological wholeness.”<sup>14</sup>

While there is some validity to Lasch’s assessment—our sin nature always favors exonerating itself whenever possible—at the same time, we must question the church’s role in this development. Why is it that “psychological man” could not find his happiness and satisfaction in the church? While these are not the chief ends of a biblical spirituality, they are important outcomes of being in fellowship with God and those who follow him. For too many would-be Christians, the church has communicated only a message of condemnation, rooted in manipulation through guilt, fear, and intimidation.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, it has surrendered the privileged position that it formerly held in the culture—postmoderns simply cannot accept the church’s formulation of how to change what we do when they see that so many Christian need to change how they interact with those with whom they disagree.

## II. The Psychological Spirituality of Postmodernism

At first blush, it would seem that the explanatory power of psychology would lose its influence as postmodernism gained ascendancy. Grounded in the Enlightenment Project, psychology is based on supposedly objective, rational analysis, which postmodernism denies. It views humans simply as so many mechanistic examples under the control of the forces of cause and effect. But in fact, the trend is the opposite. The continuously spiraling cycle of enfeeblement and infirmity expands without abatement, and the prestige of the field of psychology grows ever greater. How is it that postmodernism, which denies all the foundational principles upon which psychology is built, can continue to ally itself with the psychological paradigm?

There seem to be two primary reasons. First, psychology shares with postmodernism the assumption of ulterior motives, hidden agendas, and attempts at manipulation to the advantage of the self. Personality-type and defense-mechanism theories explore this facet of life, showing how humans have a tendency to hide even from themselves their true reasons for some, or even many, of their actions. Though psychology has moved beyond Freud in many respects, and many of his key theories are now discounted, his influence is still heavily felt in psychology today, particularly in its objectives and basic worldview. It is precisely in this regard that Freud is at his most proto-postmodern, as he challenges “the notion of the modern self in control of its own choices, values, and goals.” Instead, he proposes a picture of “the self, first, as an amalgam of neurological, quasi-physical or psychic ‘forces’ which serve to define and to shape it; second, as a victim of its own manipulative deceptions.”<sup>16</sup> This agrees with the postmodern assessment of human tendencies, and postmoderns are drawn to psychology to discover—to whatever extent it is possible—ways in which these primal urges for power have created unfortunate, damaging,

or even destructive results in their lives, making the negotiations through life more difficult than otherwise necessary.

The second reason for the postmodern attraction to psychology lies in the historically unparalleled spotlight that postmodernism shines on the self. In a world without a knowable external reality, the self becomes the only thing to know; in a world with no external meaning, the self becomes the only avenue to meaning. So the attention focuses on the inner workings of one's mind, its development, its history, its desires, and its proclivities, spiraling into a web of narcissism.<sup>17</sup> The failure of the Enlightenment Project to find stable meaning in the world "out there" has been pivotal in turning the attention of postmoderns to their experiences, thoughts, and feelings; as technology has increasingly alienated postmoderns from the external world, the inner world and inner life have become the focus and provide identity in the face of the competing claims, opposing roles, and adversarial loyalties of the fragmented external reality.<sup>18</sup> Religion is still denied the authority to explain the operation of the interior realm because of its metanarrative claims and subsequent demands on the inquirer, which are seen to be motivated by power interests. That leaves psychology, then, as the only mechanism for explaining the self that does not propagate a metanarrative.

Clearly then, psychology, holds sway in the struggle to define the self. Yet its reductionist outlook does not preclude an explosion in the interest in spirituality. Psychology, which concentrates on the internal life of the patient, and spirituality, which is "the experience of consciously striving to integrate one's life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption but of self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives,"<sup>19</sup> have been conjoined in postmodernity to result in an attempt at self-transcendence that aims at one's psychological

wholeness. The best way to see the paradoxical merging of these two pursuits is to view the junction against the backdrop of classical Christian spirituality.

### A. *Private*

Classical spirituality occurs in the context of a community of faith, but in a very important sense, psychologized spirituality is almost entirely a *private* affair, centered on the internal life of the individual. While postmoderns do yearn for community, they have found that actual communities (particularly religious communities) have neither been accepting of them, nor supportive of their spiritual quests, so in practice, they have tended to withdraw at least from traditional religious communities. The majority of 20- and 30-year-olds care deeply about spirituality, but less than one in three believe the church is helpful in that pursuit,<sup>20</sup> an assessment that probably says more about the church than about the 20- and 30-year-olds.

Necessarily, then, there is a common perception throughout the culture that one can be spiritual without going to a church or synagogue regularly, which has been accompanied by a perceived bifurcation of religion from spirituality, as the external (potentially “artificial”) from the internal (“genuine”), respectively.<sup>21</sup> As their experiences with “organized religion” have left them cold, they have come to see the external religious practices as simply expressions of fondness, components chosen by a person to correspond as nearly as possible to the subjective experiences the individual has had, a match of personal preferences with institutional realities,<sup>22</sup> like searching for the perfect shade of upholstery to match the carpet and wallpaper already in place. Postmoderns will not casually accept religious truth or instructions from an authority or institution without the authentication of personal experience. The ultimate test of what “counts” as spiritual is one’s own personal experience.<sup>23</sup>

In sympathy with this appraisal of today's church, author Kurt Vonnegut has made it a consistent practice in his novels to invent his own religions to make up for the deficiencies of Christianity. In his autobiography, the atheist claims:

We need a new religion. An effective religion allows people to imagine from moment to moment what is going on and how they should behave. Christianity used to be like that. [But] our country is now jammed with human beings who say out loud that life is chaos to them, and that it doesn't seem to matter what anybody does next.<sup>24</sup>

The church has somewhere lost the ability to make sense of the world for postmoderns.

Although Christianity formerly answered the questions the culture was asking, the culture has moved on to new questions, but the church still fights the specters of modernism. Postmodern people have a utilitarian attitude toward religion—they want a community that will help them interpret their world, something that allows them to process their experiences, a meaning-making system. But instead of listening to the needs of postmoderns, the church has been insistent on preaching doctrines, universal principles, and the pursuit of Truth, neglecting potential points of contact and leaving postmoderns wallowing in “chaos.” Many Christian authors, such as Doug Groothuis, argue that if this is the case, then postmoderns will simply have to change their outlook viz. religion and its purposes before they can come to a saving knowledge of Christ.<sup>25</sup> I contend that if the church is not trying to be *useful* to postmoderns while claiming to be *right*, their claims will never be convincing ones, and postmoderns will be left to their own spiritual paths without the input of the church—and this is indeed what is happening. The church too often seems impatient with people who have not been instructed in the faith but who, nevertheless, are seeking God.

The result of the alienation and abandonment of postmoderns from the church is that postmodern people pursue spirituality on their own. Unfortunately, as Irving Kristol has noted, when spirituality is divorced from community, it “quickly diminishes into an indoor pleasure, a

kind of hobby of one or more individuals, like reading a book or watching television”<sup>26</sup> because there is no community structure for accountability. This sad hobby-version of faith manifests itself most often in baby-boomers and their progeny. Boomers, who had started to return to church in the 1980s and early 1990s in the hope of finding the goal of their spiritual pilgrimage, after being disillusioned once more, have now begun to question again the value of organized faith. Generation Xers, reared in an environment that has considered the church merely as a disposable option rather than a prerequisite for personal wholeness, have shown a predilection to rejecting religion outright.<sup>27</sup> If the church is ever to reach this people group with any considerable success, it must craft a spirituality that speaks to their needs and concerns, or else the faith can hold no real meaning for them.

For those who do find a home in the church and experience spiritual growth through a relationship with Christ, they are congratulated by other postmoderns who are still in process. They might be told something like, “I’m glad you found something that *works for you!*” However, postmoderns are often very sensitive about *convictions* that might be expressed as a result of this spiritual self-understanding of the Christian because of their negative encounters with other Christians who have illegitimately tried to manipulate the behavior of those beyond the walls of faith. In this manner, authentic believers are often forced to pretend that their religious beliefs really do not make any difference except for their own sense of personal fulfillment, causing a rift between the public and the private self.<sup>28</sup> Wade Clark Roofe observes:

Privatized faith is common in contemporary America because it is so very congenial with a highly differentiated society. Restricted largely to the spheres of family and personal life it encroaches very little into the larger public world, which Americans increasingly define as off-limits to religious institutions. With believing disjointed from belonging, it amounts to a ‘portable faith’—one that a believer can keep in the inner life and take along in life, having little contact with a religious institution or ascribed group.<sup>29</sup>

## *B. Unorthodox*

Classical spirituality is consistent with the creeds and other professions of belief of the church over time, but this hobby-spirituality mentality allows for a connected aspect of privatized, psychologized postmodern spirituality: *unorthodoxy*. Since spirituality is seen as essentially a matter of inner-personal operations, each individual is free to choose his or her own beliefs, unencumbered by any duty to an organization or institution—even for those in the church.

Ours is a society built on “freedom,” which has been conceived now to be coextensive with *choice*,<sup>30</sup> the religious corollary to consumerism. David Wells claims that choice is the defining feature of our culture: we choose our own social standing, occupation, marriage partner(s), whether we have children and how many, even our own identities. Why should we not then be able to choose things like meaning and values?<sup>31</sup> Kay Meyer would agree with the perspective behind that question. “Why do I have the right to say someone’s going to hell just because they believe something different than I do?” she asks. As she appropriates her new Unitarian Universalist attitudes to her Baptist upbringing, Kay feels “like I’m becoming an evangelical Unitarian.” Unitarian Universalism is a religion without creed, accepting as members former Muslims, Christians, Jews, pagans, Buddhists, atheists, agnostics, and humanists into their fold, with no requirement of assent to any dogma, and its numbers have been increasing for the last twenty years.<sup>32</sup> Barna reports that fully 45% of Americans believe that religious beliefs do not matter at all.<sup>33</sup>

The younger the person the more likely they are to hold unorthodox beliefs; refrain from spiritual disciplines, such as prayer and Bible-reading; not profess commitment to church or Christianity; and not consider themselves “religious.”<sup>34</sup> Moreover, it is the young who are most



immersed in postmodern assumptions;<sup>35</sup> yet, even among adults, one in five is “closely aligned” with the belief patterns and lifestyle of New Age teaching.<sup>36</sup> Though 93% of Americans believe God exists, almost 30% of those who believe in God conceive of deity outside of biblical boundaries.<sup>37</sup> Beaudoin considers experimentation with heresy and even blasphemy key to Generation X’s religious experience. The World Wide Web houses holy home pages along side pornography and sacrilege, and music videos routinely mix the sacred and the profane. Thus, Generation X removes the ideas of *holy* and *unholy* from their black-and-white environments and throws them together as expressions of one another.<sup>38</sup>

The phenomenon of the Internet and its random, chaotic character is important for understanding this rise in the unorthodoxy of the young. In browsing the religious options on the Web, one easily passes from orthodoxy to heterodoxy and back, each standing side-by-side in cyberspace, equally available and accessible, which raises questions about their metaphysical equality. Cyberspace is theologically fluid, flowing with religious options from high popery to astrology, Scientology, and paganism, and there is no central authority. For many Xers, the Web is taken as an ontology (a way of being) and an epistemology (a way of knowing). Changing a letter (or a few) transports the surfer to an entirely different reality, a wholly different experience than visiting different religious sites in the “real” world, some of which may not even be open for “browsing.” “When religious devotees note the ephemerality and heightened access of religion in cyberspace, they may begin to doubt the absolute claims of sacredness and permanence” of religion.<sup>39</sup> Beaudoin says the Net is becoming a “virtual monastery for the spiritually dispossessed,” replete with options for self-reflection, prayer, meditation, or Scripture studies. One can even listen to monks chanting, gaze on iconography, and read holy texts.<sup>40</sup> It is expected that in ten years, 20% of Americans will have their entire spiritual experience on-line,

separated from any physically present community support and tailored to the demands of the user.<sup>41</sup>

### *C. Self-Oriented*

Classical spirituality is focused on God as its ultimate point of focus. Psychologized spirituality focuses ultimately on the *self* and its mental health as its highest aspiration: self-help, self-empowerment, self-improvement. Since it is launched from the moorings of community and tradition, this personalized, customized form of faith, which bears little resemblance to the “pure” forms of any of the world’s major religions, is available to be shaped and molded by its adherents for the primary purpose of meeting personal needs.<sup>42</sup> As the therapeutic outlook has displaced the religious as the organizing framework of American culture, it should not be surprising that it should determine the purpose and content of the latter, or that the manifestation of this trend is widespread.

The doctrine of sin is conceived, no longer in relation to God, but to the self. Though people still believe that sin exists, they do not accept rigid definitions of sinful behavior.<sup>43</sup> Instead, they view it as a disloyalty to oneself, or the manifestation of psychological disorders that prevent one from achieving or enjoying all that one would otherwise. The chief problem of humanity becomes the psychological deficits discussed above (low self-esteem, obsessive-compulsive disorder, self-alienation, et al.), and God functions only to calm, assuage, and mend, never to judge or condemn, like a divine dispenser of holy wholeness.<sup>44</sup>

As sin is psychologized, salvation necessarily receives the same fate; since salvation is deliverance from sin, if the definition of sin changes, that of its deliverance does as well. Salvation is retooled in terms of achieving one’s potential and finding self-worth. Spiritual needs are psychoanalyzed, and self-help books become “portable pastors,” containing all the

wisdom and advice necessary to negotiate through life,<sup>45</sup> supplementing 12-step programs and motivational video tapes. These trends, taken collectively, are the expressions of our culture's craving for "happiness," the secularization of the religious quest for redemption from sin.<sup>46</sup>

Without a theological understanding of the world, there can be no conviction concerning the vileness and offensiveness of sin. As a result, the hunger today is not for salvation from that sin, but for the feeling, the momentary illusion of psychological wholeness and security, which is absent in the hectic, fragmented pace of life. From a Christian perspective, however, "[t]he dreadful thing about the [post]modern pursuit of happiness ... is that people become imprisoned in themselves, endlessly ransacking their own emotional needs in order to attain what in reality is unattainable" apart from God.<sup>47</sup>

This development is widespread even in the church. Loving God and being in love with God have replaced consecration and commitment of oneself to his agenda. This "love" is not conceived of as a dedication of oneself or a sacrifice of oneself, but rather a private, individualized, experience-based emotion that is more therapeutic than moral.<sup>48</sup> This is a spirituality of feelings, generated by subjective, mystical experiences, instead of connection with the biblical stories or participation in the church body. This desire for emotional satisfaction is witnessed in the trend of church-hopping—little religious continuity, non-adherence to the traditions of the people of God, and most importantly a failure to live with integrity.<sup>49</sup> Emotions are regarded as self-authenticating and must be lifted up without reference to doctrinal content.<sup>50</sup> It is the fault of the church that it has not communicated the message of scripture to its members in convincing ways, opting more often to pontificate rather than to explain, and to delineate rather than to accept a proper stance of ambiguity and flexibility when appropriate.

One thing that has come out of the new transformation of the culture is a more assertive stance toward anything that stifles creativity and play, including—and perhaps, especially—religion.<sup>51</sup> The perceived inflexibility of the church on a variety of issues has led postmoderns to consider it as an institution typified by arrogance. They thrive on ambiguity as a major component of the spiritual life that reflects the instabilities that characterize the postmodern existence.<sup>52</sup> Postmoderns claim that institutions, including the Church, are socially made, not divinely given, and that they can therefore be unmade or reformed or reconstituted.<sup>53</sup> Women, for example, demand a say in determining the morality of abortion and of views on divorce and remarriage. The democratization of decision-making is regarded as essential in all social institutions—including the church<sup>54</sup>—as the priesthood of all believers has become the democracy of interpretation. Norman observes that postmodern Christians

can only accept [*sic*] as religious truth what seems to them to be comfy and conducive to a painless safe-passage through experience. Religion is perceived to be the heaped-up accumulation of the agreeable; God is love, and therefore he is to be envisaged as the great guarantor of whatever in life makes for human satisfaction.<sup>55</sup>

Psychological happiness becomes the First Principle of postmodernity, the unquestionable foundation, what is self-evident. Personal satisfaction, pleasure, and the emotions are bifurcated from and elevated over moral character, which is replaced by self-expression, self-gratification, and self-fulfillment.<sup>56</sup>

### **III. Christian Postmodernism—A New Hermeneutic, Part II**

It would seem that psychology as a replacement for religion is a poor substitute; yet few would deny that it has tremendous explaining power and has brought about benefits, even substantial ones, in the description of human behavior. Nevertheless, the discipline of psychology is inherently reductionist and, as such, does not do justice to the profundity and mystery of the human experience.<sup>57</sup> If Christianity is to regain the historical fervency of its

spirituality, it must find some way to challenge the dominance of psychology over Christians and non-Christians alike without denying psychology's relevance to certain situations. We cannot return to a pre-psychological world, as if the discipline had never arisen; it is all but unimaginable to conceive of our urbanized, postindustrial society without any of the forms of psychotherapy and theories of personality derived from them. Moreover, in an era when religious frameworks no longer carry influence across the culture, psychology has become the common parlance to discuss the events of the inner life, a secular reordering of self-understanding.<sup>58</sup>

Using psychological language, then, is unavoidable if the church wishes to communicate with the culture. But it must do a better job of explaining that entering into relationship with the living God is much more than a psychological experience. Furthermore, the church must tell postmodern people the Bible provides the individual with an identity that is much more full-orbed and profound than the truncated and incomplete version offered by psychology. Grounding one's life in God *does* provide psychological wholeness and health, but the Christian life is about much more than self-actualization. The church must demonstrate that it has relevant answers to the questions of who we are, why we do what we do, and how we can change what we do; to communicate otherwise is to denigrate the gospel and to render it impotent. I believe a powerful way to do that—and further to connect postmoderns to the communities of which they yearn to be a part—is through a Christian application of the narratival hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur.

### *A. Ricoeurian Narratival Hermeneutics*

As we briefly mentioned in chapter one, Ricoeur has largely pioneered a new way of understanding truth, as well as the self. To review, most postmodern philosophy accepts the

modern criteria for what counts as truth, namely that a statement is true if it accurately corresponds to the external realities it purports to describe. This line of postmodern reasoning, which flows from Nietzsche, does not undermine the modern correspondence theory of truth; rather, it demonstrates that we cannot achieve its requirements, rendering truth, therefore, humanly unattainable. Thus, the anti-epistemology of much postmodernism is a critique waged from the foundations of modernism, not so much a repudiation of those foundations, as often presented.<sup>59</sup>

But a Christian view of truth need not be a modern one. I suggest that it might follow the thinking of Ricoeur's theory of narrative, which has much to recommend it from a biblical worldview. The "narrative identity," according to Ricoeur, is an entity who acts within a dual framework of continuity and change through time. In other words, on the one hand, the self is not separated from itself; since the narrative holds it together, a person's identity remains constant from one moment to the next and over a prospectively infinite succession of moments. On the other hand, the self can undergo potentially radical change that renders it unrecognizable from the perspective of an outsider who comes in contact with that person at sufficiently distant time intervals,<sup>60</sup> and in a very real sense we can say that this "new" self is not the same person he or she used to be.<sup>61</sup>

This rather simple concept, which accords with common experience,<sup>62</sup> serves as the launching point in the thought of Ricoeur for a contrary understanding of truth, yielding several important and profound insights. Truth, from within the understanding of the narrative identity, is formed by its relations to the past, present, and future of the narrative; it is a trajectory created by the timeline of one's life, rather than a timeless proposition, extracted from the context in which it emerged.

The present acquires understanding, significance, and interpretation in light of the relation between its 'situatedness' in terms of the past and its transformation and destiny

in the future. It relates to creative processes ... of transformation into the ever-maturing, ever-developing [*telos*].<sup>63</sup>

The Christian, then, locates his or her identity within the larger story of God's activity in the world. Biblical notions of truth are bound up in the concepts of witness, promise, accountability, covenant, faithfulness, *hesed*-love, all of which emerge over time in a relationship with God, highlighted by events that illustrate these truths—narratives. God's character and the Christian's character serve as aspects of stable continuity in the narrative, amidst the constant change of circumstances.<sup>64</sup>

Derrida's concentration on linguistic markers in the literary domain led to his assertion that texts could never achieve stability of meaning or closure. But his focus on the minutiae of discourse prevented him from seeing that the stability of truth of human behavior in external reality could exist on a large scale—that, in other words, the whole could be greater than the sum of the parts. There is a truth, found in the constancy of actions and activity, that transcends definitions.<sup>65</sup>

This truth, then, is the basis for our understanding of who we are, why we do what we do, and how we can change what we do. All these components of human existence are included in the narrative. We are God's creation, specially chosen by him to bear his image and to enjoy fellowship with him. Our sin, discontentment with and rebellion against his limits, severed us from him and led us to engage in self-destructive and alienating behavior. However, we can begin to experience redemption in the power of the Spirit through faith in Christ Jesus, who serves as the mediator between God and his creation, with the promise of total deliverance someday. This is the identity-producing narrative; it is the gospel; it is the community-constitutive story that binds Christians of all stripes together; it is the explanation of who we are, why we do what we do, and how we can change what we do.

When we plug ourselves into the story, we find a place for ourselves that is consistent with the beginning and end of the grand story, but our own individual stories are yet to be told. When we enter into and appropriate the “world of the text,” as Ricoeur invites us to do, it is this process that gives the text its fulfillment. Discourse is incomplete unless there is someone to whom the discourse is directed *and* that someone receives the discourse.<sup>66</sup> When the reader accepts the author’s proposal for how to be in the world, the world of the text and the world of the reader intersect, marking “the realization, the enactment, of the semantic possibilities of the text.”<sup>67</sup> It should be noted that this process of appropriation is not a matter of the reader making the text the reader’s possession, but of surrendering to the vision of the text, giving up (at least temporarily) one’s ideas about how the world works and one’s place in it.<sup>68</sup> This process has ethical ramifications as well, for the narrative provides the reader with a *telos* that shapes the subsequent decisions to be made. “There is no ethically neutral narrative.”<sup>69</sup>

Additionally, in this unique version of appropriation, we become a text for interpretation as well.<sup>70</sup> We understand our lives in light of the narrative and plan our future to align with the *telos* of the story. This acceptance of ourselves as “text” further allows us to permit the existence of self-deception because as a “text,” we must constantly live in a perpetual state of interpretation, a project that never achieves finality.<sup>71</sup> Contrary to Descartes, Hume, and the rest of modernity, Ricoeur reminds us that the self “is never the subject one thinks it is.”<sup>72</sup>

Thiselton summarizes, “Ricoeur’s profound achievement was to undermine equally the autonomous self which commands the center of the stage in high modernity and the reduced de-centered self of postmodernity. This comes closest to the self of scripture.”<sup>73</sup>



### *B. Unifying Gadamer and Ricoeur*

The hermeneutical strategies of Gadamer (introduced in chapter two) and of Ricoeur should not be understood in isolation from each other. While they are clearly different authors who have achieved somewhat different conclusions using different methods,<sup>74</sup> their work is not incompatible with each other. The majority of Ricoeur's work in hermeneutics has come since the publication of Gadamer's magnum opus, *Truth and Method*,<sup>75</sup> and he has favorably cited the latter many times, sometimes even drawing on his arguments extendedly.<sup>76</sup>

Essentially, Ricoeur places our lives within a larger narrative that provides us with insight into our place in the world, while Gadamer places our lives within a larger community that helps us to understand better both our own stories and the larger stories. The stories form the basis for our identity, but the community gives us a broader perspective to more correctly understand our identity than we could alone.

Both thinkers acknowledge the postmodern limits on the individual in terms of both finitude and corruptibility, and both have given complementary strategies to overcome them without brushing them aside. By removing the possession of truth out of the hands of the individual, where it had resided in the modern era, and bestowing it upon the narrative itself and the corporate body with whom we are in relationship, Gadamer and Ricoeur have preserved the notion of truth while recognizing the need for its transformation.

Furthermore, the work of both thinkers implies an ethics of the Other, which we will address in more detail in chapter four. However, it is sufficient to note here that Gadamer's concept of conversation, which entails respect for the other partner(s) in the exchange, and Ricoeur's respect for the otherness of the text both conclude with a respect for differences and a hope of agreement, even in the midst of conflict. Both strategies are characterized by a

deference and a humility in approaching the Other that should shape all our interpersonal relationships.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

In our exploration of postmodern spirituality, we have learned that—contrary to the naturalistic impulses of the modern era—postmoderns conceive of humans with an irreducible component of religiousness. The religious being cannot be defined adequately as simply a needy being; it is also a being with a desire and aspiration for *otherness*.<sup>77</sup> The desire of the postmodern, who acutely senses the limitations of human finitude and corruption, is at least to come in contact with a reality deeper than one's own senses, though that desire is admixed with a decisive drive for personal satisfaction and happiness.

While it would seem that such a shift in attitudes would be a boon to the church, prompting seekers of God to come learn more about him, there has been no Great Awakening, and most churches in America continue in plateau or decline. Much of the evangelical church has not considered the emerging spiritual quest of postmodernism to be an opportunity, but has instead viewed it simply as another indication of the worldliness of the culture because it has not been expressed in rational, orthodox expressions of faith. It has asked uncomfortable questions in Sunday School classes, has not dressed in acceptable clothing, and may still get drunk on the weekends while it is trying to figure out what it believes. And when it visits most traditional evangelical churches, it can sense that it is out of place, an unwanted nuisance, a burdensome imposition, so it leaves to continue on its own.

The narrativial hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur, in conjunction with the dialogical hermeneutics of Gadamer, offer a way of grafting into the family of God those who are not “church-broken.” The inclusion into the story of the community gives identity, security, and

hope. It provides the seeker with a purpose, and it offers help and support in finding and in realizing that purpose. It meets the needs of postmodern spiritual sojourners while at the same time protecting them from the equally grave errors of heterodoxy and hypocrisy. It also offers new possibilities for established believers to envision their spiritual lives in ways that they had never considered before.

Even with these appropriations of postmodernism, however, important as they are, the church may not experience any impact in the lives of postmoderns until it addresses the crucial topic of ethics. We turn now to such an examination, which represents perhaps the biggest obstacle for postmoderns considering the evangelical church.

## ENDNOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> For a helpful discussion of this trend that includes many citations for further research, see Sandra M. Schneiders, "Spirituality in the Academy," in *Modern Christian Spirituality: Methodological and Historical Essays*, ed. Bradley C. Hanson, American Academy of Religion Modern Christian Spirituality Series, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham, no. 62 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 15-37.

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Tom Schaeffer, "What's So Bad about Praying for Converts?" *Lexington (Kentucky) Herald-Leader*, 13 Nov. 1999, C10.

<sup>3</sup> George Barna, *The Index of Leading Spiritual Indicators* (Dallas: Word, 1996), x.

<sup>4</sup> Theodore A. McConnell, *The Shattered Self: The Psychological and Religious Search for Selfhood* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim, 1971), xi.

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M. Bowman, Jr., *An Unchanging Faith in a Changing World: Understanding and Responding to Critical Issues that Christians Face Today* (Nashville: Nelson, 1997), 34.

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth J. Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 27-29.

<sup>7</sup> Donald Kagan, et al., *The Western Heritage*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1983), 863.

<sup>8</sup> Gergen, 30.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>11</sup> James M. Houston, "Spiritual Life Today: An Appropriate Spirituality for a Postmodern World," in *The Gospel in the Modern World: A Tribute to John Stott*, ed. Martyn Eden and David F. Wells (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1991), 188.

<sup>12</sup> Boa and Bowman, 42.

<sup>13</sup> Gergen, 13-15.

<sup>14</sup> Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1979), 13.

<sup>15</sup> Linda Raney Wright, *Christianity's Crisis in Evangelism: Going Where the People Are*, Critical Issues Series (Gresham, OR: Vision House, 1995), esp. 1-50.

<sup>16</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self: On Meaning, Manipulation and Promise* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 127.

<sup>17</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, Christian Mission and Modern Culture Series (Valley Forge: Trinity, 1996), 9.

<sup>18</sup> David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 77.

<sup>19</sup> Schneiders, 23.

---

<sup>20</sup> Kathryn McCormick and Lindsay Hardin Freeman, "Teleconference Challenges Church to Broaden its Vision," *Episcopal Life*, Nov. 1999, 37. Tom Beaudoin, in preparation for his book, conducted thousands of informal interviews with members of Generation X, asking them about issues of spirituality, and he uncovered a similar attitude among young people today. He reported one as saying, "If you want to talk about church, I'm not very interested. I think people can still be religious without going to churches or synagogues. Do you think it really even makes a difference to God?" Anti-institutionalism, he concludes, is key to a postmodern spirituality as part of a heavily engrained skepticism, even cynicism, that reverberates throughout the generation. Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 51-52.

<sup>21</sup> Clark Wade Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of The Baby Boom Generation* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1993), 215.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>23</sup> Beaudoin, 74.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Peter Freese, "Invented Religions as Sense-Making Systems in Kurt Vonnegut's Novels," in *Religion and Philosophy in the United States of America: Proceedings of the German-American Conference at Paderborn, July 29-August 1, 1986*, 2 vol., ed. Peter Freese, (Essen, Germany: Verlag Die Blaue Eule, 1987), 1:215.

<sup>25</sup> He contends that Christians "must be wary of working to make the Christian message relevant to the felt needs of non-Christians." Essentially, he argues that postmoderns must be converted to modernism before they can be converted to Christ. Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000), 163.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in David F. Wells, *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 9.

<sup>27</sup> Barna, 34-35.

<sup>28</sup> Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 3-22.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Barna, 106.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 292.

<sup>31</sup> Wells, *Losing Our Virtue*, 86-88.

<sup>32</sup> Brian Lewis, "Individual Searches Lead to Faith: Unitarian Universalists are Spreading the Word More," *Lexington (Kentucky) Herald-Leader*, 27 Nov. 1999, C10.

<sup>33</sup> Barna, 71.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 83-85.

<sup>35</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 13.

<sup>36</sup> Barna, 28.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 18. Such conceptions include a state of higher consciousness, realization of human potential, polytheism, and that each person is his or her own God, or that everyone is a god.

<sup>38</sup> Beaudoin, 122.

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 57-58.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 89-90.

<sup>41</sup> McCormick and Freeman, 37. The beginning of an internet spiritual movement is taking place via such sites as The First Church of Cyberspace ([www.godweb.org](http://www.godweb.org)), Cornerstones Internet Mission Church ([www.spiritualcornerstones.org](http://www.spiritualcornerstones.org)), Virtual Church ([virtualchurch.org](http://virtualchurch.org)), and Wechurch.com.

<sup>42</sup> Barna, 130.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>44</sup> Wells, *Losing Our Virtue*, 42.

<sup>45</sup> McCormick and Freeman, 37.

<sup>46</sup> Edward Norman, *Entering the Darkness: Christianity and its Modern Substitutes*, (London: SPCK, 1991), 18.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>48</sup> Wells, *Losing Our Virtue*, 44-45.

<sup>49</sup> See David Neff, "Six Trends Facing Christians: Helpful Insights for Church Leaders," *Leadership* (May 30, 2001): unpaginated, on-line, available from <http://www.christianitytoday.com/leaders/newsletter/2001/cln10530.html>. Note especially Trend 3: "Young evangelicals increasingly support living together."

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 23-24.

<sup>51</sup> Roof, 213.

<sup>52</sup> Beaudoin, 127-140.

<sup>53</sup> Beaudoin, 58-59.

<sup>54</sup> Roof, 219.

<sup>55</sup> Norman, 33.

<sup>56</sup> Wells, *Losing Our Virtue*, 99.

<sup>57</sup> Boa and Bowman, 34-38.

<sup>58</sup> Lucy Bregman, "Psychotherapies," in *Spirituality and the Secular Quest*, ed. Peter H. Van Ness, vol. 22 of *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest*, ed. Ewert Cousins (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 255.

<sup>59</sup> Lee Hardy, "Postmodernism as a Kind of Modernism," in *Postmodern Philosophy and Christian Thought*, ed. Merold Westphal (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1999), 28-43.

<sup>60</sup> Such a concept has been the foundation of many literary works, from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* to Alexander Dumas's *The Count of Monte Cristo*.

---

<sup>61</sup> One excellent and clear explanation of this dichotomy can be found in Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 115-139. Here he explores the narrative identity according to the matrices of *sameness* and *selfhood*, arguing that the self does not need to stay the same to retain its selfhood.

<sup>62</sup> I have known many people who have described their lives as a movie or a TV show with unseen cameras and producers and characters that enter and exit. This common feeling was the basis for the box-office hit, "The Truman Show," in which Truman, a character played by Jim Carrey, was the main character in a TV show, though he was unaware of that fact, having been given an artificial world to inhabit. The narrative quality of our lives is also the basis for the genre of biographies, and especially autobiographies. In fact, fictional stories would not make any sense for us, unless we were able to identify with the situations of the characters in the story, which requires some resemblance between their lives and ours, particularly a narrative understanding of the world. MacIntyre refers to this as the "narrative unity of a life." Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

<sup>63</sup> Thiselton, 145.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, x. For a discussion of his view on character, viz. identity and continuity through time and narrative, see Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 118-125.

<sup>65</sup> Thiselton, 39. He notes, "It was not for nothing that Irenaeus and other early Fathers passionately opposed the Gnostic attempt to construe the cross as an *intra-linguistic* entity; as an *idea* rather than an *event in the public domain*." Original italics.

<sup>66</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 3:157-179.

<sup>67</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and The Human Sciences*, ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1981), 159. Quoted in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "The Reader in New Testament Interpretation," in *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*, ed. Joel B. Green, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 309.

<sup>68</sup> Vanhoozer, "The Reader in NT Interpretation," 310.

<sup>69</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 115.

<sup>70</sup> See Paul Ricoeur, "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as Text," *Social Research* 38 (1971): 529-562.

<sup>71</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 5. He also quotes Ricoeur: "I maintain that the unity of truth is a timeless task only because it is at first an eschatological hope."

<sup>72</sup> Quoted in Thiselton, 129-130.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 77-78.

<sup>74</sup> For an examination of the divergences between the two, see Gary E. Aylesworth, "Dialogue, Text, Narrative: Confronting Gadamer and Ricoeur," in *Gadamer and Hermeneutics*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman, Continental Philosophy Series, no. 4 (New York: Routledge, 1991), 63-81.

<sup>75</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. and ed. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York: Crossroads, 1975).

<sup>76</sup> See, for example, Paul Ricoeur, *The Ricoeur Reader*, ed. Mario J. Valdes (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 87-98, 126, 148, 404-405; *Time and Narrative*, 3:172-179, 220-224; *Oneself as Another*, 158,

---

177. For a discussion between the philosophers about their similarities and differences, see “The Conflict of Interpretations: Debate with Hans-Georg Gadamer,” in *The Ricoeur Reader*, 216-241.

<sup>77</sup> Claude Geffré and Jean-Pierre Jossua, eds., *The Debate on Modernity* (London: SCM, 1992), ix.



## CHAPTER FOUR POSTMODERN ETHICS

One of the more often noted characteristics of our current society is the decline of traditional ethical standards; indeed, perhaps no element of culture has felt the change of postmodernism more keenly than that of ethics. The revolutions in ways of thinking about the self, external reality, and objective truth have utterly transformed the ethical assumptions of Westerners and the ways they make ethical decisions. The moral consensus that was once assumed has now dissipated as relativism and diversity flourish.

That such a transformation has taken place should not be surprising. A society's ethics flow out of its spiritual and religious moorings. That is, the spiritual beliefs of a culture define the good and the *telos* of humanity, while ethics serve as the bridge between the actual state and that desired *telos*. When a civilization experiences a radical transformation in its understanding of spiritual realities, it is inevitable that its ethics should change accordingly as well. A dramatic change in the goal presages a significant modification in how to arrive at that goal. Thus, with a psychologized spirituality, we have emerged with a psychologized ethics.

### I. The Impact of Psychology on Ethics

As we saw in the last chapter, the culture has largely turned to psychology to answer what were once "religious" questions: who we are, why we do what we do, and how we can change what we do. Therefore, the religious concepts of sin and salvation have been repackaged in psychological ways that excise from them the implication of moral judgment. This, then, is a spirituality that is in many ways unconcerned with ethics as traditionally understood and that does not prescribe morals.<sup>1</sup> Instead of *character*, it is concerned with achieving *power* over anxiety, addiction, self-alienation, guilt, etc.—in short, one's daily functioning.<sup>2</sup> As the ultimate

goal of the human life has changed, the ethics, the means to that goal, have also undergone transformation, now in line with the psychological goals of the new spirituality.

If the new spiritual *telos* is the achievement of personal fulfillment and psychic wholeness, then the ethical imperative for each person is to find and engage in whatever contributes to his or her own contentment. On a societal level, the ethical injunction is to allow each person the *freedom* to engage in this search. This, then, is an ethics mostly absent the contribution and support of the wider community in favor of a localized group of those who have arrived at similar conclusions concerning what is fulfilling for them; in fact, the only mandate for the broader society is to get out of the way and to leave the individual alone! An essential component of such an outlook is the resolute principle that no one way of pursuing happiness and fulfillment is better than any other way—the only authorized arbiter of determining the worthiness of one's path is the individual whose path it is.

This characteristic of postmodern ethics is in direct parallel with the privatized and self-oriented postmodern spirituality, for, since personal satisfaction means something different for each person, it comes within the domain of one's freedom. In this way, this characteristic of postmodern society is inextricably linked to the postmodern viewpoint regarding the ultimate spiritual goal of humanity—the acquisition of happiness. The private and self-oriented spirituality of postmodernism has produced a private and self-oriented system of ethics, which can best be summarized under the rubrics of individualism and egalitarianism.

In assessing the moral stance of the country in contrast to the America of the past, cultural analyst Robert Bork identifies two culture-wide moral precepts that have been part of America since the beginning, but have now become radicalized in postmodernity: individualism and egalitarianism.<sup>3</sup> According to Bork, in modernity, these impulses were tempered by various

forces that restrained them from extreme expressions. The fear of want in cooperation with a culture-wide stable family system, church, and other private associations produced a restraining effect on individualism and egalitarianism that limited their harshness. But the decline of these restraining institutions in conjunction with widespread affluence has led to the radical expressions of these concepts.<sup>4</sup>

Radical individualism is demanded in areas in which people wish to be unhindered in the pursuit of pleasure, finding expression especially in sexuality and the popular arts. It is in these situations that nearly any individual choice is acceptable. This is coupled, however, with a radical egalitarianism, which denies that anyone can be superior to anyone else, or that any group could be superior to any other group. In situations where one could conceive of competition and being better than another, then, we are pressed into a state of utter equality. Such a philosophy is motivated by the desire to protect people from their failures, the acknowledgement of which could lead them to have a poor opinion of themselves and prevent them from achieving happiness, the attainment of which lies at the heart of postmodern ethics.

These complementary movements have created a culture of self-authentication, anti-institutionalism, anti-authority, and relativism, embodied in the only ethical injunction put on postmodern Americans: tolerance.<sup>5</sup> To criticize, or to be “intolerant” of, another person is to do more than voice personal displeasure; it is to appeal to a common standard, which postmodernism rejects. Although the Enlightenment also stressed individual autonomy, Enlightenment autonomy did not result in a postmodern-type antinomianism because of the presuppositions of the universal, knowable Natural Law, which everyone agreed on.<sup>6</sup> But with the departure of a belief in universal reason and universal ethics, the modern moral consensus

has evaporated, individual autonomy has been radicalized,<sup>7</sup> and ethical restrictions on behavior become difficult to impose.

Traditional, modernist ethics involved living in accordance with a higher reality that established fixed standards and rules for right and wrong. A sampling of ethical activities according to this old standard might involve consistently telling the truth, treating elders with respect, volunteering to work with the poor, or lending assistance to a stranded motorist. Although such activities are not necessarily denigrated in the new ethical climate, neither are they regularly heralded as acts of virtue. What is most often lifted up as an exemplary deed is that which gives meaning and satisfaction to the doer; if the performer of the deed testifies that it was instrumental to him or her in bringing worth to his or her life, that is all the authentication any action demands. Thus, there has been a corresponding decline in understanding any general behavior as right or wrong, depending on where and how it is performed.

Without the encumbrance of desiring the approbation of the larger society, Americans today largely make up their own rules, laws, and moral codes. Only 13% believe in all ten commandments, and only 40% believe in even five out of ten.<sup>8</sup> “For most people, religion plays virtually no role in shaping their opinions on [many issues] ... Most people do not even know their churches’ position on [those] issues.”<sup>9</sup>

The only conclusion to draw from this transition to the individual as the determiner of his or her own morality is that the church has failed at the task of making disciples. It has neglected its duty to articulate convincingly its own vision of who we are, why we do what we do, and how we can change what we do, capitulating *de facto* to the narrative of psychology, with the result that much of American Christianity is only nominal, as commitment to the local church and to biblical Christianity is on the decline.<sup>10</sup> If such people are in church regularly at all, they do not

find its teachings relevant to their lives in any significant way, and they do not feel any compunction about holding unorthodox positions on what constitutes the good and the right. Is it any wonder, then, that only 34% of Americans read a Bible outside of church services in any given week?<sup>11</sup> The culture has become more formative for their ethics than the church, which has been reduced to a mere social club. The result is a fragmented “taste culture” that boasts an infinite variety of styles, limited only by the imagination of its inhabitants,<sup>12</sup> and the postmodern age becomes the one shaped by the loss of a vision of humans as moral beings.<sup>13</sup>

Such an ethics focuses on acceptance and overlooking shortcomings in others. Since we are all in a process of overcoming our own personal limitations and psychological “issues,” claims the culture-forming myth asserted by postmoderns, everyone should simply recognize and celebrate the differences that accentuate our society, giving nearly any behavior the benefit of the doubt and a moral pass. The prevailing moral consensus, as we noted above, is a stance of “tolerance,” which no longer means putting up with or enduring what one finds disagreeable, but rather finding nothing disagreeable.

Of course, such an ethical stance runs counter to the teachings of most religions, which do not unite with each other precisely because they *do* find each other disagreeable. But such convictions are no longer acceptable in a postmodern milieu, and many postmoderns seek ways to escape the negative emotions connected with previous experiences of religious “intolerance.” Because spiritual growth in postmodernity is considered to be tied to the psychological concept of self-actualization, therapeutic language, drawn from the psychological cultural narrative of well-being, is used to supplant the fear, anxiety, guilt, and shame associated with traditional religious teachings and practices. Self-worth and self-esteem are the top priorities in this endeavor.<sup>14</sup> In this way, personality has become more important than character in determining

an individual's worth or attractiveness<sup>15</sup> because we are left without any mutual means of evaluating character.

One example of this phenomenon was the cultural reaction to the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal. One contingent of the country judged the president's actions to be those of a soulless, rudderless appetite incarnated, with no moral awareness or attempt at decorum or modesty, in accordance with a modernist notion of ethics. This group evaluated his character according to an objective, predetermined standard of right and wrong *behavior*. A second section of society found his sexual activity with an intern distasteful—abhorrent even—but irrelevant to the job of presidency and his attempt at a cover-up understandable, given the circumstances, in line with the postmodern freedom to find one's own source of personal fulfillment. This group still evaluated his character positively based on the *policies* that he advocated and what they judged to be the overall positive impact of his presidency on the country. With these two incommensurable appraisals of the *character* of the Clinton presidency, it was ultimately his charismatic *personality* that counted with the third slice of citizens, who really did not think in terms of character at all.

Postmodern America has accepted the notion of morality as an entirely social construct, rather than a reflection of some higher reality, such as the divine character. Therefore, if the larger society—or even one's subgroup—has agreed on new and different conventions, it simply means that a new definition for morality has been forged; these social relationships are the only way we have to identify what is and is not moral.<sup>16</sup> Morality changes according to time, place, and dominant attitudes. Thus, morality is a fluid concept, free to take on new shapes and appearances if demanded by a new cultural climate. “No responsibility is felt for the nurture of

social continuities or multi-generational moral tradition” because it does not matter if a culture’s conception of ethics remains constant or not.<sup>17</sup>

Additionally, the fact that the culture recognizes itself to have “seen through” the artifice of morality means that our particular cultural climate is one that is comfortable with a wide latitude of acceptable variation and personalization. As a result, the dominant, culture-wide consensus is that an individual is free to construct a workable system of morality that achieves one’s own particular spiritual goals of personal fulfillment. In the end, it is not the specific moral *choice* that is important but the *choosing itself*; if the individual has freely chosen, the specific choice is almost irrelevant.<sup>18</sup>

This privatized, self-oriented ethics is the result of carrying the logic of individualism and egalitarianism to the extreme; our culture has now pursued happiness so far that it has arrived at a dead end, wrapped up in an unsatisfying preoccupation with the self.<sup>19</sup> This heightened emphasis on a psychological spirituality and ethics has resulted in a “no-fault society.” As personal responsibility loses ground to environmental and physiological factors, a never-ending circle of blame strikes everywhere and nowhere.<sup>20</sup> In contrast to President Truman, our culture cries, “I never even saw the buck. The buck never got here.” Instead, responsibility for one’s psychological shortcomings falls to one’s parents, teachers, community, and biochemical composition. Though postmodern people know deep down that there is something unsatisfying about constantly shifting blame and abrogating responsibility, they lack any means of fixing the problem or of replacing their outlook with another,<sup>21</sup> so they are doomed to wallow in a bog of blameworthiness, radiating out from the self, indiscriminately cast on anything with which it has had contact.

One of the telling signs of this transition has been an intensification and amplification of the language of human rights. As we noted above, individualism was certainly a concern of the modern period, as politically demonstrated by the Bill of Rights in the United States Constitution, which sought to protect the rights of individuals against the extension of governmental power. However, as the importance of the individual has been elevated even higher in the postmodern period, the corresponding claims for individual rights have risen accordingly. Americans now claim the right to financial security, access to health care, prescription drugs, and legalized homosexual marriage. The defining attitude of American culture has moved beyond, “Everyone else is doing it; why shouldn’t I?” to “She is doing it, and why shouldn’t she?” Choice and freedom, again, in the context of the pursuit of happiness, the concept of which differs from individual to individual, have become the hallmarks of the American spirit.

Any mode of behavior that holds the potential for overcoming the perceived suffering of the postmodern life is open to investigation. This suffering of today is characterized by a perceived lack of meaning; the only meaning that does exist is artificially constructed through popular culture (see chapter five). Life is seen to be hollow, while a preponderance of debts from previous generations compounds daily, debts such as the ravages of the sexual revolution, the national debt, and a high divorce rate. Such problems are accentuated by a profound sadness borne from a series of wider major cultural problems and failures, such as AIDS, domestic abuse, poor education, teen suicide, the various disappointments concerning respected institutions and figures, environmental problems, drugs, violence and crime, and on and on. In a few words, this suffering is the result of not possessing viable solutions for the problems of the world that have



materialized in this postmodern age.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the search for some of these solutions, any solutions, is the spiritual journey of the postmodern, and ethics the road the journey takes.

## II. A Postmodern Ethical Appraisal of Biblical Christianity

One of the most serious challenges of the postmodern period are the criticisms that postmoderns have leveled against the church in the arena of ethics. For most people within the church, it may come as a surprise that Christianity could be challenged on ethical grounds. After all, where have Western ethics largely come from, if not from the Bible and the teachings of the church? But with the advent of a spirit of anti-institutionalism, combined with a proclivity toward skepticism, the church is suddenly open to much criticism and negative evaluation in the postmodern age.

Among other things, Christianity has been denounced as inherently racist, sexist, imperialist, intolerant, anti-pleasure, anti-freedom, anti-human rights, anti-environmental, and hypocritical.<sup>23</sup> Some of these criticisms have become almost cliché in describing nearly any aspect of traditional Western culture, but to note that fact does not dismiss Christianity (or Western culture) of such charges. The salient fact about the postmodern critique is that it is an *ethical* disagreement with Christianity—it asserts that Christianity prevents the attainment of personal satisfaction, the one common good of the culture. The charge is that Christian ethics is itself unethical; consequently, Christian ethics has become a tremendous liability in the culture.

In fact, it is hardly ever Christian theology anymore that receives the brunt of postmodern antipathy, but Christian ethics. “It is not so much what Christians say about God that non-Christians question as what Christians say about sex.”<sup>24</sup> Part of the assertive stance that characterizes postmodernism is the assumption of one’s role as judge of religious institutions, practices, and beliefs, dismissing any aspect that fails to conform to one’s predilections,

impulses, or predetermined notions. As a result of this trend, “The religious scene is undergoing fundamental changes of seismic proportions. Like almost everything in our culture today, there is nothing sacred anymore, even in the realm of the sacred... taboos have been discarded in favor of a wholesale re-evaluation.”<sup>25</sup>

One of the most common complaints about the church is its hypocrisy. Nietzsche claimed that issues of value and power had been disguised by the metaphorical language of religion as issues of truth. For adherents, he claimed that Christianity reinforced their selfish preoccupation with their own advantage.

Christianity owes its triumph to this miserable flattery of personal vanity: it was precisely all the failures, all the rebellious-minded, all the less favored, the whole scum and refuse of humanity who were thus won over to it. The ‘salvation of the soul’—in plain language: ‘the world revolves around *me*.’<sup>26</sup>

But for those in power, the motivation was much more sinister. “Supreme principle: ‘God forgives those who repent’—in plain language: those who submit to the priest.”<sup>27</sup>

Despite the ferocity of this criticism, it nevertheless allows us as a church to see with new eyes ways in which we perhaps have not lived up to our own standards, historically. Faults to which we were blind in the past because they accorded with the spirit of the age can now be seen for what they are—a failure to follow God with unswerving purity. In fact, it is my contention that the postmodern ethical critique of Christianity is ironically one of the most fruitful aspects of postmodernism for the church.

### **III. Christian Postmodernism—An Ethics of the Other**

One of the tasks of the church in the postmodern age is to own up to the fact that she has not bequeathed a blameless legacy, that she has often in her history been party to violence against the innocent, manipulation and exploitation of the powerless and defenseless, and defamation and marginalization of women and many ethnic and religious groups—in other

words, that Nietzsche and other detractors are sadly not very wide of the mark. The church has sided with the rich for political gain and has sought worldly power to make itself more comfortable. It has forced compliance with its commands of behavior and even belief, under threat of imprisonment, torture, and death, all in the name of God.

History testifies against the church, telling a story of Constantinian corruption; papal plottings; marauding, murderous Crusade mobs; infamous Inquisitions; rapacious religious wars; scandalous slavery; the subjugation of “savages,” executed under the banners of The White Man’s Burden and Manifest Destiny; the denial of democracy to women and minorities; the compliance and collusion with capitalism and consumerism; the disregard and disrespect for the protection and preservation of our planet; and the hypocritical hatred of homosexuals. It is a sad and shameful tale, a woeful collection of episodes that in concert create a pattern of self-aggrandizement and arrogance around the very ones who claim the blessing and approval of God.

The church must take the blame for its shortcomings, must accept responsibility for the atrocities it has wrought on those it should have protected and cared for. This story, furthermore, should not be hidden from the view of its members. The children of Israel were not so proud that they masked their greatest failures, and neither should the church be. For better or worse, our story is what it is, but the story, pockmarked as it may be, still contains the possibility and hope of maturity and even redemption. In this postmodern age, so concerned with the limitations of perspective, when we now have the opportunity to see how our perspective has often been tyrannical, the church must seize the opportunity to recover an ethics of the “other.”

The calls of postmodernism for tolerance and diversity, grounded in a guiding principle of relativism, do not issue out of a secret desire for anarchical chaos (though some with a

libertine agenda have co-opted the language of postmodernism for such a purpose). Rather, the subjectivism and relativism stem from a caution necessitated by the realization that others, who differ from ourselves in belief and behavior, may nevertheless have arrived at their beliefs and behaviors in a reasonable way, just as we have. Reason does not inevitably lead to only one conclusion, one “correct” way of being and doing. Furthermore, the comprehension that reason is never dispassionate or disinterested means that postmoderns must be wary of making final judgments and must adopt a posture of humility with respect to the ways of others. The fact that every relationship and every attempt at describing reality involves issues of power and that power is a corrupting force means that everyone is corrupt at some level and that no one is pure; with different descriptions of reality vying for positions of power, there is not even a mechanism for determining what corrupt and pure *are*. Thus, postmoderns are driven to try to understand the motivations of others and the logic that is veiled behind actions that are patently illogical—at least from one perspective.

But these concerns of the culture do not seem to have begun to permeate the consciousness of much of the evangelical church. The tendency of conservatives is to reduce religious truth to propositions that serve as devices for our *possession* of truth, but in fact these propositions are themselves only the conclusions *we have made* from the actual revelation—in other words, they are “the traditions of men” (Mk. 7:8). Once we become the ones who “have the truth,” it is easy to excuse ourselves for dominating others, chiding them for their sins, or in some other way manipulating or browbeating them.<sup>28</sup> This realist metaphysics, explain Middleton and Walsh, is “a metaphysics of violence... the direct result of seeking to grasp the infinite, irreducible complexities of the world as a unified and homogenous totality.”<sup>29</sup> The organized system purchases its order at the price of repressing the voices that do not fit into the

favored account of reality. This “violent closure of human thought... denies all heterogeneous difference or dissolves it into a homogeneous unity, effectively co-opting, dominating, or eliminating that which is perceived as ‘other.’”<sup>30</sup> The evangelistic strategy of “turn or burn” that often results from such an idea of truth depends on a *manipulative* strategy for its success. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer observes, people who adopt such a tactic “set themselves to drive people to inward despair and then the game is in their hands... And whom does it touch? A small number of people who regard themselves as the most important thing in the world, and who therefore like to busy themselves with themselves.”<sup>31</sup>

In contrast, a view of truth that incorporates the hermeneutics of Gadamer and Ricoeur, as suggested in chapters two and three, looks at truth as the outcome of conversation with those of other perspectives within the context of a narrative. This truth is not amenable to possession, only to being shared and enacted. Others may not be abused with it, only invited to join it. It is strictly understood in holistic unity, never divided into categories, subsections, and line-item propositions. In other words, it is a conception of truth that entails an ethical orientation outside of oneself, an ethics of the “other.”

This ethics of the other is not a foreign concept to Christianity at all. Thiselton describes the definition of *agape*, the Greek word most often used of Christian love in the New Testament, as “creative regard for the Other; it is a love prompted by will, not by prior ‘like-mindedness.’”<sup>32</sup> *Agape*-love is the decision to overcome differences (without ignoring or minimizing them) by deliberately engaging in non-manipulative service of the other with no hope of or investment in benefit to the self. The incarnation of Jesus and his submission to crucifixion serve as models of the rejection of manipulative power in the church (Php. 2:5-8; Eph. 5:1-2). Christ repeatedly urged his followers to surrender their bent toward self-interest in favor of service to God and to

others (Mt. 5:10-11; 22:37-40; Mk. 9:35; Lk. 6:27-38). Paul insisted on his sufferings as proof for his authority as an apostle (2Co. 10-12). This is an ethics of the other that prefers others to ourselves, that values their benefit more than our own (Ro. 12:10, 14-20; Php. 2:3).

With the basic structure for an ethics of the other in place, we will now turn to specific examples of Christian behavior that might be modified by such an ethics, with a particular eye toward evangelism. Before focusing on the implications of an ethics of the other for evangelism, however, I will first briefly suggest directions of thought regarding its contribution to an understanding of other races and other religions.

### *A. Other Races*

Race in America is one of the most complicated and passion-filled problems we face domestically today. Reminders are constant, whether it be the protests and resultant curfews in Cincinnati following the police shooting of a young black man, or the election of George W. Bush as president, for whom only 9% of non-whites voted.<sup>33</sup> The core of the race problem is the unassailable reality that blacks and whites interpret life in America radically differently. From the very beginning in the days of slavery through emancipation and civil rights, to the Watts riots, Rodney King, and O.J. Simpson, the vast majority of blacks have experienced life in America as oppressive, repressive, demeaning, and depersonalizing. Whites, for the most part, have not understood these feelings of resentment, trusting in their own magnanimity and notions of universal well-being. In this process of bifurcation, blacks and whites have developed ways of speaking about “them,” when safely in the company of one’s own group, further reinforcing the racial divide.<sup>34</sup>

An ethics of the other seeks to understand the perspective of the other rather than to be understood. A white Christian,<sup>35</sup> for example, should not participate in conversations about

blacks that support stereotypes of laziness, poverty, drug use, violence, or promiscuity. No assumptions should be made about the life experiences of another simply because of race. Beyond these rather obvious observations, however, an ethics of the other demands that whites should seek blacks out and listen to their stories in a spirit of affirmation that gives dignity to the feelings and thoughts of the other. They should endeavor to understand what blacks mean by “institutional racism” and why they support Democrats in nearly unanimous numbers. They should acquaint themselves with the heritage of black Americans and listen to why the specter of slavery still has a profound impact on the black mindset today. They should imagine what it would be like to be unable to trace one’s family tree, to be unwillingly separated from one’s ancestral customs, or to negotiate one’s way through a world that is largely controlled by whites.

An ethics of the other is deeply interested in the equality of all races, as all races possess equally the divine image. It searches for ways it can learn from the cultures of other races the shortcomings of one’s own people and the advantages enjoyed by other peoples. Our natural inclination is toward the glorification of our own group and unbridled faith in the virtue of our cultural patterns, but an ethics of the other seeks ways we have failed the other and how we can repair it, if possible. An ethics of the other cares for the other and not only desires but *works for* the well being of the other in tangible ways.

### *B. Other Religions*

Most conservatives happily trumpet exclusivist texts of Scripture, such as John 14:6 (“I am the way and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me.”) or Acts 4:12 (“There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”) and cite them as evidence for the corruption of other religions. The church denies that it has anything to learn from Buddhists, Muslims, or New Agers because they

do not have the truths of scripture or the example of Christ. Such an *a priori* dismissal of other religions fails to be either suspicious enough of itself or generous enough to the reasonableness of the sincerity of others.

An ethics of the other does not let the church off so easily. It insists that, while *salvation* is not available through Buddha, Mohammed, or the Earth Mother, that fact does not preclude other groups from speaking correctly on some or many issues. Furthermore, the presence of true revelation of the Bible does not mean that the church has necessarily interpreted that revelation correctly *or* truly put into action the teaching of that revelation. In other words, even though salvation is found only in Christ, in some circumstances, we might find that other religions are right and Christianity (the religion) wrong.<sup>36</sup> Christianity might find that it has much to learn from other religions and even secularists—after all we have uncovered much of value from secular postmodernists so far in this thesis!

Thus, rather than denouncing the legitimacy of other religions, Christians should spend time engaging adherents of groups different than their own. Establishing a dialogue in which one is eager to learn what the other has to offer creates an atmosphere in which an invitation to the gospel comes not as a self-righteous declaration of superiority but a humble desire to share the good news that one has found. It further affords the opportunity to grow in one's understanding of others and perhaps to reformulate one's errant ideas. This means that Christians should not assume they are automatically correct in an encounter with a non-Christian, nor are they the spiritual experts. Instead, encounters should be approached as a possible occasion for mutual learning and benefit.



### *C. Evangelizing the Other*

In our discussion of a proper Christian approach to other religions within the context of an ethics of the other, we began to move into the arena of sharing our faith. I want to continue that discussion because I think that this area serves as one of the most important and misunderstood tasks of the church for both those within and those without it. Most Christians do not understand the cultural climate of relativism and are thus hesitant to evangelize non-Christians. They often assume that nonbelievers already have a set of beliefs that they are happy with and do not want to amend, and/or that the unsaved have all understood the gospel message and have rejected it as irrelevant to them. They look on the heathen as an unmitigated force of cultural destruction, inflicting immorality and sin with reckless indiscriminateness.<sup>37</sup> Non-Christians, for their part, view the condemning messages of most Christians as interfering attempts to control the lives of others with no understanding of new cultural realities that make the old standards more difficult to accept than in the past. They also think that Christians are monolithic regarding nearly all political and religious issues, and that they avoid independent thought.<sup>38</sup>

Because Christians tend to equate evangelism with the declaration of what they take to be Christian morality, they focus on external behavior to the complete detriment of the state of the heart. Such a stance seems to communicate to unbelievers a desire on the Christian's part to be made to feel more comfortable rather than a genuine concern with the spiritual life of the non-Christian. This confusion concerning how to relate to a culture that is unaware of the nature of the gospel may find its solution in the example of Paul's address to the Athenians, recorded in Acts 17. Like Paul, we are faced with a culture bursting with ignorance about the things of God,

and it is imperative that we learn how to communicate His message to them in a way they can hear. Paul adopts an evangelism strategy that accords with the ethics of the other.

First, we notice that *Paul has simplified his message*. Although only one speech is recorded, we can discern that Paul's interaction with the Athenians was ongoing during his stay there ("every day" v. 17). Every indication is that, in the framework of these dialogues, Paul has constructed a gospel (Gk. *euangelizō* v. 18) specifically for his Athenian audience. In contrast to his previous speech patterns in Acts where he offers a fuller orb-ed presentation of his theology, here Paul pares down the gospel to an introduction to a God the Athenians admittedly do not know (vv. 23-25), a description of this God's providence (vv. 26-28), and a call to repentance (vv. 29-31). This reveals Paul's consideration of the spiritual situation of his hearers, taking into account what they will be able to understand.

Second, despite the ignorance of the Athenians, *Paul establishes significant points of contact*; the ignorance is not of such a degree that it renders communication of the gospel impossible for Paul. One such point of contact is the decision to preach in the agora, the main public space of Athens, the economic, political, cultural, and religious heart of the city.<sup>39</sup> By choosing to speak to the people there, he continued in a tradition used by itinerant philosophers and preachers of various types since the time of Socrates,<sup>40</sup> presenting either a challenging or confirming system of thinking with the hopes of procuring a following. Another point of contact consists in his use of the recognized rhetorical patterns of Greco-Roman speech, being sure to clothe the "new teaching" (v. 19) in a familiar form that would be easily apprehended by his audience. This would have accomplished two things: 1) it would have created rapport between Paul and his audience, giving him a better chance of being heard because he used their cultural forms; 2) it would have made his arguments more intelligible to his audience since they came in

a genre the audience accepted. Finally, he has also tailored the content significantly to reflect the views and values of his hearers. Whereas Paul in other situations cites Jewish Scripture as justification for his preaching, here he quotes the Cretan poet Epimenides<sup>41</sup> and the Stoic poet Aratus of Cilicia in Asia Minor,<sup>42</sup> because the Law and the Prophets carry no weight for the Athenians. Rather, he uses individuals whom *they* would recognize as authorities; by zeroing in on the threads of both Epicurean and Stoic philosophy (cf. v. 18) that accord with the gospel he wants to preach, Paul forces them logically to allow his argument.<sup>43</sup> By alluding to Greek ideas and quoting Greek thinkers, however, Paul is not intimating that he agrees with the pagan worldview they espouse. Rather, in a proto-deconstructionist way, he uses the words and concepts to fit with his Christian teaching.

Finally, *Paul's message was firmly grounded in the Jewish scriptures and tradition*, ensuring its faithfulness to the word of God. Though Paul did not quote a single scripture to his hearers, everything he said was firmly grounded in divine revelation. The issue of idol worship was a chief concern for Jews, and Paul's outrage at the sight of the idols (v. 16) at the beginning of the narrative places him squarely within the stream of Jewish thought (cf. Dt. 4:28; Ps. 113:12; 134:25; Isa. 40:18; 44:9-20; Wis. 13:5, 10; 15:3-17).<sup>44</sup> Additionally, Paul's address contains many allusions to the Jewish Scriptures. Essentially, his speech is a shortened version of the primeval history in Genesis 1-11. Though he does not expressly use language identifying humanity as created in God's image, Paul affirms such a concept by emphasizing the connection that exists between the human and the divine. The rhetorical play that the reader who is familiar with Judaism will catch is that the *image of God* is the only legitimate image in a world of idolatry.<sup>45</sup>

Based on Paul's simplified message, establishment of points of contact, and faithfulness to the scriptures, we may draw several conclusions about evangelism to the ignorant in the vein of an ethics of the other.

- *The church must familiarize itself with the culture.* It is imperative to be familiar with the culture if one is going to have any impact on it. This includes exposing oneself to things he/she may find uncomfortable or even provocative (v. 16).
- *The church must recognize the culture as a legitimate conversation partner in the approach to God.* Paul did not condemn "some of your poets" (v. 28), but he used them to show where their seeking and groping after God (v. 27) leads, if successful.
- *The church must find points of agreement with the culture.* Music, movies, news, sports, or almost any type of cultural phenomenon can illustrate Christian principles. If Christians use these events—which already enjoy influential status in the culture—in the proclamation of the gospel, rather than Bible verses, listeners will be more likely to hear the message as an intelligible one.
- *The church must know the Bible.* Though Paul did not quote Bible verses to the Athenians, that does not entail that biblical understanding is unnecessary. In fact, the better one understands the messages of Scripture, the easier it will be for that person to find points of commonality in the culture and to reshape the message in a new cultural form. Paul's knowledge of the scriptures freed him to communicate the gospel without once referring to the Bible, though it was the very foundation of his message.
- *The church must not compromise the gospel.* While it is irresponsible to offend one's hearers unnecessarily, it is also illegitimate to omit essential components of one's

message out of fear that they might offend. Paul closed his speech with a call to repentance (v. 30), a complete change of mind and life, an invitation to see the world in a radically different way, which included the resurrection of dead people, a revolting idea to the Athenians.

- *Above all, the church not be complicated in its message.* Paul's address does not mention Christ's crucifixion, the atonement, or the second coming; nonetheless, the speech sets forth some of the basic elements of the gospel with an invitation to learn more.<sup>46</sup> It is not necessary to load one's presentation with many doctrines; the important thing is to point the hearer toward a relationship with God.

Paul's message respected the dignity and independence of his hearers by presenting a message suited for *their* spiritual, cultural, and intellectual location that was nevertheless faithful to the story of scripture. The church's responsibility, her mandate, is to replicate that process in the new setting of postmodern America. Respect for the other will gain a hearing for the gospel in today's agora of ideas. It will legitimate the right of Christians to be heard in a much more significant way than the current incessant cries for equal access. As Thiselton notes, the ethics of the other is in itself a profound apologetic in postmodernity.

It is as if Bonhoeffer said to Nietzsche from his Nazi prison: 'But not all Christian are as you suggest. For even if you are right about "religion" as a human construct, authentic Christian faith lies in identification with the Christ who neither sought power by manipulation, nor was "weak" in the sense of being bland, conformist, or world-denying. He was "the man for others."'”<sup>47</sup>

“Any hope of a hearing for a Christian message of healing rides on the shoulders of those who, like Bonhoeffer, resist the temptation to use God and others for our own advancement.”<sup>48</sup> In actuality, it is “cheap grace” that Nietzsche and postmodernism protest—and rightly so—they, without any faith in God have given the lie to the self-gratifying beliefs of many Christians who

have diluted the words of scripture. “Grace is represented as the Church’s inexhaustible treasury, from which she showers blessings with generous hands, without asking questions or fixing limits. Grace without price; grace without cost!”<sup>49</sup> In contrast to this abuse, Bonhoeffer warns, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”<sup>50</sup> There is a cost to the grace, and one discovers that only those who surrender their lives for the sake of Christ will truly find their life in the end (Mt. 10:39).

#### IV. Conclusion

Reinhold Niebuhr remarks that it is the natural tendency of people to “allow themselves to be seduced into operating manipulative power-interests by deceiving themselves into interpreting their own actions as altruistic concerns for the sake of the corporate structures to which they belong.”<sup>51</sup> Whether the enlargement of one’s power comes via the chimera of national interest, a corporation, or the church, the drive to self-interest in groups is much more deeply hidden and disguised but no less powerful and destructive than that wielded by an individual. It simply requires more diligence and intentionality to discern and root out.<sup>52</sup> Christians must agree with Foucault that “everything is dangerous” because anything—including Christianity—can be (mis)used to perpetrate violence against the other.<sup>53</sup>

However, because postmodernism is right about instances of manipulative power disguised as truth claims, it does not legitimate the *universal* cynicism that *all* truth claims are reducible to quests for power. The acceptance of our history of failure to live up to the call of Christ for his church affirms the concerns of postmodernism that have shined a spotlight on our hypocrisy and sin. However, in this age of cynicism and suspicion, “the only true, credible witness will be flesh-and-blood, non-manipulative regard for the other.”<sup>54</sup> It is only in

embracing the vision of *agape*-love that the church can overcome the damage it has inflicted on its reputation.

The non-Christian world is incapable of coming to a realization of the necessity of *agape*-love because they do not have the spirit of Christ to lead them. They believe in open tolerance because all they can see is the limitedness of their own perspective. It is not the job of the church to denigrate their morality and criticize their behavior; we are called to be Christ's *ambassadors*, representing his love to them by showing and sharing the higher way—the ethics of the other. We will now turn to consideration of a postmodern *presentation* of Christianity by examining the potency of postmodern pop culture.

## ENDNOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> David F. Wells, *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 18.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 43. Wells further notes that such a spirituality is reticent to wrestle with the gravity of one's sinfulness before God: "Whereas in classical spirituality it was assumed the sinners would struggle with their sin, and feel its sting, and experience dismay over it, in postmodern spirituality, this struggle is considered abnormal and something for which divine relief is immediately available. That is why the experience of Luther, Brainerd, and Owen is so remote from what passes as normal in the evangelical world today."

<sup>3</sup> Robert H. Bork, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah: Modern Liberalism and American Decline* (New York: ReganBooks, 1996), 5.

4

<sup>5</sup> For the development of this phenomenon, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), particularly 1-35 and 181-263.

<sup>6</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, and Roger E. Olson, *Twentieth Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1992), 21.

<sup>7</sup> Brian Ingraffia comments on the differences and similarities between modern and postmodern versions of autonomy: "Although Nietzsche and Heidegger's call for humanity to enter the freedom of autonomy is not based upon the 'courage to use your own reason!' as in Kant, their calls are still based upon the Enlightenment call to obtain the 'resolution and courage' to base one's existence upon one's own self (autonomy), and not upon God (heteronomy)." Brian D. Ingraffia, *Postmodern Theory and Biblical Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 164.

<sup>8</sup> James Patterson and Peter Kim, *The Day Asmerica Told the Truth: What People Really Believe about Everything that Really Matters* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1991), 6.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 199-200.

<sup>10</sup> George Barna, *The Index of Leading Spritual Indicators* (Dallas: Word, 1996), 4. Only 27% of Americans attend worship services regularly, while ½ of Americans have not been at a religious service for at least three months and ⅓ have not been for at least one year. Patterson and Kim, 200.

<sup>11</sup> Barna, 55.

<sup>12</sup> Stanley Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 19.

<sup>13</sup> Wells, 13.

<sup>14</sup> Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1993), 214-215.

<sup>15</sup> Wells, 96-103.

<sup>16</sup> Kenneth J. Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 169.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas C. Oden, *Agenda for Theology: Recovering Christian Roots* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 39.



---

<sup>18</sup> Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M. Bowman, Jr., *An Unchanging Faith in a Changing World: Understanding and Responding to Critical Issues that Christians Face Today* (Nashville: Nelson, 1997), 52-53.

<sup>19</sup> Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1979), xv.

<sup>20</sup> Boa and Bowman, 42-45.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>22</sup> Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 99-108.

<sup>23</sup> Boa and Bowman, 170-171.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>25</sup> Barna, 129.

<sup>26</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Antichrist: Attempt at a Critique of Christianity," in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann, Viking Portable Library Series, no. 62, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Penguin, 1982), 619, aphorism 43.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 598, aphorism 26.

<sup>28</sup> Andrew J. Dell'Olio, "Between Exclusivity and Plurality: Toward a Postmodern Christian Philosophy of Other Religions," in *Postmodern Philosophy and Christian Thought*, Merold Westphal, ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 272.

<sup>29</sup> J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1995), 34.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-35.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Anthony C. Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self: On Meaning, Manipulation, and Promise* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 23-24.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>33</sup> Available on-line at <http://www.gallup.com/election2000/breakdown.asp?id=nonwhite>.

<sup>34</sup> Raleigh Washington and Glen Kehrein, *Breaking Down Walls: A Model for Reconciliation in an Age of Racial Strife* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1993), 146-153. For another approach to the different ways blacks and whites see the world, see Studs Terkel, *Race: How Blacks & Whites Think & Feel about the American Obsession* (New York: New Press, 1992).

<sup>35</sup> I write from a white perspective because I am white. I feel that I still have much to learn about black persons before I can make any observations about their own approach to race relations. As someone who needs to be involved in many more cross-cultural conversations, I acknowledge that many of my assumptions about the behavior of blacks are due to my experiences as a white person.

<sup>36</sup> Dell'Olio, 268-269.

<sup>37</sup> Linda Raney Wright, *Christianity's Crisis in Evangelism: Going Where the People Are*, Critical Issues Series (Gresham, OR: Vision House, 1995), 13-36.

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 37-50.

<sup>39</sup> David W. J. Gill, "Achaia," in *Graeco-Roman Setting*, vol. 2 of *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting*, ed. David W. J. Gill and Conrad Gempf (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 445.

<sup>40</sup> Bertil Gärtner, *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation*, Acta Seminarii Newtestamentici Upsaliensis Series, No. 21, Trans. Carolyn Hannay King (Uppsala, Sweden: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1955), 46.

<sup>41</sup> Brian S. Rosner, "Acts and Biblical History," in *The Book of Acts in Its Ancient Literary Setting*, ed. Bruce W. Winter and Andrew D. Clarke, vol. 1 of *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting*, ed. Bruce W. Winter (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 67n.

<sup>42</sup> Gill, 446n.

<sup>43</sup> David John Williams, *Acts*, NIBC Series, ed. W. Ward Gasque, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), 305; Simon J. Kistemaker, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990), 636.

<sup>44</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, Sacra Pagina Series, no. 5 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 316.

<sup>45</sup> Williams, p. 308.

<sup>46</sup> Kistemaker, 640.

<sup>47</sup> Thiselton, 23.

<sup>48</sup> Steven Bouma-Prediger, "Yearning for Home: The Doctrine of Creation in a Postmodern Age," in *Postmodern Philosophy and Christian Thought*, ed. Merold Westphal (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 187.

<sup>49</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 45.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>51</sup> Quoted in Thiselton, 137-138.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>53</sup> Bouma-Prediger, 172.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 186.

## CHAPTER FIVE

# POSTMODERN POP CULTURE

Another well-noted feature of the postmodern period is the unparalleled power and continual presence of pop culture. Any United States resident that participates in any significant way with the broader culture can perceive that movies, television, advertising, music, radio, and the like have become the primary vehicles for communicating what it means to be a man, woman, or American today. They shape public perception of marginalized groups, such as the poor, the elderly, the disabled, and various ethnic and religious minority groups. Additionally, they define the norms, delineating what clothing is trendy, what behavior is acceptable, and what attitudes are proscribed.

Now the pop culture machine has expanded even to include media for differentiated groups of Americans. Under the umbrella of the larger pop culture, sub-cultures have formed around such unifying themes as body piercing, skateboarding, comic books, gardening, cooking, and a million other activities and hobbies. For whatever interest any American has, there is sure to be a cable channel (or several), a magazine (or several dozen), and/or a web site (or several hundred) centered around that subject matter, dispensing advice, gossip, tips, and all sorts of other specified information, establishing customs tailor-made for that one area of interest.

But there is a much more specific aspect of American pop culture that is interesting for one studying the postmodern world than simply its ubiquity. For, in its powerful omnipresence, it has become a key transmitter, perpetuator, and supporter of American postmodernism, and, in turn, it has become an essential element in the postmodern experience of ordinary Americans. In this chapter, we will explore this symbiotic relationship, also touching on some related issues

with technology and communication, which have had a parallel impact on the culture because of their intertwined alliance with pop culture.

## I. The Rise of Pop Culture

Pop culture, or popular culture, has been around at least since the beginning of the twentieth century; what is new is its power over the broader society to shape values, attitudes, behaviors, and understanding of the world. The term first originated with a perceived difference between “highbrow” and “lowbrow” culture. The former might include such activities as the opera, the theater stage, literature, or the symphony (essentially the traditional arts), while the latter would encompass the Vaudeville stage, jazz music, melodramas, and penny arcades (what we would more often consider to be exclusively entertainment).<sup>1</sup> Originally, this distinction broke down along socio-economic lines, but eventually these lines blurred, as the upper classes began to participate in more of the “lowbrow” cultural activities, though the distinction between high and low culture is still with us.

This distinction has come under heavy attack in recent years, as a holdover from a hegemonic system based on the supposed superiority of the rich and powerful. Differences between high and low culture, good and bad entertainment, sacred and profane art, are seen by postmoderns to have been merely an attempt to retain power for the upper classes—the rich (who controlled the definitions and agenda) portrayed themselves and their endeavors as high, good, and sacred and those of the poor as low, bad, and profane. Even more interestingly, at the time that this division emerged, the rich were largely Anglo-Saxon Protestants, while the poor were often immigrant Catholics. So, the postmodern argues, the differentiation between high and low culture is best understood as having its roots in a *cultural* clash between the socially entrenched

and those who did not share their Victorian values, rather than in any actual meritorious features of the expressions of art themselves.<sup>2</sup>

Much of postmodernism consists of just such a breakdown of distinctions, which, it is argued, have served to perpetuate the authority and power of a ruling elite. As Michel Foucault has said, each society has its own “regime of truth,” which establishes standards for normalcy and decency, thus legitimating the domination over those on the margins—the “abnormal” and “indecent.”<sup>3</sup> In the case of the division between “high culture” and “low culture,” the argument can easily be buttressed by simple observation. For example, the artistic power of the brilliant cinematography in *Out of Africa* or the powerful storyline of *Schindler’s List* is unassailable—surely these works are not diminished by their mode of presentation! Or consider the role of the stage in Western history: during the time of Shakespeare, the bawdy humor and propinquity of brothels that accompanied the theater led to widespread denunciation by the Puritans who composed the majority of the House of Commons;<sup>4</sup> yet today the stage enjoys a high standing among the highbrow. Such examples demonstrate that the capacity is high for the divisions that have emerged between “high culture” and “low culture” to be simply arbitrary.

In this milieu, then, pop cultural forms, such as television, movies, and popular fiction have gained a standing equal to that of the traditional art forms, such as visual art, performance art, and literature. A rock concert may be considered as artistic as the New York philharmonic. In the academy, various pop culture genres, such as comic books and television, have become the object of serious academic inquiry with the same fervor as that given to historically regarded literature. In addition, it may no longer be supposed that the highbrow do not really enjoy the opera or the stage, as if the imaginary superiority of the medium eliminated from it the considerations of money and entertainment, so often used to denigrate the popular arts.

In the new context of appreciation for the *value* of pop culture, the way became clear for the ascent in the perceived and actual *importance* of pop culture, and, indeed, it is now of such importance in the definition of American society that an America without it is virtually unimaginable. Now that we have considered this brief sketch of the ascendancy of pop culture, we turn to an examination into the *manner* of its impact on the culture at large.

## II. The Power of Pop Culture

The strongest element of pop culture, defined as the most persuasive, the most widespread, the most familiar, and the most dominant, is indisputably television. It is the postmodern medium extraordinaire. We will therefore direct our discussion mostly to TV, though other forms of pop culture transmission will enter our view as needed.

1946 was the first year of commercial television, and by 1949, one million sets had been sold in the United States. In two short years, that number was up to 10 million and by the end of that decade, over 50 million television sets were in use. By the early 1980s, over 800 million televisions were in operation throughout the world. Today, the average TV in the United States is on for seven hours a day.<sup>5</sup> The exponential growth of television consumption in the United States and throughout the world is incontrovertible and unchallenged.

The screen is no longer for us merely an external object; we enter its world as much as it enters ours. The realities it portrays become an extension of ourselves, and we of it. As Grenz has said, the screen is “an embodied form of our psychic worlds,”<sup>6</sup> meaning that it represents to us the meaning we attribute to our own lives. On this note, it is worth quoting Wells at length:

More people pass through our lives today, more quickly, than ever before. We are exposed to an almost endless number of new people, new opportunities. With some of our technologies the encounters are superficial and we are engaged little. Others, however, intensify their relationships. This is true of television, some of whose characters become more real to us than the people next door, for our contact with the person whose image we see is far more sustained, and perhaps far more pleasant, than the

real people around the corner. This can certainly be the case in cyberspace... And it is true of many a teenager's identity with a rock band, known only through their music and videos, but which becomes more intense than many other personal relationships.<sup>7</sup>

Because of this habit of postmoderns to appropriate the world of the television, the movie, or the video, for the real world, they have come to thrive on narratives and stories. Such a medium is a recognizable invitation to postmoderns to insert themselves into the story, beyond simply identifying with the characters but even imagining what the world of the narrative would be like if they were a character in it.<sup>8</sup> Conversely, an entire mode of conversation has emerged as common in which the experiences of one's real life are compared to different movies and TV shows; the screen has become a hermeneutical tool for interpreting life.

The power of the screen to produce an ontology in its viewers has had other effects as well. Because television produces constant stimulation, it locates viewers in a continual orientation to the now of the screen; as they become accustomed to having problems solved for them through the course of the show, life becomes a passive activity. Television, thus, discourages viewers from reflecting on the past—whether their own past or their culture's past—or from planning for the future. Even shows that take place in a different temporal orientation invite the viewer into the dramatic problems and situations of only that show. Thus, there is a breakdown in the continuity between the past, present, and future, and a barrier is erected, locating the viewer in “a perpetual present.”<sup>9</sup> Middleton and Walsh assess television's orientation to the present as perfect for the postmodern self.

A constantly reconstructible self with no stable core requires a world of fleeting images to provide material for its reconstruction. Having no substance in itself, the saturated self must be constantly fed with images that it can take up, mimic, be entertained by and then discard.<sup>10</sup>

Such characteristics inherent to television have caused it to be considered a necessarily postmodern genre. But in recent years, television has become even more of a force for

postmodernism through developments in the industry itself. For example, the old standard was for shows to have a linear plot, a single hero, and a single, unified ending, but this formula has been replaced in the majority of shows, particularly dramas. In shows like *ER* and *Boston Public*, one finds many characters (none of whom could be called a main character), many interspersed plots with little relation to each other, and only occasional endings. The viewer must be aware of simultaneous plots in which the characters are involved in order to understand what he or she sees. As another example, let us compare the murder mystery genre. Shows such as *Perry Mason*, *Dragnet*, *Columbo*, *Murder, She Wrote*, and *Matlock* dealt almost exclusively with the events of the crime and the inevitable solution that came at the end, deduced through copious attention to the facts, evidence, and details of the crime. Postmodern crime shows, such as *Law & Order*, *NYPD Blue*, and *LA Law*, spend significant time exploring the internal feelings, processes, and reactions of the characters to the events of the story, and nabbing the bad guy will often take a back seat to the personal lives (often involving sexual exploits) of the characters. Lastly, we should not permit this discussion of the new style of television to pass before commenting on the rise of so-called reality television shows (which, in *reality*, are so remote from the average person's experience of *reality* that the title feels like a marketing tactic). These real-life soap operas are constructed as quasi-game shows, where the "contestants" kick each other out of the "game" until the most popular (or most cunning) is left. But the game is really secondary; the most interesting aspects of the show to the viewers are the conflicts that arise among the contestants and the revelation of their private thoughts in on-camera interviews that the other players cannot hear. The shows are driven by these conflicts, which carry on from week to week without resolution, until the game is over.



This “infusion of the inchoate into the popular culture” finds its acme in MTV, whose surreal videos signal a full breakdown of a rationally coherent universe.<sup>11</sup> MTV dispenses moods and emotions in non-narrative form, cutting right to the viewer’s feelings and bypassing the mind directly. As Middleton and Walsh comment, “The postmodern subject does not *need* a coherent world; MTV makes sure that he or she does not get one.”<sup>12</sup> The multitude of images found there are easily detached from whatever reference to reality they may have originally had, and the viewer is encouraged to supply whatever meaning he or she enjoys. I was once listening to an interview with the rock star Sting, who was describing the making of his hit song, “If I Ever Lose My Faith in You.” The interviewer asked him who the song was written to, and the artist replied that it was not actually written to anyone. He went on to declare that that ambiguity was the great part about that song; the listeners could appropriate the lyrics and apply them to God, their lovers, their friends, even themselves! This is the quintessential postmodern sentiment—the song itself has no stable meaning, adjusting according to the interpretations assigned to it by the hearers. In this manner, the images in the postmodern pop culture circulate and interact in a ceaseless, centerless flow.<sup>13</sup>

We have observed how entertainment television, consisting of fiction, reality game shows, and music videos, have had an impact on the culture, but information television, made up of the news and news magazine shows, is within our purview as well.<sup>14</sup> In many respects, the mass media have become the arbiters of reality, deciding for the country what is important and even what is real. “Anything not submitted to the ‘ontological test’ of being aired on television is relegated to the periphery of life in contemporary society.”<sup>15</sup> One sad example of this phenomenon played itself out after the school shooting this year in San Diego, California, at Santee High School. Many of the media-savvy pupils at that school, when they heard there had

been a shooting, quickly rushed home to change their clothes and fix their hair for the impending television cameras. When the media arrived, these children waved their arms and ran up to them, claiming to know the alleged shooter and details about his family life. They knew that this might be their only opportunity to be important, that is, to be seen on TV.

### **III. Pop Culture as Ontology**

So we see that pop culture has now become a major meaning-making system for contemporary American society.<sup>16</sup> This is due to the fact that it has replaced the community as the determiner of role, identity, and being. The small, cohesive, united community, which was formerly located in a place, provided an expectation for the individual concerning his or her position(s), privileges, and responsibilities within that community. Membership in the community had requirements and provided structure, but due to the mobility of the contemporary era and the postmodern ethos that declares every decision as valid and as acceptable as any other, the community no longer holds sway in the postmodern era. Postmoderns derive their identity and learn their manner of being from the pop culture, which is everywhere and nowhere, and which places no arduous burdens on them.

The population group least oriented to a community and most postmodern in outlook is the young. Expectedly, they are also the most common participants in pop culture. For Generation X, the pop culture has become the locus for their lived theology; they use the pop culture themes of anti-institutionalism, emotional experience, suffering, and ambiguity in religious ways, finding in them a way to connect to the human condition throughout time.<sup>17</sup>

But the pop culture is not specific; it emits the same signals to people in Appalachia as it does to those in Beverly Hills and Des Moines. It does not know the people to whom it transmits, and it has no insights into their special talents or potential. Thus, when the public

world rises in importance and cuts ties to place, community, and family, it is incapable of fulfilling all the functions that those ties once did. The postmodern is left characteristically alone and aimless in a homogenized world of mass culture.<sup>18</sup> Middleton and Walsh identify the postmodern condition as one of “homelessness,” in which “the notion of a settled home or a stable world is, after all, an illusory modern (and premodern) construction that can no longer be believed.”<sup>19</sup> There are no longer any points of departure or arrival, just an endless whirl of games, shows, and imaginary identities.

This sense of unreality, being adrift, and lost connections is symptomatic of a highly urbanized, technological world.<sup>20</sup> Technology, as the legitimating myth of the society with nearly unanimously unquestioned allegiance, “presents itself with religious force, combining seemingly inevitable developments in the social infrastructure with belief in the unassailable sanctity of these developments.”<sup>21</sup> But technology is no longer a religion that promises deliverance, as it did in the modern era; the postmodern version of the religion of technology no longer accepts any hope for release from the limitations of subjectivity and self-interest. Postmoderns know that technology will not bring peace or even an improved life, but it *will* bring a faster life and a life of more experiences, thus rendering life more fulfilling to postmoderns. Though it no longer holds promise for the achievement of paradise, for the tasks of blurring boundaries, creating unlimited choices, and uncovering infinite potential experiences, it is efficiently perfect—not a philosophy or an ideology that must be maintained, but simply an accepted fact of contemporary life. Like the medieval Church or the First Amendment, it organizes and influences virtually every aspect of society, commanding vast resources and affecting the power of nations in the international arena.<sup>22</sup> As technology becomes increasingly faster, cheaper, smaller, and better, it propels the American fascination with the *modo*, the most

recent thing, as an unparalleled virtue.<sup>23</sup> As a result, creativity, imagination, skill, meaning, excellence, and beauty are all traded for *novelty*. The more outrageous something is, the more “creative” it is considered to be.<sup>24</sup>

Technology has also led to the unequaled dissemination of information that characterizes our postmodern era; information has replaced the manufacture of goods as the key industry in the country. With our information society functioning as an efficient, organized, global communication network, we can gain information from anywhere on earth instantaneously. This information often manifests the cultural diversity throughout the earth; in fact, the multiplicity of messages and perspectives is at times overwhelming. This whole process further advances the postmodern bent toward pluralism, diversity, and eclecticism, encouraging those inundated by the barrage of information to forgo trying to evaluate it (which is a hopeless challenge, anyway), and instead to simply incorporate it piecemeal into one’s life journey. This juxtaposition of diverse, mostly unrelated pieces of information blurs for the postmodern into a fragmented jumble of puzzle pieces, which are constantly exchanged but never connected to each other.

Gergen graphically describes this process:

We find technology and life-style operating in a state of symbiotic interdependence. The technology opens opportunities, and as these opportunities are realized, the person becomes increasingly dependent on the technology. The technologies engender a multiplicitous and polymorphic being who thrives on incoherence, and this being grows increasingly enraptured by the means by which this protean capacity is experienced. We enter the age of *techno-personal* systems.<sup>25</sup>

This experience of technology and communication is both helpful for and helped by the universality of pop culture. Pop culture is increasingly technology- and information-driven, as the media themselves require progressively faster technology to contend with their competitors, and pop culture consumers seek higher definition, resolution, and clarity in their stereos and televisions. There is also an insatiable drive for more and more information; because

information is useful in a specific field, there is a competition for who can acquire the most massive trove of information. The more information one can acquire in a specific area, the more strategic that person can be in positioning one's company, one's product, or oneself in the marketplace. The demand for technology and information increases unendingly, and pop culture, the ever-present cultural authority, ensures that they will be delivered.

## **IV. Christian Postmodernism—A Theology of Images**

### *A. Examining Images*

The dominance of pop culture in America is undeniable; America has become a nation oriented around the screen and, to a lesser extent, the stereo. The omnipresence of such powerful society-forming forces, which are concentrated around the production of images, suggest for the church the need to develop a thoughtful analysis of the role of images in the establishment of culture, behavior, and worldviews. Whether the dissemination of images holds promise or peril (or both), it is the church's task to submit it to the examination of scripture so we can determine our proper stance toward it.

The images of pop culture, while not always occurring within a narrative, per se—as in the case of MTV—still always occur within a context. In addition to the contexts generated by the familiarity of the genres in which they occur, images also appear within the specific contexts created by the words and sounds that surround them. In other words, the pop culture does not broadcast indiscriminate images without reference to a storyline, a lyric, a conversation, or some other accompanying language. The images of pop culture, then, serve to enhance and to be enhanced by the word-context in which they arise, a situation quite parallel to images, motifs, and “word pictures” used in literature.

In reading scripture in its totality, we find that it is filled with images that serve as metaphors for various components of life, most of these occurring within the context of

narrative. Creation, rest, covenant, promise, community, sacrifice, servanthood—each of these is essential to understanding God and our relationship with him. They are *images* located in scripture that draw parallels between our relationships with other humans and our relationship with our God. Furthermore, we find that scripture builds on these images progressively, adding new facets to our understanding of each as God’s revelation unfolds. Thus scripture exists as a centuries-long conversation of the biblical writers, who engaged in a process of refining, retooling, recoloring, and reforming old images and establishing new images that together served as the formative components of the people of God. They weaved these images together, inspiring and challenging their readers to aspire to the pictures of right living, painted by their symbolic words.

The language of scripture then, is largely metaphorical, image-laden language. Allan Coppedge asserts that, in fact, this is inevitable in the communication process between an infinite God and a finite creation.

Human language is necessarily all confined to the world of creation. Recognizing our dilemma (particularly the finiteness of our perception), God has condescended to use language from the created world to describe His own transcendent being. Working with terms from creation and personal relations, God tells us what He is *like*.<sup>26</sup>

Significantly, this sounds rather like Derrida, who made the claim concerning *all* human language that since it was interminably intertwined with finite perspective, it was also necessarily incapable of achieving the standards of truth demanded by the correspondence theory. Words themselves are always incomplete, never arriving at any singular or definitive meaning, according to Derrida.<sup>27</sup> This use of analogy means that all messages of language, including the images of scripture, are both like and *unlike* the reality they attempt to describe. We understand the concept of power because of our partial experience with it in this world, so when the Bible describes God as “powerful,” we know that it is similar to each of our individual

ideas of power. But because it is analogical language, we know that God's power is still somehow different than our conceptions.<sup>28</sup>

As we have already learned, many postmodernists, such as Lyotard and Derrida, in perceiving the inability of humans to reach the standards of the correspondence theory of truth, claim we cannot grasp reality or present truth at all. Theology has more at stake in this loss of belief in truth than probably any other branch of learning because it alone among the disciplines seeks to establish critically informed trust, while radical postmodernism is grounded on suspicion. Not only does theology claim to salvage truth out of the swamp of self-interest, self-aggrandizement, and manipulation, it also claims that at its heart is *the* paradigm of non-manipulative love, “namely the theology of the cross and the free gift of resurrection.”<sup>29</sup> The skepticism of postmodernism has proven to be a much more viable threat to the truth-claims of Christianity than the materialistic, naturalistic attacks of modernity ever were.<sup>30</sup>

But fortunately, the hermeneutics of Ricoeur and Gadamer once again assist us in at once acknowledging the seriousness of the postmodern assessment and not allowing ourselves to be dragged down into the nihilism of despair. A narratival and conversational conception of truth is particularly amenable to the use of image and metaphor.<sup>31</sup> Narratives and conversations constantly explore relationships between different, often disparate, elements, probing how things may be like or unlike other things. Such a process helps us to place these things in their proper context and establishes their position viz. ourselves and other participants in the narrative or dialogue.

The main caution that should be noted in the use of images, which is to say the shortcoming of all language, is incompleteness. Because images approach a subject from only one perspective and are both like and *unlike* the thing described, no one image must be permitted to

dominate other images. A biblical, and therefore Christian, use of images will avail itself of as many images as possible so that the presentation of God and his interaction with the world that is set forward by the church is as balanced and representative of the whole of Christian revelation as we can make it.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, individual models of such central and wide-ranging concepts as salvation, atonement, and sin should be accompanied by disclaimers and caveats; such qualification will prevent the concepts from being skewed by domination of one biblical image over another.<sup>33</sup> If we have an incomplete picture of what God wants or who God is, we will not connect with him in the manner he plans for us to.

One of the reasons for God's revealing Himself in multiple roles is that if we are to properly relate to Him, we must have the whole picture of what He is like... A much more holistic understanding of God's character is necessary if one is to properly relate to Him as He desires... The roles of Judge and King must be balanced with the pictures of God's immanence, which we find in His roles as Father and Shepherd.<sup>34</sup>

To summarize our exploration to this point, we noted the importance of images in pop culture and therefore for the production of postmodern notions of identity and selfhood. We then encountered a parallel situation in the examination of scripture's approach to images. It stands to reason, then, that the church should be eager to employ images, metaphors, and pictures in its transmission of God's message to postmoderns. This means a reversal of the modern church's tendency to preference the didactic portions of scripture, such as the epistles—which are amenable to abstraction, analysis, and propositional formulations—at the expense of the gospels and much of the Old Testament. Now we turn to an investigation into what such an image-controlled theology might look like.

## *B. Appropriating Images*

### 1. The Image of Home

As we observed in our explication of pop culture, the postmodern person is a being without a home; there is no spot in his or her experience that serves as a center or a point of



orientation. The postmodern's is a journey without a destination. The Simon and Garfunkel song, "Homeward Bound," while on one level a description of the life of the traveling musician, is at the same time a description of the postmodern life, which is never homeward bound.

I'm sittin' in the railway station,  
 Got a ticket for my destination, mmm  
 On a tour of one-night stands,  
 My suitcase and guitar in hand,  
 And every stop is neatly planned  
 For a poet and a one-man band.

Homeward bound.  
 I wish I was  
 Homeward bound.  
 Home, where my thought's escapin'  
 Home, where my music's playin'  
 Home, where my love lies waiting  
 Silently for me

Every day's an endless stream  
 Of cigarettes and magazines  
 And each town looks the same to me  
 The movies and the factories  
 And every stranger's face I see  
 Reminds me that I long to be  
 Homeward bound.

Tonight I'll sing my songs again.  
 I'll play the game and pretend.  
 But all my words come back to me  
 In shades of mediocrity,  
 Like emptiness in harmony—  
 I need someone to comfort me.

Homeward bound.  
 I wish I was  
 Homeward bound.<sup>35</sup>

This song, as a picture of postmodern life, illuminates the constructed nature of our interactions with each other. Every encounter with another is "neatly planned," never genuine, never revelatory of our true feelings or thoughts. The artifice of this "game" is constantly present to us

as we hear the mediocrity of our own words and their tepid, half-truth inadequacy that makes them palatable to others but never to ourselves. We long for a place where we can be true to ourselves, our thoughts, our hearts, yet where we will still be loved and comforted—a home. We wish there were such a place that served as an orientation to our world, but, sadly, every place looks the same—there is no differentiation. We are always “guitar in hand,” ever on the move, continually emerging, never arriving, and so, in postmodernity, we are road-weary.

Homelessness is a kind of disorientation, a sensation of being out of balance or out of kilter, easily lost, turned around, and mixed up. Places, customs, and language are all unfamiliar.

Home functions as a (more than merely physical) point of orientation around which our world is rendered meaningful. There is a geography of home which consists of more than the lay of the land. Our unique topography involves more than merely our *topos* as a point on a map, important as that is. Home is an *axis mundi*.<sup>36</sup>

This desire to come home, to be rooted, to find security, to be aware of one’s *axis mundi*, is “an apparently common longing of the human soul,”<sup>37</sup> and in God’s providence, he has provided a home for the homeless. For every desire, there seems to be a satisfaction for it: for hunger, there is food, for thirst, liquid, and for the yearning for home of the “restless nomad”<sup>38</sup> of postmodernism, there is a home.

On one level, this world is our home, for that is the purpose for which it was created.

And God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’ And God said, ‘Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food (Gen. 1:28-29 RSV).

The creation, as a gift from God, implies an identity for us as grateful caretakers, *homo gratus*.<sup>39</sup> But because of sin, the world became disorienting to us in a way that it was never intended to be, so its capacity to serve as our home is limited. This is the discovery of postmodernism in its

repudiation of modern optimism, but that truth does not eliminate the role of creation as our home entirely.

On a second level, God has established the community of the people of God as a home for humanity. With God the Father giving leadership and guidance, the brothers and sisters in Christ have a role as supporters, encouragers, exhorters, and helpers to each other in discovering identity, purpose, and value for each member of the family. The family of God means that Christians must live in community, not as independent, isolated, autonomous individuals. We have both a responsibility for the assistance of others and an obligation to mutual submission, as modeled by the firstborn, Jesus. This partaking in our home community forms us through repeated participation, instruction, and fellowship.

While residents require only ‘cash and a map,’ inhabitants ‘bear the marks of their places,’ and when uprooted, they get homesick... For the inhabitant, there is a place of dwelling in which one finds *identity* and from which one derives *meaning* and apart from which one feels a bit lost and lonely.<sup>40</sup>

Despite these provisions of home here on earth, however, our supreme home is not yet part of our experience. The creation is fallen, the church fails to live up to its promise, and so the world longs for redemption (Ro. 8:22). Ultimately, our home is in heaven, where we will enjoy true fellowship, where we will no longer feel the ravages of sin’s disorientation. Thus, the message of the church is one of affirmation of the postmodern’s sensation of homelessness. The invitation to Christ is an invitation to join the community of the homeless who nevertheless know where home is. To join the church is not to arrive fully at home, but it is to be “homeward bound” (cf. Jn. 14:2).

## 2. The Image of Incorporation

Perhaps the paradigmatic example of a modern expression of evangelicalism would be the tradition of dispensationalism, which intends to divide human history into various epochs, or

dispensations, which serve as barriers, demarcating the manner of God's activity respecting his created order. In the current dispensation, for example, according to most dispensationalists, the canon is closed, and the Holy Spirit no longer gives revelation for the church as he did in past dispensations. Dispensationalism dwells in the land of singularity, organization, classification, finality, rationality, totality, and systematization—the perfect representative of modern sympathies. However, the system of dispensationalism fails to contend with a strain of incorporation (rather than division) that runs throughout scripture. From the call of Abraham to the close of Revelation, there is a consistent agenda to establish the continuity of the community of God's people.

Throughout the Old Testament, God identifies himself as the God of Israel's ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He affirms his trustworthiness on the basis of the mighty works accomplished during the Exodus and in creation. He continually reaffirms the promises that he swore to the patriarchs and makes new promises to Israel. He consistently recalls the covenant he made with Abraham and the one established at Mt. Horeb. Through the rite of circumcision, each newborn Jew is incorporated into the community of those who follow the one true God. God's standards for his community remain constant—faithfulness to the covenant, compassion for the powerless, purity in worship.

The continuity of the Old Testament is apparent to most and needs little argumentation, even for dispensationalists. However, the New Testament too is predicated on its conformity to the story of Israel, a surprising claim to most post-Reformation Protestants, who often perceive division and antipathy between the covenants. Certainly, we see the claims of fulfilled prophecy in the Gospels and Jesus' explicit support for many of the Ten Commandments, in addition to the declaration of the greatest commandments. But the two testaments are linked by more than these

separated threads; they are woven intimately by a shared vision of the world and a common story of the community of God's people.

Jesus declares that those who follow him are the true descendents of Abraham (Jn. 8:39-59), a claim echoed by Paul (Ro. 4). Jesus' message, then, is one concerning the identity of Israel; among these competing claims, whose way of being Israel—the Pharisees', the Sadducees', the Essenes', the Zealots', Jesus'—is the right way? The narrative of the Gospels shows that Jesus' teaching was authenticated by his resurrection and ascension, the indubitable sign of God's approbation. The inclusion of the Gentiles into the community of God's people, then (Ac. 15; Gal.; Eph. 2:11-22), signals an incorporation into the people of Israel, establishing a line of continuity from Abraham to Christians today.

At an even deeper level, when we put faith in the saving work of Christ, we are mysteriously and mystically united with him in that work. Paul, in Ephesians, reminds his readers that Christ was raised from the dead and seated at God's right hand in the heavenly realms (1:20). "As for you," he continues, "you were dead" as well (2:1), "but God... made us alive *with* (Gk. *syn*) Christ... And God raised us up *with* (Gk. *syn*) Christ and seated us *with* (Gk. *syn*) him in the heavenly realms" (2:5-6, NIV; my italics; note the past tense).<sup>41</sup> Paul uses similar language in Colossians and in Romans as well. The incorporation motif gives further power to the programmatic Pauline formula "in Christ," for we can see that in a real way Paul considers Christians to have participated in the death, resurrection, and ascension performed by Jesus. This incorporation is not a strictly Pauline doctrine, however. Peter too, in writing to believers who "have not seen him" (1:8), urges them to "rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ" (4:13).

Jesus claimed to be the fulfillment of the scriptures, and, because of the presence of the Holy Spirit on him throughout his ministry (Lk. 4:18), he even acted as the replacement of the Temple (Mt. 12:6; cf. Ac. 3-4; 1Co. 3:16-17), the symbol of God's presence in the midst of his community. If we are incorporated into his life, death, resurrection, and glorification, in some sense, we have participated in each one of these aspects of his ministry as well. With the aid of the image of incorporation, we might be able to understand in a new way the biblical portrait of the church as the body of Christ—now more connected to him than we ever imagined before. With the incorporation of our lives into Christ's, the church is (or ought to be) the presence of God in the world, the locus of the Holy Spirit, the inheritors of the story of Israel.

### *C. Using Images*

Adopting a theology of images in contrast to abstract, cerebral theologies, founded on propositions, extracted from the narratives in which they emerged, yields a Christianity with the potential for being more concrete and incarnational. The ease with which one can grasp a picture makes the vision of the kingdom transmittable to young children, mentally delayed or handicapped people, and new Christians or pre-Christians, who are not yet well-versed in the theological language of church-speak. The ideas are then more likely to be applied in the lives of believers because they are more readily grasped. The use of images also leads to a more experiential theology because the images create a reality that must be lived out to be realized. A theological declaration about the preexistence of Christ has little to do with one's ordinary life, but the paradigm of Christ as an example for non-manipulative love as evidenced through the Incarnation has myriad applications in nearly every situation in one's life.

Therefore, the church must initiate a concerted effort to promulgate image-laden messages that connect with the cultural realities of postmodern America. Songs, prayers, and

sermons that cull the images of the Bible should be used for public worship. New analogies and metaphors that relate to the uniqueness of the postmodern experience should be discovered and shared with a world of lost people. The use of poetry, dance, and art should be reintroduced to the liturgy and allowed to communicate on their own terms the profundity of the Christian life without the distraction of an “official” interpretation. The omnipresence of the pop culture should be exploited and “secular” movies, television shows, and songs deconstructed and reinterpreted in light of the narrative of scripture.

The potential for a spiritual revival resides in the recovery of biblical imagery. In it rests the possibility of widespread understanding and acceptance of the true cost of discipleship because, for the story of following Christ to be believable, it must accord with the experiences of life. It will therefore be told in its entirety, never yielding to the neat systematization of cheap grace. Images of peace and liberation hold the promise of a Christendom with a burning desire for social justice around the world. Images of compassion and concern for the widow, the alien, and the fatherless give hope for a church that shows empathy to the disenfranchised, the voiceless, and the marginalized in our society—the addicts, the homeless, the single mothers. Images of community and hospitality promise a church that supports and encourages one another, that values the diverse benefits that each gives, that offers open arms to outsiders who wish to join. In sum, images allow the demolition of the fragmented life; biblical images give to postmoderns the tools they need to live a holistic Christian life that is incorporated in every part of their day. No longer must Christians live in a public, secular world and retreat to a private, spiritual world. The two are brought together by images that determine the course, tenor, and pitch of *all* of life.

Images are the basis for the attraction we have to life. We do not love life because it is analyzable, understandable, and definable. We love life because it is poetic, unpredictable, touching, and mysterious. Images dwell in the very foundations of our thoughts, and they are present in every word we utter. They hold tremendous power, and the church neglects them at its peril.

## **V. Conclusion**

American pop culture is the location for the creation of a new national identity in the United States. Driven by global capitalism and international trade, American pop culture is even being carried all over the world, establishing the first vestiges of a one-world culture. It speaks above languages in the transmission of pictures, creating moods and feelings through its powerful images. Biblical writers knew long before the invention of the camera the power of pictures for the creation and alteration of reality. Jesus' homey stories of fish, bread, water, vineyards, and soil confirm it—the images that arise from stories form the foundation for one's understanding of the world, much more than sterile logic and scientific empiricism. The church must acquaint itself with the images of scripture if it hopes to be relevant to an image-oriented culture and to reach a new generation for Christ.



## ENDNOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> For a further discussion of this distinction, see William D. Romanowski, *Pop Culture Wars: Religion & the Role of Entertainment in American Life* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1996), particularly 20-33 and 112-113.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 71-80.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Bouma-Prediger, "Yearning for Home: The Christian Doctrine of Creation in a Postmodern Age," in *Postmodern Philosophy and Christian Thought*, ed. Merold Westphal (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 172.

<sup>4</sup> Will Durant and Ariel Durant, *The Age of Reason Begins* (New York: MJF Books, 1961), 24, 78-79.

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth J. Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 54.

<sup>6</sup> Stanley Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 35.

<sup>7</sup> David F. Wells, *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover its Moral Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 84.

<sup>8</sup> Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 110.

<sup>9</sup> Grenz, 35.

<sup>10</sup> J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth is Stranger than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1995), 54-55.

<sup>11</sup> Gergen, 132-133.

<sup>12</sup> Middleton and Walsh, 55. My italics.

<sup>13</sup> Grenz, 35.

<sup>14</sup> I am using this distinction between entertainment television and information television, although in actuality the line of demarcation is quite thin. For example, the difference between a political convention today and a major sporting event is almost indiscernible. The success of information television is absolutely tied to its ability to entertain, and the production of images (rather than the dissemination of information) is its main business. However, being fully aware of this, I still use the classification in order to highlight what I see to be somewhat different effects on the society at large.

<sup>15</sup> Grenz, 34.

<sup>16</sup> Beaudoin, xiv.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, xvii.

<sup>18</sup> David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 76-77.

<sup>19</sup> Middleton and Walsh, 58.

<sup>20</sup> Wells, *Losing Our Virtue*, 97.

---

<sup>21</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 282.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 282-283.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas C. Oden, *Agenda for Theology: Recovering Christian Roots* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 27.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>25</sup> Gergen, 173. Emphasis in original.

<sup>26</sup> Allan Coppedge, *The Roles of God* (Wilmore, KY: Barnabas Foundation, n.d.), 2. My italics.

<sup>27</sup> Stuart Sim, ed, *The Routledge Critical Dictionary of Postmodern Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 226-227.

<sup>28</sup> Coppedge, 2.

<sup>29</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self: On Meaning, Manipulation and Promise* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 16-17.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>31</sup> For more on this, see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Garrett Barden and John Cumming, 2nd ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1975), esp. 121ff., 369ff.; Michel Philibert, "Philosophical Imagination: Paul Ricoeur as the Singer of Ruins," in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, ed. Lewis Edwin Hahn, The Library of Living Philosophers, vol. 22 (Chicago: Open Court, 1995), 126-137; and Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. R. Czerny, et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977).

<sup>32</sup> Coppedge, 1-2.

<sup>33</sup> Thiselton, 29.

<sup>34</sup> Coppedge, 296.

<sup>35</sup> Paul Simon, "Homeward Bound," *Parsley, Sage, Rosemary, and Thyme* (1966), available on-line, *The Simon and Garfunkel Lyrics Archive*, <http://www.angelfire.com/music/sandglyrics>.

<sup>36</sup> Bouma-Prediger, 181.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>38</sup> Gergen, 173.

<sup>39</sup> Bouma-Prediger, 187.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 181. Quotes are from David Orr, *Ecological Literacy*. My italics.

<sup>41</sup> I am indebted to Joe Dongell for this understanding of Ephesians 1-2.

## CHAPTER SIX: MISAPPROPRIATIONS OF POSTMODERNISM

Though our examination of the potential relationship between postmodernism and the evangelical church is far from complete—we have not given sufficient attention to such central issues as worship, pastoral care, the role of mystery for the church, and other concerns—it nevertheless establishes a trajectory with the possibility for further exploration as well as a manner of thinking into which can be placed the particularities of any individual church's local context. As this proposal is adapted to specific local contexts, however, as I hope it will be, there is the possibility for an openness to postmodernism and an enthusiasm about postmodernism that forgets to evaluate what it appropriates, resulting in a *misappropriation* of postmodernism. So before I conclude this thesis, I am compelled to express this final cautionary note.

It can hardly be denied that postmodernism is in vogue. It sometimes seems as if every aspect of American culture has yielded to the irresistible label.<sup>1</sup> To be postmodern is to be sexy, enigmatic, current, and sophisticated. It is the topic of discussions in all disciplines; having moved beyond architecture, art, and linguistics, scholars are now pumping out voluminous amounts of material explaining what it is to do postmodern history, postmodern theology, and postmodern science. If something seems new or innovative in any way, it is automatically placed in the category of the postmodern. The church should not be straining toward postmodernism simply to be popular and trendy, lest its fate mirror that of liberalism after its capitulation to secular modernism, and its lifeblood drain slowly from it. Rather, its motivation should spring from a genuine commitment to share the love of God, to care for needs, and to provide opportunities for worship in a way that is most readily received by postmodern persons. Therefore, a consideration

of misappropriations is necessary to avoid errors in thinking and acting that might await those who reach out to embrace postmodernism too readily.

## I. Possibilities for Misappropriation

### A. *Denigration of the Past*

The mystique of postmodernism, I believe, lies in its self-characterization to have moved beyond the naïveté of all earlier periods in history. This chronological arrogance affords it an alluring sensation of sophistication that relegates all abstainers to the realm of the simple, the artless, and the hopelessly bypassed, unworthy of serious consideration. Ironically, this attitude is but one of many characteristics that it shares with the modern period, that stretch of time that postmodernists claim to be “post.” In fact, such a temporal superciliousness is the basis for modernity’s name. Derived from the Latin, *modo*, meaning “the lately” or “the just now,” modernity was founded on the discoveries of the Enlightenment, which name of course implies that previous times were comparatively *unenlightened*.<sup>2</sup> But now, in striking parallelism, the *modo* is to be *post-modo*; in partial objection to the term, *postmodernism*, Jean-François Lyotard protested:

Now this idea of a linear chronology [implied in the prefix *post-*] is itself perfectly ‘modern.’ It is at once part of Christianity, Cartesianism, and Jacobinism. Since we are inaugurating something completely new, the hands of the clock should be put back to zero. The very idea of modernity is closely correlated with the principle that it is both possible and necessary to break with tradition and institute absolutely new ways of living and thinking. We now suspect that this ‘rupture’ is in fact a way of forgetting or repressing the past.<sup>3</sup>

A Christian version of postmodernism, while identifying and rejecting the errors and sins of the past, must never assume that because it can enumerate the shortcomings of its ancestors it is therefore in a position of superiority with respect to them. To do so is to fail to treat the past as an “other,” as mandated by our ethics, outlined in chapter four. The theologians and Christians of the past approached the scriptures from their own perspective, and our responsibility is to listen intently to their message for our day and to engage in conversation with

them, as mandated by our dialogical hermeneutics, outlined in chapter two. This does not always mean that we will accept the position expressed by those in the past, but it does mean that we will approach the encounter with the other in an attitude of respect and with the expectation that we will learn as a result of it.

Additionally, we must never consider ourselves to have arrived. Because we are now aware of our own limited perspective, we are forced to adopt the humility commanded by scripture. We must assume that there are unseen failures of our own that will be corrected (hopefully) by future generations. We probably even participate in new failures that would not have occurred in the churches of the past but to which we are blind today. In other words, we are in no position to remove the speck from the eyes of past Christians because of our own planks around which we try to see.

### *B. Denial of Authority*

As Lyotard has so famously pointed out, postmodernism is characterized by an “incredulity towards metanarratives,”<sup>4</sup> i.e., postmodernism prohibits subscription to a prevailing theory against whose norms single events of judging might themselves be judged and either validated or invalidated. Considered oppressive, authoritarian, and restrictive of individual creativity, postmodern theorists consider these claims to authority false and illegitimate. Postmodernism gets its name, of course, from its ostensible antipathy with modernism, and, accordingly, Lyotard rejects what he sees to be the primary characteristic of modernism, namely, the promulgation of these grand narratives. Whether it is the Enlightenment story of the gradual but steady progress of reason and freedom, Hegel’s dialectic of Spirit coming to know itself, or Marx’s drama of the forward march of human productive capacities via class conflict culminating in proletarian revolution, these metanarratives instantiate an unsound and unfounded approach to the problem of legitimation.<sup>5</sup>

They themselves are unproven and improvable and therefore specious grounds for the evaluation of truth claims. All such narratives, where the veil is lifted and truth arrives unbesmirched, are distressingly biblical to many postmodernists.<sup>6</sup>

While Christians undoubtedly need to be more suspicious of authority and power in general, and especially their own use of it, they must still preserve some legitimation of power, modeled after the other-focused power of God as manifested in his Son, Jesus Christ. There is an inherent power structure present in the church flowing from God to the church leadership to the laity. Simply for the sake of effectiveness and efficiency, the church needs committees with responsibility and authority to carry out their tasks. Teaching is a main function of the church, the transmission of the faith from one generation to the next, but the position of teacher is necessarily a position of authority and power (Jas. 3:1). Power exists in the commingling of the old and the young—no relationship is absent the influence of power.

That is why postmodernists have not completely supplanted notions of authority, despite some claims to the contrary. To an extent equal to their modern predecessors, postmodernists have simply supplanted the authority of a previous era and substituted it with their own. It is impossible to enjoin others to reject authority without any authority oneself. That is, if a potential convert is exposed to the idea, “Reject Authority” (whether in Lyotard, Foucault, or the rear bumper of a Volkswagen van), it is always appropriate for him or her to respond, “By what authority am I being asked to reject authority?” Similarly, the postmodern account of the rejection of the grand narratives has, to some extent, become its own grand narrative.<sup>7</sup> It is surprising the extent to which so many postmodern philosophers, now freed from the shackles of the stifling modern age, have arrived at precisely the same conclusions in this era of rejecting authority.

Consequently, Christians should not be anxious about the existence of authorities, even in a postmodern reality. The church should not accept any interpretation of scripture as a good interpretation; it should not democratize its ethical teachings; it should not abdicate its right to instruct, admonish, rebuke, or lead. Instead, it must submit itself to the narrative of scripture and to the conversation of the church throughout time, checking to make sure that it does not stray from the true faith, handed down for countless generations. Further, it must repeatedly evaluate its own use of power to make sure that as much as possible its motives have been pure and directed toward the benefit and edification of the other, rather than one's own self-aggrandizement.

### *C. Departure from Orthodoxy*

The potential exists for the church to become so enamored with the devices of postmodernism that they replace the gospel as what is foundational for us. Once that happens, we have excused ourselves from the table of dialogue and have launched into a sea of our own solipsistic navigation of faith. Stephen D. Moore, in his book, *Poststructuralism and the New Testament: Derrida and Foucault at the Foot of the Cross*, models a case only too graphically of biblical scholarship that has purchased an appropriation of postmodernism at the cost of its orthodoxy. After a quick orientation to the philosophies of structuralism and poststructuralism, Moore leads the reader through two case studies of poststructuralist hermeneutics. The first examines the Johannine story of the woman at the Samaritan well, using the style employed by Derrida. Through an examination of water throughout the book of John as well as a reinterpretation of the ambiguous discussion between the woman and Jesus previously uncovered by several leading feminist scholars, Moore deconstructs the text, concluding that the woman is in fact the superior conversationalist.

What remains unquestioned in these [feminist] readings, however, is Jesus' superiority to the Samaritan woman. He retains his privileged role as the dispenser of knowledge—

‘the subject presumed to know,’ as Jacques Lacan would say.... But what if the Samaritan woman were found to be the more enlightened partner in the dialogue from the outset? What if her insight were found to exceed that of Jesus all along? Impossible? Not at all.<sup>8</sup>

In Part II, Moore examines the passages in Paul referring to the cross through the lens of Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*. By analyzing the satisfaction theory of the atonement, Moore picks at the weak parts of the theory, asking questions that would be disturbing, no doubt, for Anselm, such as why God’s wrath must be satisfied through cruelty and suffering. Through the use of such questions, Moore concludes that, for Paul, God is a symbol of absolute power and, as such, is a useful tool for gaining power for himself as well as the whole class of clergy who would follow. This pastoral power is manifested by the role of the priest to scold and to discipline the flock and became so ubiquitous that it spread throughout the European society, supported by nearly every other medieval institution. And this power has been a source of repression. “Power is at its most insidious and efficient, for Foucault, precisely when its workings are effaced—when its brow is furrowed with humanitarian concern, when its voice is warm with Christian compassion, when its menace is masked even, or especially, from itself.”<sup>9</sup>

Moore’s unconcern for orthodox Christianity stands as a suggestive example of what can happen if the practices of postmodernity are applied to biblical studies in the same manner that the secular postmodernists apply them to other texts. His work truly represents what Derrida or Foucault might write on the passages in question. The evangelical must remember that, while the criticisms that postmodernity levels against human behavior can be incorporated in accordance with a biblical faith, surrender to the conclusions that most postmodernists make regarding these criticisms is a surrender of one’s faith. I have endeavored to demonstrate in this thesis that the arguments of postmodernism do not necessarily lead to the conclusions of the



radical, secular postmodernists; there are other, viable alternatives, that fall within the boundaries of orthodox faith.

#### *D. Denunciation of Deep Thought*

While none of the postmodern writers themselves encourages a mental vacation (most border on the impregnably complicated), some Christians, in a desire to appeal to a postmodern culture, have adopted a strategy that circumvents the mind and aims straight for the emotions. These apologists give up all claims to any kind of truth at all and simply call unbelievers to the faith on the basis of its usefulness or satisfaction-inducing qualities. Douglas Groothuis paraphrases such an evangelistic approach in the style of Paul's address to the Athenians in Acts 17.

People of Postmodernity, I can see you speak in many language games and are interested in diverse spiritualities. I have observed your pluralistic religious discourse and the fact that you use many final vocabularies.... We affirm the Christian community, which professes that God is the strand that unites our web of belief. We have our own manner of interpreting the world and using language that we call you to adopt for yourself.... We are not interested in metaphysics but in discipleship.

For us, Jesus is Lord. That is how we speak. We act that way, too; it's important to us... We believe that God is in control of our narrative. We ask you to join our language game. Please.... We simply declare this to be our truth. It can become your truth as well, if you join up.<sup>10</sup>

An apologetic based solely on an emotional plea offers no reasons for the hope we have (1Pe. 3:15) and makes no attempt to "contend for the faith" (Jude 3), thus failing the test of scripture as a viable apologetic. While a biblically-oriented postmodern apologetic addresses the seeker as a holistic entity and may include an emotional component, that component cannot compose the whole of the apologetic strategy. It must be buttressed by compelling challenges to the non-Christian's way of conceiving the world, which necessitates an intellectual appraisal of the deficiencies of the worldview in question. In other words, we must call the seeker to *think* about the prospect of joining the church and exchanging "language games." To do otherwise is, again, to fail to treat the pre-Christian as an "other"; creating a mood through the management of words, sounds, lighting,

etc., is simply a manipulation of the seeker's emotions. Conversions wrought through such circumstances are illegitimate until they result in a *metanoia*, a reorientation of the *whole* person, including the mind.

Additionally, to present a vision of the faith to the saints that does not require their continued intellectual development is a disservice to the church, an insult to God, and a desertion of the responsibility of stewardship. Among the talents given to us as humans, formed in the image of God, are our minds, and to ignore them and to downplay the importance of their development is to bury them in the ground, never using them for anything profitable (Mt. 25:14-30). The theology of images proposed in the last chapter should not be understood as a departure from an intellectually rigorous theology. The task for the theologian in postmodernity is the apprehension of images that hold potential for connecting to the postmodern situation, fleshing them out by applying them to the key elements of the faith, and communicating the challenging vision produced through the development of the image. Such a task requires creativity, insight, understanding, and familiarity with the world of scripture. We still need linguists, archaeologists, and cultural historians to tell us what it is impossible for a text to mean by virtue of its cultural situation and to explore what the messianic images used by Jesus to describe himself would have meant to the first hearers. Christians must be intellectual in their approach to faith—it is part of a holistic Christian life.

### *E. Deference to Relativism*

In surveying the cultural landscape, many observant culture-watchers have noted the widespread disbelief in absolute truth that permeates the society. Numerous Americans have followed the atheistic reasoning of Derrida, Foucault, Rorty, and Lyotard and believe that, because we cannot see reality in any absolute way, we are therefore doomed to an interminable relativism. I have truth that makes sense to me, you have truth that makes sense to you, but nobody's truth is

really accurate in the sense of corresponding to what is really “out there.” Any claims to apprehending the features of the actual world that could function as independent norms for epistemology are in fact just a human construction, buttressed by convention. Even more sinister, they are further the means by which we attempt to legitimate our self-serving bids for power. Under such a schema, the assumption is that what one believes is irrelevant, along with the search for truth itself.

Sadly, too many Christians have adopted such a stance with regard to truth,<sup>11</sup> accepting the correspondence theory of truth and denying the truth-telling capacity of the Bible or the church since we humans fail to attain the fullness of truth by that standard. In the Enlightenment, the bar for what can be considered as accurate knowledge was set too high, but we are not forced to accept the Enlightenment’s definitions. As we observed in chapter two, the Bible offers at least one other way to construe the nature of truth, which has nothing to do with the correspondence theory. A proper Christian understanding of truth in postmodernity does not deny that truth exists; instead, it accepts that truth is different than we previously thought.<sup>12</sup>

## **II. Conclusion**

In every age, the church must walk the thin line that divides separation from the culture and capitulation to the culture. On one side of the line, the church is too distant from the culture and refuses to embrace the truth that exists in it; she denounces the evils of society and demonstrates the difference demanded by adherence to the gospel message. On the other side of the line, the church has lost her identity; in affirming everything that the culture does and says, she is only a mirror that reflects back what the culture projects. In such a case, the church has nothing unique to offer to the culture, no message that is not already present, and it becomes simply one more voice reinforcing the status quo.

Not everything postmodern is an attack of Satan; neither is it all a movement of God. Like everything else in the world, it is a mixture of truth and lie, good and evil, right and wrong. But for the church, the item of importance is that postmodernism is a new development and as such demands a response from the church. In a period of cultural transition, when the multitudes are searching for what cannot be found in humanity, when there is unprecedented openness to questions about spirituality and about God, when societal relationships are being reevaluated and reformed, the church stands at the threshold of a great opportunity to rise up and become a significant force for the kingdom of God. But that can only happen if the church models non-manipulative love, acknowledges its finite limitations, and communicates the message of the gospel in ways that are readily understandable by postmoderns. Neither a rigid adherence to modernism or an embrace of postmodernism that compromises the gospel is acceptable. To be God's church in this place and at this time requires the emergence of a faith that is truly postmodern, yet truly faithful to scripture—a Christian postmodernism.

## ENDNOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> In one of my classes during the fall of 2000, we identified postmodern elements in various facets of popular culture. In addition to the usual suspects of literature, music, and movies, we discerned as postmodern WWF wrestling, body piercing, video games, and consumerism.

<sup>2</sup> Kant wrote in the November 1784 edition of the German periodical, *Berlinische Monatschrift*, a treatise in response to the question, *Was ist Aufklärung?*, in which he opined: "Enlightenment is man's release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man's inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. *Sapere aude!* ['Dare to know!'] 'Have courage to use your own reason!'—that is the motto of enlightenment." Immanuel Kant, "What is Enlightenment?" in *The Portable Enlightenment Reader*, ed. Isaac Kramnick, Viking Portable Library Series (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, "Note on the Meaning of 'Post-'" in *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. Thomas Docherty (New York: Columbia U., 1993), 48. It is ironic (undoubtedly intentionally so) that Lyotard notes the shared attitude of breaking with tradition that modernism and postmodernism hold in common, yet condemns the "ruptures" of modernity as "repressive." Surely, Lyotard is also aware that it was the greatest advocates of Reason, the French Revolutionaries, that first declared their time so world-shattering that they reset the calendar to the year zero. While trumpeting the "completely new," he knowingly continues in the tradition of modernity, winking at us all the while.

<sup>4</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Theory and History of Literature Series, vol. 10 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

<sup>5</sup> Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson, "Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism," in *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. Thomas Docherty (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 417.

<sup>6</sup> Merold Westphal, *Suspicion & Faith: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), 225-228.

<sup>7</sup> Stuart Sim, "Postmodernism and Philosophy," in *The Routledge Critical Dictionary of Postmodern Thought*, ed. Stuart Sim (New York: Routledge, 1999), 14.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen D. Moore, *Poststructuralism and the New Testament: Derrida and Foucault at the Foot of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 50.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 111-112.

<sup>10</sup> Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000), 161-162.

<sup>11</sup> See *ibid.*, 139-160.

<sup>12</sup> J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth is Stranger than it Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1995), 32-33.

## SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barna, George. *The Index of Leading Spiritual Indicators*. Dallas: Word, 1996.
- Beaudoin, Tom. *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998.
- Boa, Kenneth D., and Robert M. Bowman, Jr. *An Unchanging Faith in a Changing World: Understanding and Responding to Critical Issues that Christians Face Today*. Nashville: Nelson, 1997.
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together*. Trans. John W. Doberstein, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1954.
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *The Cost of Discipleship*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Macmillan, 1959.
- Bork, Robert H. *Slouching Towards Gomorrah: Modern Liberalism and American Decline*. New York: ReganBooks, 1996.
- Bregman, Lucy. "Psychotherapies." In *Spirituality and the Secular Quest*, ed. Peter H. Van Ness, vol. 22 of *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest*, ed. Ewert Cousins. New York: Crossroad, 1996.
- Carter, Stephen L. *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion*. New York: Basic Books, 1993.
- Coppedge, Allan. *The Roles of God*. Wilmore, KY: Barnabas Foundation, n.d.
- Descartes, René. *Discourse on Method and First Meditations on Philosophy*. Trans. Donald A. Cress, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998.
- Dickens, Charles. *Hard Times*. Ed. George Ford and Sylvère Monod. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Norton, 1990.
- Docherty, Thomas, ed. *Postmodernism: A Reader*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.
- Dreyfus, Hubert L., and Paul Rabinow. *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.
- Durant, Will, and Ariel Durant. *The Age of Reason Begins*. New York: MJF Books, 1961.
- Fee, Gordon D., and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.

- Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993.
- Freese, Peter. "Invented Religions as Sense-Making Systems in Kurt Vonnegut's Novels." In *Religion and Philosophy in the United States of America: Proceedings of the German-American Conference at Paderborn, July 29-August 1, 1986*. 2 vols., ed. Peter Freese. Essen, Germany: Verlag Die Blaue Eule, 1987, 1:215\*\*.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*, ed. and trans. Garrett Barden and John Cumming. New York: Crossroads, 1975.
- Gärtner, Bertil. *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation*. Acta Seminarii Newtestamentici Upsaliensis, no. 21. Trans. Carolyn Hannay King. Uppsala, Sweden: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1955.
- Geffré, Claude, and Jean-Pierre Jossua, eds. *The Debate on Modernity*. London: SCM: 1992.
- Gergen, Kenneth J. *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life*. New York: Basic Books, 1991.
- Gill, David W. J. "Achaia." In *Graeco-Roman Setting*. Vol. 2 of *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting*, ed. David W. J. Gill and Conrad Gempf. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994.
- Grenz, Stanley J. *A Primer on Postmodernism*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996.
- Grenz, Stanley J., and Roger E. Olson. *Twentieth Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1992.
- Groothuis, Douglas. *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Trans. Frederick Lawrence. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987.
- Hartnack, Justus. *Kant's Theory of Knowledge*. Trans. M. Holmes Hartshorne. New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1967.
- Houston, James M. "Spiritual Life Today: An Appropriate Spirituality for a Postmodern World." In *The Gospel in the Modern World: A Tribute to John Stott*. Ed. Martyn Eden and David F. Wells. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1991.
- Hunter, James Davison. *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. New York: HarperCollins, 1991.

- Ingraffia, Brian D. *Postmodern Theory and Biblical Theology*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Johnson, Luke Timothy. *The Acts of the Apostles*. Ed. Daniel J. Harrington, Sacra Pagina, no. 5. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992.
- Jost, Walter, and Michael J. Hyde, eds. *Rhetoric and Hermeneutics in Our Time: A Reader*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997.
- Kagan, Donald, et al. *The Western Heritage*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., New York: Macmillan, 1983.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Kistemaker, Simon J. *Acts*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990.
- Kramnick, Isaac, ed. *The Portable Enlightenment Reader*. Viking Portable Library. New York: Penguin Books, 1995.
- Kraus, Richard. *Leisure in a Changing America: Multicultural Perspectives*. New York: Macmillan, 1994.
- Lasch, Christopher. *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*. New York: Norton, 1979.
- Lewis, Brian. "Individual Searches Lead to Faith: Unitarian Universalists are Spreading the Word More." *Lexington (Kentucky) Herald-Leader*, 27 Nov. 1999, C10.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. *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.
- MacCannell, Dean. *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*. New York: Schocken Books, 1976.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984.
- McConnell, Theodore A. *The Shattered Self: The Psychological and Religious Search for Selfhood*. Philadelphia: Pilgrim, 1971.
- McCormick, Kathryn, and Lindsay Hardin Freeman. "Teleconference Challenges Church to Broaden its Vision." *Episcopal Life*, Nov. 1999, 37, \*\*.
- Medved, Michael. *Hollywood vs. America*. New York: HarperCollins, 1992.



- Middleton, J. Richard, and Brian J. Walsh. *Truth Is Stranger than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1995.
- Moore, Stephen D. *Poststructuralism and the New Testament: Derrida and Foucault at the Foot of the Cross*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994.
- Murphey, Nancey. *Anglo-American Postmodernity: Philosophical Perspectives on Science, Religion, and Ethics*. Boulder: Westview, 1997.
- Neff, David. "Six Trends Facing Christians: Helpful Insights for Church Leaders." *Leadership* (May 30, 2001): unpaginated. On-line. Available from <http://www.christianitytoday.com/leaders/newsletter/2001/cln10530.html>.
- Neill, Thomas P. *Makers of the Modern Mind*. Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing, 1949.
- Newbigin, Lesslie. *Truth and Authority in Modernity*. Christian Mission and Modern Culture. Valley Forge: Trinity, 1996.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Portable Nietzsche*. Trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann, Viking Portable Library, no. 62. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New York: Penguin Books, 1982.
- Norman, Edward. *Entering the Darkness: Christianity and its Modern Substitutes*. London: SPCK, 1991.
- Oden, Thomas C. *Agenda for Theology: Recovering Christian Roots*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979.
- Patterson, James, and Peter Kim. *The Day America Told the Truth: What People Really Believe about Everything that Really Matters*. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1991.
- Philibert, Michel. "Philosophical Imagination: Paul Ricoeur as the Singer of Ruins." In *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, ed. Lewis Edwin Hahn, The Library of Living Philosophers, vol. 22. Chicago: Open Court, 1995.
- Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. New York: Penguin Books, 1985.
- PwC. "Online Hotel Industry Data Trends and Research—Global Hotel Trends, Global Hotel Data." On-line. Available from [www.lodgingresearch.com](http://www.lodgingresearch.com).
- Ricoeur, Paul. "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as Text." *Social Research* 38 (1971): 529-562.
- Ricoeur, Paul. *Hermeneutics and The Human Sciences*. Ed. John B. Thompson. Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1981.

- Ricoeur, Paul. *Oneself as Another*. Trans. Kathleen Blamey. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- Ricoeur, Paul. *The Ricoeur Reader*. Ed. Mario J. Valdes. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991.
- Ricoeur, Paul. *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*. Trans. R. Czerny, et al. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977.
- Ricoeur, Paul. *Time and Narrative*. Trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer. 3 vols. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.
- Romanowski, William D. *Pop Culture Wars: Religion & the Role of Entertainment in American Life*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1996.
- Roof, Clark Wade. *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of The Baby Boom Generation*. San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1993.
- Rorty, Richard. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979.
- Rosner, Brian S. "Acts and Biblical History." In *The Book of Acts in Its Ancient Literary Setting*, ed. Bruce W. Winter and Andrew D. Clarke. Vol. 1 of *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting*, ed. Bruce W. Winter. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993.
- Schaeffer, Tom. "What's So Bad about Praying for Converts?" *Lexington (Kentucky) Herald-Leader*, 13 Nov. 1999, C10.
- Schneiders, Sandra M. "Spirituality in the Academy." In *Modern Christian Spirituality: Methodological and Historical Essays*, ed. Bradley C. Hanson, American Academy of Religion Modern Christian Spirituality, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham, no. 62. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990, 15-37.
- Silverman, Hugh J. ed., *Gadamer and Hermeneutics*. Continental Philosophy, no. 4. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Sim, Stuart, ed. *The Routledge Critical Dictionary of Postmodern Thought*. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Simon, Paul. "Homeward Bound." *Parsley, Sage, Rosemary, and Thyme* (1966). On-line. Available from The Simon and Garfunkel Lyrics Archive, <http://www.angelfire.com/music/sandglyrics>.
- Simon, Paul. "The Boxer." *Bridge Over Troubled Water* (1970). On-line. Available

from The Simon and Garfunkel Lyrics Archive, <http://www.angelfire.com/music/sandglyrics/bridge.htm>.

- Terkel, Studs. *Race: How Blacks & Whites Think & Feel about the American Obsession*. New York: New Press, 1992.
- Thiselton, Anthony C. *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self: On Meaning, Manipulation and Promise*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995.
- Thiselton, Anthony C. "Truth, *Alētheia*." In *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown. 3 vols. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986, 3:874-902.
- Vanhoozer, Kevin J. "The Reader in New Testament Interpretation." In *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*. Ed. Joel B. Green. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995.
- Vanhoozer, Kevin J. *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Vattimo, Gianni. *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture*. Trans. Jon R. Snyder. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988.
- Verbeek, Theo. "Tradition and Novelty: Descartes and Some Cartesians." In *The Rise of Modern Philosophy: The Tension between the New and Traditional Philosophies from Machiavelli to Leibniz*. Ed. Tom Sorell. Oxford: Clarendon, 1993.
- Ward, Graham, ed. *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader*. Blackwell Readings in Modern Theology, ed. L. Gregory Jones and James J. Buckley, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997.
- Washington, Raleigh, and Glen Kehrein. *Breaking Down Walls: A Model for Reconciliation in an Age of Racial Strife*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1993.
- Wells, David F. *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998.
- Wells, David F. *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993.
- Westphal, Merold, ed. *Postmodern Philosophy and Christian Thought*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1999.

Westphal, Merold. *Suspicion and Faith: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1998.

Williams, David John. *Acts*. NIBC, ed. W. Ward Gasque. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990.

Wright, Linda Raney. *Christianity's Crisis in Evangelism: Going Where the People Are*. Critical Issues, Gresham, OR: Vision House, 1995.

Wuthnow, Robert. *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988.