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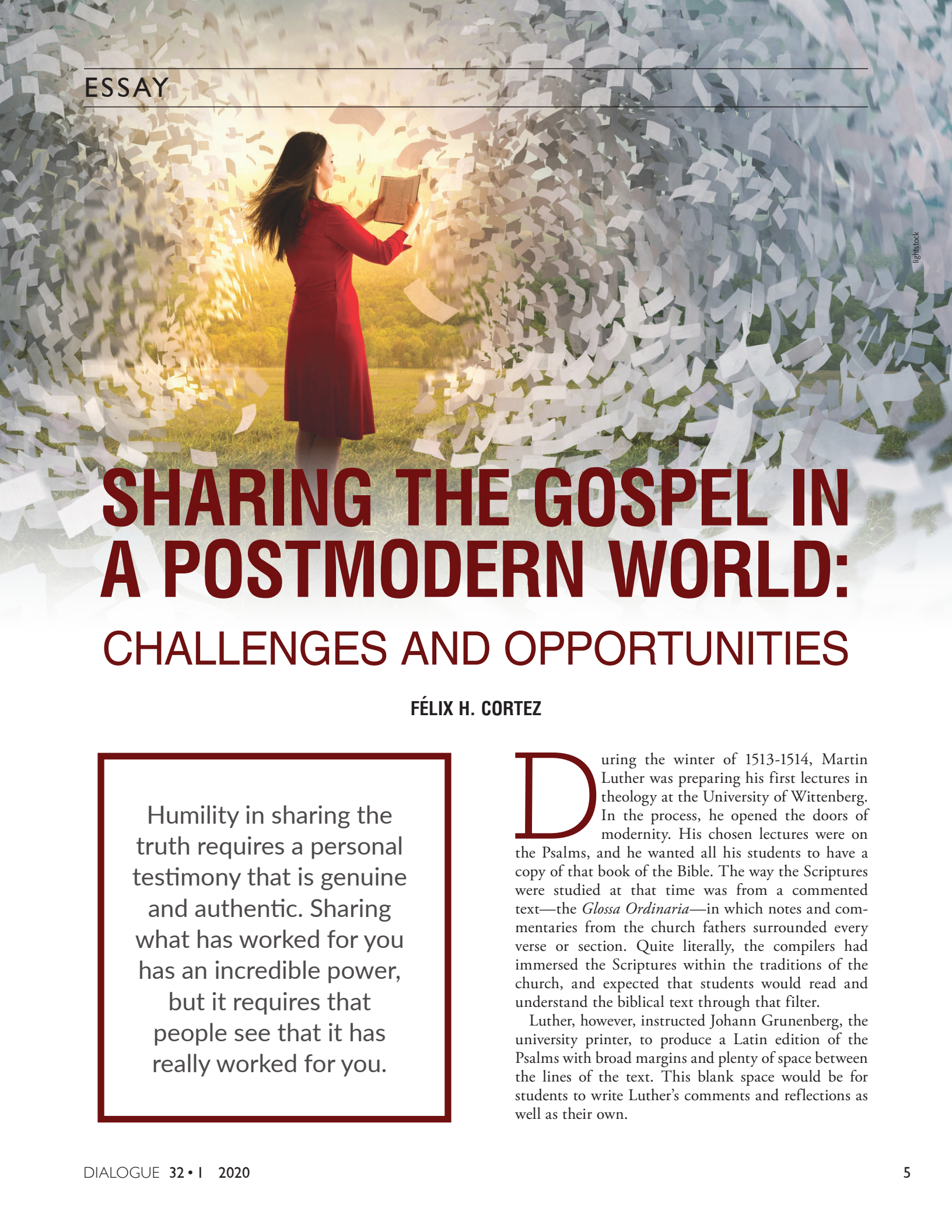
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SHARING THE GOSPEL IN A POSTMODERN WORLD: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

FÉLIX H. CORTEZ

Humility in sharing the truth requires a personal testimony that is genuine and authentic. Sharing what has worked for you has an incredible power, but it requires that people see that it has really worked for you.

During the winter of 1513-1514, Martin Luther was preparing his first lectures in theology at the University of Wittenberg. In the process, he opened the doors of modernity. His chosen lectures were on the Psalms, and he wanted all his students to have a copy of that book of the Bible. The way the Scriptures were studied at that time was from a commented text—the *Glossa Ordinaria*—in which notes and commentaries from the church fathers surrounded every verse or section. Quite literally, the compilers had immersed the Scriptures within the traditions of the church, and expected that students would read and understand the biblical text through that filter.

Luther, however, instructed Johann Grunenberg, the university printer, to produce a Latin edition of the Psalms with broad margins and plenty of space between the lines of the text. This blank space would be for students to write Luther's comments and reflections as well as their own.

Luther's decision heralded a shift in the way Scriptures were read and understood and a crisis of authority. How should the correctness or legitimacy of an interpretation be determined? Where did authority reside? Before the time when modernity broke into the world, one could resolve an argument by appealing to the authority of the ancient sources or tradition.¹ Moderns argued, however, that it was not an agreement with the ancient sources or tradition that legitimized a conclusion, but the method in which the inquiry was done. Conclusions were true if the study was led rationally—that is, scientifically, scholarly, and properly reasoned.

Modernism was optimistic about human destiny. Because it was powered by reason, advocates expected that the scientific revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries would liberate humanity from the darkness of superstition and lay the foundation for progress. Technology would make it possible to control and harness nature for the benefit of humans, producing wealth and raising people's standard of living. Market economy would spur economic growth and provide for social and material needs so people could live truly free and genuinely happy lives.² Similarly, proponents argued, a rational method for the study of the Bible would make it possible to go behind tradition to discover the original historic situations in which biblical documents were written in order to understand the original meaning of the text. A rational study of the Bible would make it possible to arrive at objective truth—a truth no longer marred by tradition or the interests of the hierarchy of the church—and to determine exactly what the Word of God really meant.³

The dream of modernism, however, did not materialize as expected. Science did provide great benefits to humanity but also gave birth to weapons of mass destruction that led to staggering losses in human life in the first and second world wars. Technology raised the standard of living but also made possible the horrors of the Holocaust. The market economy spurred economic growth but also the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Similarly, the historical-critical method—which was the dominant approach of modernism for biblical study—produced mixed results. The original purpose of Luther in stripping the comments and notes of the church fathers from the biblical text was to liberate it from the errors that had accumulated through tradition in order to arrive at the literal, simple sense of Scripture “from which comes power, life, comfort, and instruction.”⁴ Nevertheless, instead of producing the “power, life, comfort, and instruction” Luther envisioned, the scientific study of the Bible undermined the notion that the Bible was inspired by God. Scripture was understood as a human composition and even worse: “a

sloppy, inconsistent, sometimes cynical, and more than occasionally deceitful” human composition.⁵

FROM MODERN TO POSTMODERN HERMENEUTICS

The failure of reason and science to prevent the great social, political, and economic tragedies of the first half of the 20th century created a backlash against modernism. Postmodernism rose basically as a movement of resistance out of deep distrust of the claims of modernism. Its main objective was to point out that the claims to truth that come from the modern worldview were in fact not legitimate.⁶

Cornell West in lectures at Yale identified three important characteristics of postmodernism: it is anti-foundational, antitotalizing, and demystifying.⁷ Thus, against the claims of modernism, postmodern thinkers point out (1) that there is not, and there cannot be, an unassailable starting point to establish truth; (2) any theory that claims to account for everything is suppressing examples or applying warped criteria; and finally, (3) any claim based upon assumptions that are “natural” or “objective” in fact conceals ideological agendas.⁸

Let us look a little closer at these three characteristics.

1. THE PROBLEM WITH FOUNDATIONS

Philosophical tradition has claimed that people need to have some undoubtable, unshakeable truth with which to back up their arguments. Postmodernists do not doubt the existence of starting points (or foundations), but they will point out that choosing one is always problematic. The problem is that philosophical foundations are human constructions, which implies two shortcomings. The first is that human perception is fallible.⁹ Second, philosophical foundations are communicated through words and symbols, but words and symbols are ambiguous. So, philosophical foundations depend on imperfect perception and are communicated through ambiguous means.¹⁰

2. THE PROBLEM WITH TOTALITIES

A claim to truth is also an assertion about a totality. This totality may be the universe, a set of things, or even the individual. The problem with totalities is that they differentiate members from non-members.¹¹ Who decides what should be included and what should not? When a person makes an assertion about patriotic people, for example, who gets to say who is patriotic and who is not?

3. THE PROBLEM WITH OBJECTIVITY

Postmodernists will point out that an assertion of inclusion or exclusion from a totality, an assertion of truth,

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or any intellectual discourse is not disinterested or pure. Wittingly or unwittingly, group interests, political agendas, other motives—or simply honest beliefs and preconceptions—color the way we see things. Our perception is never raw. Human perception is always filtered.¹²

In summary, we could say that postmoderns have a deep distrust of modernistic claims to objective truth.

POSTMODERNS' DEEP DISTRUST OF CHRISTIANITY

Postmoderns also have a deep distrust of Christianity's claim to own the truth about God. Note, for example, the list of terms that young Americans thought more accurately described Christians (with the percent who affirmed their accuracy): anti-homosexual (91 percent), judgmental (87 percent), hypocritical (85 percent), old-fashioned (78 percent), too involved in politics (75 percent), out of touch with reality (72 percent), insensitive to others (70 percent), boring (68 percent), not accepting of other faiths (64 percent), confusing (61 percent).¹³ James Emery White explains, "we are perceived to be overly entangled with law and politics, filled with hateful aggression, and consumed with greed."¹⁴

The conundrum that postmodernism poses to the Christian message is this: "How do you promote the Christian message to someone who is not interested, or, even worse, someone who is deeply disappointed with Christianity?" The feeling of postmoderns about Christianity is that they have been there, done that, and don't want any more of that.

SHARING THE GOSPEL IN A POSTMODERN AGE

What lessons can we gather from this analysis? It may be noted that postmodernism did not attempt to build a new metanarrative alternative or a new truth to answer the claims of modernism. Postmodernism just wanted to humble modernism, to show its fallibility without attempting to replace it.

There was hubris, some arrogance in the modernist supposition. The idea was that things are a certain way,

and if you don't agree with me, you are unreasonable, a retrograde. Modernity is a totalitarian project, and thus, "otherness" is shunned or eliminated. Modernity is coercive. Postmodernists, on the contrary, value humility. They are willing to hear those who recognize their own fallibility. The truth is that the Bible agrees with this foundational position of postmodernism. Humanity is fallible. Only God is perfect. "Thus says the Lord: Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord. They shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes. They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land. Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord" (Jeremiah 17:5–7, NRSV).

We need to ask ourselves this question: Are we totalitarian, arrogant, and coercive in the way we present the gospel? Have we come to think of our relationship to God in exclusive ways? Think about concepts such as "remnant" and "people of God." What do they mean? What does it mean to be part of the people of God? I think that by "remnant" or "people of God," the Bible means we are "servants" who serve under Jesus Christ. God is the greatest Servant of all, and we are learning to collaborate with Him. He is God of all, not exclusive to us. "Are not you Israelites the same to me as the Cushites?" declares the Lord. "Did I not bring Israel up from Egypt, the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?" (Amos 9:7, NIV).

Humility is also expressed in our ability to listen. There is something incredibly magical about listening. It elevates others and humbles us. Jesus at the well in Samaria, for example, began asking for a favor: "Give me a drink" (John 4:7, NRSV). We shouldn't engage the world as the wisest, or as saviors: after all, Jesus came first as a servant.

Humility embraces diversity. We need to be inclusive. Both Jesus' disciples and Yahweh's prophets and servants were diverse. Biblical literature is also diverse. The gospel needs to be told in thousands of different personal stories.

Diversity is not restricted to people, it has to do as well with the texts we study. We need to explore the many passages of the Bible that have been ignored. We need to give real value to "all" the witness of Scripture.

Humility also means to acknowledge our ignorance. We need to recognize that there are questions for which we have no answers and texts whose interpretation is not completely clear to us. We need to remind ourselves that we are immersed in an unfinished drama. Not every point has been made, nor every answer has been given. Those difficult questions and passages open the arena for a new act of God.¹⁵


Finally, humility in sharing our message requires a personal testimony that is genuine and authentic. Sharing what has worked for you has an incredible power, but it requires that people see that it has really worked for you. Let me illustrate it with a personal story. I am deeply disappointed with my current TV system. I have a Smart TV that is connected to a cable system, Netflix, Apple TV, the Internet, and a surround sound system, each with its remote control. The system is cumbersome and confusing, but I am still able to use it. For my mother, however, there were simply too many controls and too many buttons. Repeated failure led her to disappointment and complete frustration. She gave up on it altogether and depended on others to manage the powerful but unwieldy system.

One day, I saw a beautiful cutting-edge Smart TV that was controlled by voice. All the systems were connected to it by one remote control that operated with spoken commands (something like Siri, Alexa, or Google assistant). After I tried it in a store, I was convinced that this was what my mother needed, and I was excited to tell her the good news.

She came to the store with me the next day, but she was very skeptical. She did not want to spend any more money on TVs, since she already had three. The sales associate began demonstrating the marvelous things that the TV did with voice commands about the weather and questions from the Internet, YouTube videos, etc.

My mother was unmoved. She was not interested in anything the sales associate had demonstrated for her. So, I asked the sales agent to let me try to persuade her. I gave the control to my mother and asked her to request the TV to find YouTube videos of the King's Heralds. Her eyes opened noticeably when the TV did what she asked. Then she asked it to find sermons of her favorite pastors, songs from the church hymnal, etc.

Finally, I offered the clinching argument. "Ask the TV to find sermons by your grandson," I suggested. (She likes to watch my son's sermons on YouTube.) She did, and when the TV showed the sermons, she bought it on the spot. She has greatly enjoyed using that TV. (Later, her pastor told me that she had suggested that he buy one for himself!) Personal experience results in authentic sharing with others.

Humility is the prerequisite to a significant dialogue in a postmodern context. It has the ability to transform the dialogue from a debate between opposing parties into a party of fellow travelers in the search for meaning. The truths we find and share in that common endeavor will not be suspect as biased assertions to the benefit of power groups under the cloak of truth, but embraced as common solutions to the problems we face. 

This article contains material from Félix H. Cortez, "The Psalm 23 Through Postmodern Eyes: Insights and Lessons for Missiologists." *Revisiting Postmodernism: An Old Debate on a New Era*. In Bruce L. Bauer and Kleber O. Gonçalves, eds. (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Department of World Mission, 2013): 13:110–117.

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9. E.g., how do we account for the problems of optical illusions and false memories?
10. This problem is explored in the film *Inception*, which was written, co-produced and directed by Christopher Nolan. See David Kyle Johnson, ed., *Inception and Philosophy: Because It's Never Just a Dream*, Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture Series No. 26 (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley and Sons, 2012).
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