

# Theological Equipping Class

## *The Church and Postmodernism*

November 21, 2021

Why are we studying this?

- *men who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do...* (1 Chronicles 12:32)

Four questions to answer today:

1. What is postmodernism?
2. What is the history of postmodernism?
3. How has postmodernism affected the church?
4. How should the church respond to postmodernism?

### **What is Postmodernism?**

A difficult concept to define!

"Postmodernism is difficult to define, perhaps by design. It represents a set of ideas and modes of thought that came together in response to specific historical conditions, including the cultural impact of the World Wars and how these ended, widespread disillusionment with Marxism, the waning credibility of religious worldviews in post-industrial settings, and the rapid advance of technology. It is probably most useful to understand postmodernism as a rejection of both *modernism* – an intellectual movement that predominated through the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth – and *modernity* – the epoch known as the Modern period, which began after the end of the Middle Ages and in which we (probably) still live. This new kind of radical skepticism to the very possibility of obtaining objective knowledge has since rippled outward from the academy, to challenge our social, cultural, and political thinking in intentionally disruptive ways." (Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay, "Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity")

"[Postmodernism is] a late 20<sup>th</sup>-century movement characterized by broad skepticism, subjectivism, or relativism, a general suspicion of reason; and an acute sensitivity to the role of ideology in asserting and maintaining political and economic power." (Encyclopedia Britannica)

## Characteristics|Family Traits

1. Profound skepticism about whether truth or objective knowledge is obtainable.
2. A lingering suspicion of metanarratives (overarching stories that explain everything else).  

Jean-François Lyotard (1924–1998) “incredulity toward metanarratives.”
3. The belief that all cultures and societies create systems of power which determine what can be known and how.  

the marginalization of the center and the re-centering of the marginalized
4. The rejection or blurring of boundaries.  

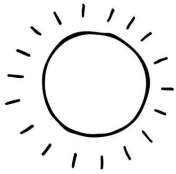
"Almost every socially significant category has been intentionally complicated and problematized by postmodern Theorists in order to deny such categories any objective validity and disrupt the systems of power that might exist across them." (Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay)
5. The reinterpretation & meaning of language.
6. Cultural relativism.
7. The rejection of the universal and the individual.
8. The goal of destruction.

## **The History of Postmodernism**

Epistemology: How do you know what you know?

4 Historic Sources of Authority

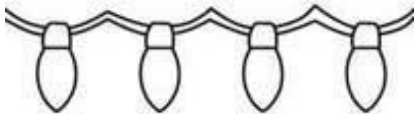
***Revelation***



***Reason***

***Feelings/experience***

***Tradition***



Middle Ages: subversion of revelation...exaltation of tradition

Reformation: subordination of tradition to revelation [unintended consequence of devaluing tradition]

Enlightenment/modernity:

- Death of revelation
- Rejection of external authorities (revelation and tradition)
- Rejection of the supernatural

- Inherent optimism
- Advances in sciences and technology

Early 20<sup>th</sup> century: the death of optimism

Factors: wars, great depression, etc.

### The birth of postmodernism

"there are no facts, only interpretations" (Nietzsche, the patron saint of postmodernism)

1950s and 60s

- Michel Foucault (1926–1984)
- Jacques Derrida (1930–2004)
- Jean-Francois Lyotard (1924-1998)

Mankind is estranged... modernity has failed us!

"To diagnose contemporary alienation they produced an historical analysis of how human society and the human self develop over time, in order to see how and why modern civilization had gone wrong. What was needed, it seemed, was a return to the true, or authentic, or free, or integrated human self as the center of lived experience." (Lawrence Cahoon)

The problem is external and the solution is internal – an inversion of the gospel

From the Industrial Age to the Information Age

Internet, social media and cultural currency/capital

### **Postmodernism and the Church**

A few helpful aspects?

Early 2000s and the "Emergent" Conversation

Proponents: Rob Bell, Brian McLaren, Tony Jones, and Doug Pagitt.

Problematic assertions:

1. The Atonement

“The fact is that the cross isn’t a form of cosmic child abuse – a vengeful Father, punishing his Son for an offence he has not even committed. Understandably, both people inside & outside of the Church have found this twisted version of events morally dubious & a huge barrier to faith. Deeper than that, however, is that such a concept stands in total contradiction to the statement ‘God is love.’ If the cross is a personal act of violence perpetrated by God towards humankind but borne by his Son, then it makes a mockery to Jesus’ own teaching to love your enemies & to refuse to repay evil with evil.” (Steve Chalke)

“I have to say kindly, but as forcefully as I can that to my mind if words mean anything both McLaren and Chalke have largely abandoned the gospel.” (DA Carson)

2. The trinity.

“The Trinity is not wrong but it may not be the only way to understand God.” “I have tried to be clear so many times on this; the Trinity is not something to be believed in, it is an explanation of how God interrelates. The language of 'not believing in something' is far too limited. It is fair to suggest that the third century version of how God relates is not the most accurate in light of what we currently know...I simply suggest that the issues that were in place that caused the concept of the Trinity to be formed are no longer an issue. I am not suggesting a lesser understanding of God, or God not dwelling in Christ Jesus. I am suggesting that we not debate the Trinity – that concept did its job, rather we need to have Christian understanding of God that fits our day as well as the Trinity fit the third century. I am not saying it is wrong, but it is not complete. No view is complete. That is why all belief is progressive.” (Doug Pagitt)

3. The creator/creature distinction.

“The idea that there is a necessary distinction of matter from spirit, or creation from creator, is being reconsidered.” – *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches*, Doug Pagitt

4. The gospel

“We do not think this [the conference and its movement] is about changing your worship service. We do not think this is about...how you structure your staff. This is actually about changing theology. This is about our belief that theology changes. The message of the gospel changes. It’s not just the method that changes.” (Tony Jones)

The role of questions

“What if tomorrow someone digs up definitive proof that Jesus had a real, earthly, biological father named Larry, and archaeologists find Larry’s tomb and do DNA samples and prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that the virgin birth was really just a bit of mythologizing the Gospel writers threw in to appeal to the followers of the Mithra & Dionysian religious cults that were hugely popular at the time of Jesus, whose gods had virgin births?” (Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis*)

## The Decline of the Emergent, but not of Postmodernism

### Evangelical examples of postmodern influence (from "The Evangelical Drift")

- “To me this text means” or “God is telling me this text *actually* means...”
- “Well, that’s just *your* interpretation of Scripture. But I understand it differently.”
- “Church leadership has too long been dominated by rich, white, straight men.”
- “God cares especially about the poor and oppressed (no matter how they became poor or what they will do with the resources given to them).”
- “Same-sex attracted individuals have not felt welcome in the church, so we should not talk so much about how homosexuality is sinful.”
- “Yes, we’re both Christians, but I am a \_\_\_\_\_ Christian, so you don’t *get* where I’m coming from.”
- “Because I fit in the same category as a person or people group that has/have experienced oppression, I am qualified to speak about oppression and am immune to the charge of being an oppressor.”
- “That’s just not my conviction (without biblical reasons that your convictions are right).”

## **A Christian Response to Postmodernism**

### 1. Understand how dangerous this is.

"Postmodern theology applies the hermeneutic of suspicion to Scripture and consequently challenges its inspiration and coherence, endorses an unknowable God, disavows the uniqueness of Jesus’ person and work, and presumes that the Church’s survival depends upon its ability to contextualize Christian dogma and praxis." (Glendon Thompson)

### 2. Repent of where we might have unwittingly imbibed some of these assumptions.

### 3. Be humble.

- Every age has its own outlook. It is specially good at seeing certain truths and specially liable to make certain mistakes. We all, therefore, need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our own period. And that means the old books. All contemporary writers share to some extent the contemporary outlook—even those, like myself, who seem most opposed to it. ... To be sure, the books of the future would be just as good a corrective as the books of the past, but unfortunately we cannot get at them. (CS Lewis)

4. Adapt our evangelistic methods.
5. Be biblically and theologically literate.