

# Postmodernism and the Church

## Part One

There is no doubt postmodernism has blanketed most of America. Deconstructionism and subjective truth have filtered not only into the universities but the general public as well. For example, “My truth is just as right as your truth” is a phrase not uncommonly heard in conversations. How does a Christian navigate this? In order to elucidate this difficult and broad subject, this section will touch on the specifics of postmodernism and develop an incarnational ecclesiology.

The term “postmodern” was used systematically perhaps the first time in 1971 by Ihab Hassan in relation to literature, and subsequently in the 1980s it made its way gradually into the social sciences and hermeneutics.” Stemming from the modernist era, this new philosophical movement has brought new challenges and opportunities for Christianity. Perhaps the best way to delve into this matter is by enumerating the 7 tenets of postmodernism:

1. The objectivity of knowledge is denied...
2. Knowledge is uncertain...
3. All-inclusive systems of explanation, whether metaphysical or historical, are impossible, and the attempt to construct them should be abandoned.
4. The inherent goodness of knowledge is also questioned...
5. Thus, progress is rejected. The history of the twentieth century should make this clear.
6. The model of the isolated individual knower as the ideal has been replaced by community-based knowledge...
7. The scientific method as the epitomization of the objective method of inquiry is called into question<sup>1</sup>

As one can see, postmodernism is essentially a complete rejection of premodern thought and an evolved (or devolved, perhaps) version of modernism. “Devolved” may indeed be the best term since many philosophers do not believe that society is advancing. Especially with the advent of nuclear

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<sup>1</sup> Erickson, Millard. *Postmodernizing the Faith*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 18.

weapons, there is hesitation that a utopia can be reached. “Postmodern thinkers reject theories that human society is advancing toward a glorious future...such views are considered the mythology of Western culture.”<sup>2</sup> Of course from a biblical standpoint, Christians know that human society will not be able to save itself. Jesus Christ, the second person of the Godhead, will come back to earth in the midst of a great turmoil and start his kingly reign in Jerusalem.

Before entering the practical applications of engaging with postmodernism, the essence of postmodernism can be crystallized into the following: “For postmodernists, morality, like religion, is a matter of desire. What I want and what I choose is not only true (for me) but right (for me). That different people want and choose different things means that truth and morality are relative, that “I have a right” to my desires.”<sup>3</sup> This can be seen especially with postmodern religions. “New Age religions, for all of their pagan trappings, have in common the idea that the self is divine, that *you* are God, the creator of your own universe.”<sup>4</sup> Oh, how familiar this sounds to the serpent’s lie to Eve in Genesis chapter 3.

Now for the pragmatic conclusions. It is beneficial to realize Christianity and postmodernism actually have some common ground, in that they both reject enlightenment epistemology. For example, “Postmodernism questions the Enlightenment assumption that knowledge is certain and that the criterion for certainty rests with our human rational capabilities.”<sup>5</sup> Likewise, Christianity certainly does not aver that people’s rational capabilities are the “end-all” when it comes to knowledge and its certainty. Remember what King Solomon wrote in his proverbs: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge” (Prov. 1:7).

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<sup>2</sup> McCallum, Dennis. *The Death of Truth*. (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1996), 56.

<sup>3</sup> Veith, Gene Edward. *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture*. (Wheaton, IL: Good News Publishers, 1994), 195.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>5</sup> Grenz, Stanley. *A Primer on Postmodernism*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 165.

Also, Christians should commend postmodernists' questioning of the Enlightenment assumption that knowledge is objective and hence dispassionate. "Postmodern epistemologists are actually echoing Augustine when they assert that our personal convictions and commitments not only color our search for knowledge but also facilitate the process of understanding."<sup>6</sup> And finally, we can affirm the postmodern rejection of the Enlightenment assumption that knowledge is inherently good. One only needs to think about the knowledge and technology explosion in the past twenty years. For example, the splitting of an atom brings the possibility of good but also offers the opposite. Similarly, Christians believe human problems are more often due to misdirected wills than mere ignorance. There is an enemy who wages war against the saints, not by flesh and blood per say, but definitively through principalities and powers (Eph. 6:12).

It is imperative to state how the 21<sup>st</sup> century church, in general, can interact with and influence postmodern people. There are three threads according to Marva Dawn. First, it is obvious today's society is hungry for meaning. Indeed, when one considers human fears, they are directly related to the quest for meaning. (For instance, we perhaps fear most what will rob us of purpose in our existence.) But what can the church offer? The Truth of God and notice the capitalization of the word "Truth." Truth is not just some objective fact, it is a person. A personal relationship with Jesus Christ gives an incredible amount of meaning to a person.

Secondly, the people of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are longing for belonging and genuine intimacy. Consider Burning Man in the Nevada desert. Thousands of people travel in the dire heat for a spiritual encounter and an accepting community; some even fling themselves into the roaring fire and burn themselves to death. "The most convincing testimony to the Truth of God for postmodern people will be the incarnation of God's love by, and the embodiment of his purposes in, the Christian community

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 166.

of those being formed by the Scriptures to be Church.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the Christian community has the potential to offer belonging and genuine intimacy. That being said, however, it must deliberately be an alternative society of trust and embodied faithfulness to God (and not some materialistic, consumerist, narcissistic group).

Lastly, the church can offer all the current generations hope. “We offer to people in the postmodern world an introduction to the God who loves them and wants to reconcile them to himself. We tell them the story of a faithful, promising God who demonstrated his devotion by always remembering his covenant with Israel.”<sup>8</sup> Not only that, but consider the book of Revelation. Jesus will come back to earth and reign over the nations. Furthermore, God will live among his people and there will be an incredibly beautiful city which will have a tree whose leaves will bring healing. No more crying and no more pain - let this be everyone’s hope!

## **Part Two**

What is “the truth” in today’s postmodern, secularized world? In current decades it seems subjectivism has had the upper hand (i.e. that truth is not absolute), but a better question to commence this section is: “Who is the truth?” Jesus in John 14:6 says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” This may boggle one’s mind, but truth is actually a person who delivered - and still delivers! - people from spiritual poverty and oppression through the seeds of the gospel (the ‘Good, Good News’ indeed!).

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<sup>7</sup> Dawn, Marva. *A Royal “Waste” of Time: The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 54.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 52.

Once a person understands that truth about the Truth, then the next question becomes: 2,000 years later, how can that same gospel be effectively ministered to the people around us?

Music can be a powerful tool to bring the fruit of healing, grace, and justice. That being said, it is a challenge for music ministers to sow the gospel seeds and then bear appropriate fruit for their context. Too many times we take our own preconceived genus of Christianity, preserved in a tightly-shaped theological flower pot, and try to transplant it somewhere. On the other hand, “What we have to do is to break the flower pot, take out the seed of the Gospel, sow it in our own cultural soil, and let our own version of Christianity grow.”<sup>9</sup> In other words then, we must decontextualize previous contextualizations of the gospel and then recontextualize them. Once we accomplish this, we are beginning to develop an incarnational theology and ecclesiology.

David Dargie provides a good example of incarnational theology. He spent years giving the Xhosa people in South Africa a voice. After decades of insidious segregation and degradation of life, the Xhosa began to “have pride in themselves”<sup>10</sup> through the ministry of Dargie. He started to incorporate their instruments, fascinating music, and theology into worship services; he even began a series of church music composition workshops around Southern Africa to give more affirmation to this people group. But back to the idea of incarnation: it is safe to say Dargie evidently had an incarnational theology. He realized that just as Jesus was enfleshed here on earth 2,000 years ago – and found value and dignity in all the messy, broken aspects of life – the Xhosa people could enflesh the gospel effectively in their own way amidst the horrible political morass in South Africa. In fact, doing so

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Paul-Gordon Chandler, *God’s Global Mosaic: What We Can Learn from Christians around the World* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1997), 16.

<sup>10</sup> One of David Dargie’s own quotes was “Unless people have a pride in themselves, how are they to liberate themselves?” It comes from his “African Church Music and Liberation,” in *Papers Presented at the Third Symposium on Ethnomusicology*, ed. Andrew Tracey (Durban: University of Natal, September 16-19, 1982), 11.

results in liberation. “Making the incarnation a vital reality for a particular cultural perspective...is the work of liberation.”<sup>11</sup>

Lastly, living out an incarnational theology means “people will get to experience Jesus on the *inside* of their culture (meaning systems) and their lives because of our embodying the gospel in an incarnationally appropriate way.”<sup>12</sup> This incarnational theology is absolutely critical to grasp because Christianity is losing its efficacy in America. There are many reasons for this, but my biggest proposition is that postmodernism has eroded meaning and purpose in people’s lives. “After the breakdown of the modern system of meaning, however, purpose is not easily found. Certainly it is not easily found in traditional religions. The increase in curiosity about religion is accompanied by a marked decrease in those very churches that were formerly the cultic bulwarks of our culture.”<sup>13</sup>

To conclude, the twenty-first century church has approached a daunting task. Besides all the myriad issues affecting the church, now it must directly interact with postmodernism. Laypeople and clergy members need to “learn the language” of this philosophical movement and be able to minister to our globalized postmodern society. According to Dawn, the Church can offer our postmodern world meaning, belonging, genuine intimacy, and hope. Most importantly, however, we must live out an incarnational theology. Indeed, there are “difficult days for the church. We are incited on a journey, to take our harps from the trees and sing the Lord’s song in a strange land. The road ahead will change us profoundly. But only by traveling that road will we discover that the Lord redeems his people and his world in the midst of changing times.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Hawn, Michael. *Gather into One: Praying and Singing Globally*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), 146.

<sup>12</sup> Hirsch, Alan and Michael Frost. *The Shaping of Things to Come, Revised and Updated Edition*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2013), 59.

<sup>13</sup> Hunsberger, George and Craig Van Gelder. *The Church between Gospel and Culture*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 212.

<sup>14</sup> Roxburgh, Alan. *Reaching a New Generation: Strategies for Tomorrow’s Church*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 130.

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