

THE
DISCIPLESHIP
PLACE

Communicating the Gospel in a
Pluralistic World



SESSION 3

The Influence of Postmodernity
on Religious Pluralism

NOTICE TO CLT PARTICIPANTS AND EDUCATORS

This is a contract. By using these materials you accept all the terms and conditions of this Agreement. This Agreement covers all Leader's Guides, Student Guides, and instructional resources included in the Continuing Lay Training (CLT) website.

Upon your acceptance of this Agreement, Continuing Lay Training grants to you a nonexclusive license to use these curricular materials provided that you agree to the following:

1. USE OF THE MODULES.

- You may distribute educational materials in electronic form to students or other educational providers.
- You may make and distribute electronic or paper copies to students for the purpose of instruction, as long as each copy contains this Agreement and the same copyright and other proprietary notices pertaining to the Module. If you download the educational materials from the Internet or similar online source, you must include the CLT notice for the Module with any online distribution and on any media you distribute that includes the educational content.
- You may translate, adapt, and/or modify the examples and instructional resources for the purpose of making the instruction culturally relevant to your students. However, you must agree that you will not sell these modified materials without express, written permission from CLT.

2. COPYRIGHT.

The material is owned by CLT and is protected by United States Copyright Law and International Treaty provisions. Except as stated above, this Agreement does not grant you any intellectual property rights in the Module.

3. RESTRICTIONS.

- You may not sell copies of these educational materials in any form except to recover the minimum reproduction cost of electronic media or photocopy expense.
- You may not modify the wording or original intent of the educational material for commercial use.

THANK YOU

Continuing Lay Training would like to thank Clergy Development for granting permission to modify and adapt their course of study materials for our educational purposes. Their willingness to partner with us is sincerely appreciated.

The Influence of Postmodernity on Religious Pluralism

SESSION OVERVIEW

A Definition

Characteristics of Postmodernity as They Affect Religious Pluralism

Postmodern Implications for Religious Pluralism

The Tower of Babel: Modernity Built the Tower

Application

Exam

Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant

LEARNER OBJECTIVES

At the end of this session, you should:

- understand some of the reasons we speak of postmodernity
- understand and be able to discuss the crisis of modernity that gave rise to postmodernity
- understand the main characteristics of postmodernity that relate to religious pluralism
- understand why respect for the many religious narratives is so important in a postmodern world
- understand why postmodernity is more favorable to the role of religion in human life than was modernity
- begin to see how Wesleyan theology is well positioned for Christian mission and service in a postmodern age

The Influence of Postmodernity on Religious Pluralism

INTRODUCTION

Prince Albert of England organized the Crystal Palace Exhibition in 1851 in Hyde Park. His public speech on the opening day voiced the modern confidence in human progress through the use of reason. “Nobody who has paid any attention to the peculiar features of our present era will doubt for a moment that we are living at a period of most wonderful transition, which tends rapidly to accomplish that great end to which indeed all history points—the realization of the unity of mankind.” Prince Albert’s words identified the achievements of the 19th century as the zenith of human reason and progress.

Quoted in J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, Truth Is Stranger than It Used to Be (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 18-19.

One of the most intriguing features of the study of history is the confluence of factors that either give birth to an era or compose its obituary. As the pieces of a new era fall into place, the foundations of the old one begin to shake. What was once held to be so obvious and permanent now causes persons to ask, “How could they ever have believed that?” Often, the question is being asked long before its full importance is confronted. Some day, if the pattern persists, someone will ask the same question of our own era. Many people believe we are now passing from one major historical era to another, from modernity to postmodernity. Others disagree, saying we are just observing major adjustments in modernity. The disagreement is not surprising. In the early dawn of a new day two persons looking at the same object will often disagree over its identity.

In this session, we have no interest in debating whether or not we should call our current situation postmodern. At least for convenience sake, we will use the language. This much is certain: the features usually associated with postmodernity are noticeably different from the features of modernity we observed in the previous session. In noticeable ways, they constitute a revolt against some of modernity’s central tenets. An era does not just simply evaporate, immediately to be replaced by another. In important ways it continues to influence and shape its successor. In fact, at their beginnings and endings eras overlap. The new age may in fact be budding even as the old one appears to be humming along on all cylinders. It is also the case that eras can exist parallel to each other, even in the same nation; i.e., a population does not move *en masse* from one era to another. Even today, there exists a “Flat Earth Society” which invites us to join.

We should also note that in much of the media and secular higher education, a bias against religion that is more modern than postmodern still exists. Those of us who were born and educated in the atmosphere of modernity are more noticeably shaped by the experience than are today's university students. The truth is that when discussing postmodernity, some of us sound more as though we are visiting someone else's home than that we are describing a house in which we live. This is probably inevitable. I did not live through the Great Depression. But a friend of mine did. The experience has shaped his spending habits in ways that seem strange to me. Maybe many of us will identify with Brian McLaren's description of himself as one who is migrating. We can also agree with his insistence that all of us who want to serve the gospel of Jesus Christ—those who already live in the house of postmodernity, and those who are still trying to find the door—have a responsibility to be informed and conversant.

A full-scale discussion of postmodernity is certainly beyond the range of this session. The books in the bibliography can provide a much broader introduction. In this session we will have to limit discussion to the features of postmodernity that bear directly on religious pluralism and announcing the gospel of God. Dr. Truesdale writes, "Permit me to state my own conviction with reference to postmodernity. I believe the postmodern era will be more hospitable to religion than was modernity. This is a time ripe with opportunity, not a time for lamenting the passing of an era. We should be characterized by eagerness and wide-eyed anticipation over what the Holy Spirit is going to do through the Church of our Lord. Many of modernity's tenets that counted against religion are now being radically challenged, and are being replaced by an openness much more conducive to religion. "How much space does the Church need?" asked Dietrich Bonhoeffer as he was being trailed by the Nazis. "Only as much space as it takes to bear witness to the gospel of God."

The openness to religion we will describe here is tailor-made for the Wesleyan tradition. That tradition trusts the success of the gospel wholly to the persuasive work of the Holy Ghost, and not at all to either human or divine coercion, whether covert or overt. The apostle Paul's stated versatility in the service of the gospel can serve as our model (1 Cor. 9:19-23).

A DEFINITION



NOTES

It would be good if we could begin with a universally agreed-upon definition of postmodernity. For numerous reasons, no such definition exists. Postmodern remains a debated concept, fairly undefined word. The first use of the term postmodern was by Federico de Osnis in a Spanish essay in 1934. It was introduced more broadly into the English-speaking world by historian Arnold Toynbee in 1954. Despite its wide use there is no consensus regarding what postmodernism is. One reason for the absence of a universally agreed-upon definition is that the contours of postmodernity are still emerging. It is probably still in its infancy. Brian McLaren suggests that one good way to begin to understand postmodernity is to write the word post in front of each of the 10 characteristics of modernity (identified in Session 2).

The early stages of an era are marked by stating what was wrong with the previous one. It takes time for a new vision to be proposed. Given the character of postmodernity as it appears so far, the notion of a monolithic vision or philosophy should not be expected. Attaching such an expectation to postmodernity would be self-contradictory. Its profile is far more pluralistic.

BORN IN CRISIS

Postmodernity was born because of a *severe crises* in modernity that broke out along broad fronts. This began to occur as early as the late 18th- and early 19th-century Romantic Movement, which revolted against what romanticists saw as the Enlightenment's overemphasis on reason. Simply put, postmoderns believe modernity claimed entirely too much for itself—for reason, for the limits of knowledge and what is worth knowing, for the objectivity of reason, for the rational organization of society, the autonomous self, and so forth. Postmodernists say modernity claimed to know far more than it could support, and it artificially limited what we can and should know. Simply stated, the charge is that modernity grossly overreached, and its overreach has finally caught up with it.

Let us look at some of the features of this historical shift, particularly as it affects religious pluralism. A reminder: postmodernity is more diverse and more complex than this brief discussion reveals.

NOTES**SOURCES OF THE CRISIS IN MODERNITY**

The crises that jolted modernity have many sources. One was the growing recognition of humankind's ability to abuse the very reason that was supposed to have been an impartial liberator. For example, while the use of reason in the industrial revolution yielded many remarkable results, its success often came at the expense of workers—men, women, and children—who were reduced to the level of expendable commodities.

The price of success was often sprawling cities that bred poverty, robber barons who gathered great wealth and power with disregard for justice and community, polluted atmosphere, rivers, and drinking water, ravaged natural resources, and a contemptuous exploitation of non-Western cultures.

Another source of the crisis was the occurrence of two world wars in half a century, which shook confidence in reason and progress. Reason turned out to be not nearly so objective as its champions had claimed, nor could it protect itself against those who reason. The two wars revealed just how grotesquely reason can be placed in the service of evil, used to destroy social institutions, and crush the human spirit. The world watched as reason was pressed to develop machines for killing combatants and civilians in magnitudes never before witnessed. The wars reduced Europe—the jewel of the Enlightenment—to mechanized savagery and destruction. Rather than enlightened reason and a secular salvation ruling the world, nations sought their own colonial and militaristic interests, disregarding the well-being of other and weaker states. The naked reality stands: no dimension of the human spirit is immune to corruption and the ravages of original sin.

Back in 1949, in his famous novel, *1984*, George Orwell made this point in secular language. The sciences were supposed to be objective, free of subjectivity, and our pioneer guide to the Promised Land. We now know that while they can be enormously beneficial, the sciences can just as easily be pressed into the hire of greed, national interests, and Wall Street. Original sin is barred by no human door. Objective reason as touted by the Enlightenment proved to be a myth. History and postmodern thinkers have exploded it. Objectivity closely examined will usually, if not always, reveal the subjectivity of the person or culture doing the reasoning. Many other factors we can't explore here contributed to the crisis in modernity and to the emergence of Postmodernity. In the sciences themselves, Einstein's theory of relativity, and subsequent developments in physics, shook the mechanistic worldview set forth by Newtonian physics. Other contributors we could consider are the end

**NOTES**

of European colonialism; the assertion of the values of non-Western cultures; developments in the nature of language and its relationship to human meaning; the accelerated attractiveness of Eastern religions for Westerners; and revisions of modernity's understanding of the self. Suspicions regarding modernity's hallmark claims emerged from numerous quarters: psychology, religion, the cinema, philosophy, art, architecture, music, etc.

CHARACTERISTICS OF POSTMODERNITY AS THEY AFFECT RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

NOTES

Brian McLaren says it is possible to describe the broad social characteristics of postmodernity without having to go too deeply into postmodern philosophy. We will follow his lead. In this session we will draw upon the substance of postmodernity without trying to wade through the names and thought of postmodern thinkers. Among the numerous characteristics of postmodernity, let's discuss three that bear most directly on religious pluralism.

A resurgence of religion, often in novel or unconventional forms.

The first thing that marks postmodernity is a resurgence of religion, often in novel or unconventional forms. Whether the resurgence of religion hastened the collapse of modernity, or whether the latter opened the door for a "return of the sacred." Much of the resurgence of religion is occurring outside the established religious institutions. We are also witnessing a shift of the center of Christian growth and influence from the northern hemisphere to the global south—what is sometimes called "the two-third world." Philip Jenkins tells this story in *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). Christianity as a whole is both growing and mutating in ways observers in the West tend to miss. In *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity Is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Pub., 2003), David Aikman chronicles the astonishing growth of the Christian faith in China.

In recent decades the world has also witnessed a wave of fundamentalism within the established faiths. These include Islamic, Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist fundamentalism. According to modern thinkers such as Sigmund Freud, Emile Durkheim, and Karl Marx the current resurgence of religion was not supposed to have occurred. They fully expected that as humankind more and more followed the contours of reason—in Marx's case the inevitability of history—religion would become nothing more than a museum piece, archived in the annals of history.

As things have turned out, modernity greatly overestimated its own triumph, and greatly underestimated the richness of the human spirit. So, postmodernity, unlike the secular, "closed world" the "ideology" of modernity described, is marked by a resurgent openness to the sacred, a fact certainly not been lost on the Western press, as witnessed by the numerous cover articles in *Time*, *Newsweek*, etc. We should be quick to note that openness to the sacred isn't limited to any single religion or any narrow definition of the sacred. It simply means what has come storming back is a persistent belief in and sensitivity to transcendent reality, and to a wholeness of the human spirit, which modernity failed to recognize and certainly did not successfully marginalize.

NOTES

Dismissal of the notion of complete objectivity.

A second feature of postmodernity that intersects with religious pluralism is its dismissal of the notion of complete objectivity. Earlier we said this modern dogma is now referred to as the myth of objectivity. Nothing contributed more to the explosion of this myth than watching moderns reason. Try as they might, their own subjectivity kept peeking through their objectivity. For example, Sigmund Freud's method of psychoanalysis was supposed to have been structured on pure objectivity. But in recent years a stack of writing has accumulated that reveals the numerous ways in which Freud's experiments and conclusions were heavily influenced by his own subjectivity, his gender, his social status, and his choice of persons for research. The November 29, 1993, cover story of *Time* asks, "Is Freud dead?"

The old paradigm supported the notion that from one superior perspective (the modern western perspective) we can construct a story of human life—what people ought to believe, how they ought to live, and how their cultures should be organized—that would be universally valid. Sometimes this notion is referred to as a metanarrative, an overarching story that is supposed to be the story for all persons.

Even though many modern thinkers dismissed the notion of religious truth, they replaced it with another truth, a modern vision of how human life should be understood, organized, and lived. Modernity, in what we earlier called its ideological form, claimed to know, and to know absolutely based on its defining convictions. Even though what could and should be known was not based on traditional religion the modern ideology constituted a grand, universally applicable story, a metanarrative of its own. That is exactly what postmodernity has set ablaze, or as is often heard, has deconstructed. This move has happened in part because of revisions in physics (theories of relativity, quantum mechanics, chaos theory, and cosmology), the idea of the Big Bang, and an expanding universe. Another contributor is the break-up of European colonialism and the assertion of indigenous voices and cultures on the world scene.

Also spurring an explosion of the myth of objectivity and the emergence of postmodernity has been a growing change in our understanding of knowledge. In place of our confidence in objectivity has come a recognition that knowing is inescapably located. That is, what we know, and how, we know is inescapably influenced by our context. It indelibly bears the marks of the societies and eras in which we live. It is affected by our gender, nationality, class, education, religion, and a host of other located factors.

NOTES

So, by postmodern standards, instead of one universal metanarrative, the world is in fact alive with many narratives that form communities and persons, thus providing the pictures of meaning that animate them. According to the postmodern mood, this is true of the many expressions of religion that populate our world. Those who believe they have access to one religious narrative all persons ought to own, and according to which they should live, suffer from an illusion that can, if pressed, visit oppression and exploitation on others. Even a modest acquaintance with popular culture and the media is sufficient to reveal this conviction. Religions? Yes. One religion? No! Many paths? Yes. One path for all? No! This spirit is revealed in the statement of a teacher in Queens, New York: “My way is not right or wrong; it’s just my way.”

Emphasis upon holism and community.

The third feature of postmodernity that has implications for religious pluralism is its emphasis upon holism and community. By contrast, modernity was marked by segmentation and reductionism. Personhood tilted toward one dimension: reason and rational organization. It stressed the isolated, subjective ego in the form of raw individualism. And it tended to separate the self from the world of nature. Way back in the 17th century Rene Descartes said we are composed of two unrelated substances: a thinking substance and an extended or material substance, the thinking substance being the most real and important part of the self and the material being of lesser value or importance.

Postmodernity, by contrast, views persons in holistic terms, as constituted by their relation to other persons, communities, themselves, and the environment. Persons aren’t knowable apart from this. Any perception of personhood that continues to rely upon the rugged and autonomous self is viewed as poverty-stricken. All dimensions of the human spirit such as our emotions, aesthetics, labor, reason, the sacred, our interaction with nature, and so forth, must thrive in harmonious complementarily.

POSTMODERN IMPLICATIONS FOR RELIGIOUS PLURALISM



NOTES

Already the implications for religious pluralism that grow out of postmodernity have probably begun to surface. Let's make them explicit.

Many religious stories or narratives.

One must simply come to grips with the postmodern assessment of the many religious stories or narratives in the world. All of religions, including Christianity, are seen as adequate, legitimate, and autonomous accounts of reality that form communities and provide meaning for their members. According to the postmodern assessment, absolutely no basis exists by which one narrative might assess and judge another, unless of course a religion is by nature disrespectful and destructive of persons and other narratives.

The conclusion is that only uninformed persons at this juncture in history would be so crude as to boast that their religion ought to be the narrative for all persons everywhere. Informed persons know narratives depend for their meaning and conviction upon the communities in which they are willingly nourished. An informed person would not be so foolish as to try to impose one religious narrative upon another, or to use proselytism to replace one narrative with another. Instead, he or she would be ruled by a commitment to respect the integrity of all religious narratives.

Alan Wolfe quotes a Queens, New York, salesman who is Jewish. Speaking of his own Jewish observances, the salesman said, "I don't have any problem with what anybody does, as long as they don't tell me what I have to do. So if you want to be involved in something that's very dear to you, that's fine, but don't sit there and tell me about something that is clearly an option in life, that I have to be doing it, and I should be doing it."

This attitude poses some significant challenges or real opportunities for evangelism in a new way, while depending on the old source, the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the only one who might persuade a person joyously to join the dance of God's grace as manifest in Christ. Gospel proof will need to be supported by Kingdom witness and lives transformed by the Spirit.

NOTES*The witness of a transformed life.*

The next implication of postmodernity for religious pluralism is one Wesleyans should welcome. It conforms to our understanding of how the grace of God works, and to our emphasis upon the witness of a transformed life. The challenge of modernity was to prove who was right, a struggle for rational dominance. The challenge of postmodernity is finding how to live well. This world is less interested in being persuaded by our ideas than being drawn by the witness of how we live. Lives lived out in love, embodying the life and character of Christ, become the best argument for Christianity. Reason may serve a positive purpose in thinking about faith or thinking through our faith but real life is where it really matters.

Narratives must listen to each other.

A third implication is that various narratives must listen to each other. This strikes some Christians as a betrayal of the gospel. "Why listen when you already have the truth?" Silence is the best service we can render to the gospel. Why listen? We listen to the meaning other's religious narrative offers them and their culture, and to hear how the gracious God may already be active far beyond our expectations and limitations, and not as a clever device for tricking persons into uninvited proselytism.

An adequate appreciation for the various religions.

A fourth implication derives from the postmodern marker known as holism. An adequate appreciation for the various religions must include the whole context from within which they view communities, persons, and nature in relationship to the sacred. Trying to understand a religion simply by using Western categories will predictably lead to misunderstanding and misrepresentation. It certainly will not advance real communication.

We should not expect new Christians in China or Afghanistan, for instance, to be stripped of their culture in order to become Christian. And we certainly should not expect them to identify Christian with Western. From the days of the Early Church, Christians have legitimately utilized aspects of their own cultures to embody their faith and witness. Sometimes some of us so closely identify Christian with Western that we forget this.

THE TOWER OF BABEL: MODERNITY BUILT THE TOWER— NOW POSTMODERNITY MUST FACE THE CHALLENGE OF CONDEMNING THE “UNSAFE STRUCTURE”

MICHAEL HORTON (*SELECTED*)

NOTES

Where Now? Suggestions for the Way Forward

Culture wars have set cultural conservatives against cultural liberals, those who support Judeo-Christian principles against secular humanists. However, the convulsions are much deeper beneath the crust of politics, morality, and entertainment. By ignoring these deeper issues, the tectonic plates beneath our civilization continue to shift while we chase the ambulances and try to rescue victims here and there.

Before proceeding, it is essential we understand that however valiantly we may be engaged in culture wars, we are certainly not offering any serious challenge to secularism. If secularism is really worldliness and the form of worldliness we call modernity, then contemporary Christian conservatives as well as liberals are almost equally culpable. Contrary to popular sentiments, recent evangelical efforts at combating secularism are not having any long-term success in pulling the culture out of its determined course toward a new dark age. We may think our conservative activism is an attack on secularism, but evangelical Christianity is as captivated by modernity as liberal Protestantism. Let me offer some examples.

Relativism and Fragmentation

If modernity is architecturally illustrated by a ten-story granite federal building, a government housing project, and tract homes, postmodernism is architecturally symbolized in the average shopping mall. Instead of order, unity, and planned conformity, the mall celebrates conflicting styles. One store looks nothing like the one next to it, in contrast to the old malls built in the 60s and 70s, where only the sign distinguished the department stores in a mall. As Peter Fuller put it, “The west front of Wells Cathedral, the Parthenon pediment, the plastic and neon signs of Caesar’s Palace, Las Vegas, even the hidden intricacies of a Mies van der Rohe curtain wall: all are equally ‘interesting.’”

But is this not the approach many evangelical Christians take to truth as well? What happens when questions about worship style are raised? Bach’s “St. Matthew Passion” and Kendrick’s “Shine, Jesus, Shine!” are both equally ‘interesting.’ One may attend a successful Wesleyan, Lutheran, Reformed,


NOTES

Pentecostal, Baptist, Roman Catholic, mainline liberal, conservative evangelical, charismatic, or non-charismatic service and find the same sermon and worship experience. That is not because the Spirit has breathed some new unity into His fragmented body, but is itself a part of the fragmentation of the age.

In other words, there are no doctrinal or liturgical distinctives anymore precisely because few of these churches take such things seriously. It is not the unity of the Spirit, but the unity of the marketplace, that has determined the homogeneity of these groups. They are all patterning their preaching, worship, and outreach to the consumer trends. When it comes to morality, some of these leaders will happily employ Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind*, apparently unaware the author's arguments against the dumbing down of the nation in the interest of peace, harmony, and sensitivity is precisely the same trend one observes in these successful churches today.

Human-Centered Orientation and Belief in Human Nature

The tendency of the human heart is toward Pelagianism—the ancient heresy of self-salvation. We believe in ourselves and in our potential to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. Eighty-six percent of America's evangelical Protestants believe that in salvation, “God helps those who help themselves,” and seventy-seven percent of evangelicals believe humans are, by nature, basically good.

This means the great majority of evangelical Christians in this country are, in ancient terms, Pelagian, and in modern terms, secular. The irony of the evangelical attack on secular humanism was indelibly stamped on my mind when Robert Schuller suggested to me we work together in confronting a common enemy: secular humanism. This from the man who said the Reformation erred because it was God-centered rather than human-centered.

From this human-centered orientation, we see the flowering of a human-centered diet in preaching and Christian discourse. For instance, the average Christian bookstore is dominated by books on the horizontal dimension of life (i.e., Christian tips on self-esteem, recovery, child-rearing, personal fitness, happiness, success, and political victory). Replacing theology with ethics and Christ with moralism was once the thing liberals did best.

Even evangelism—the place where one might expect a thoroughly God-centered, Christ-centered message—is often couched in human-centered language: “Here's what God will do for you if you say ‘yes.’” I am expecting


NOTES

one day in the not so distant future to hear an evangelist promise, “Try God. And if you’re not completely satisfied, simply return the unused portion for a full refund.” Everything, from the Law to the gospel, is sold for its usefulness to the buyer, not because the Law is the expression of God’s personal character and the gospel the expression of His saving intention.

The Me Generation is now in power, in Washington, D.C., where rebellion against authority and tradition has now taken on a more respectable aura than the campus revolutions of the 60s. The evangelical activists have emphasized this 60s-rooted rebellion, but what they fail to realize is the fact the evangelical movement itself is a massive rebellion against authority (creeds, confessions, the institutional church, church discipline, etc.) and tradition (theology, liturgy, and classic hymns). While James Dobson might remind us of the disastrous effects of Stanford’s radical student cheer, “Hey, hey, ho, ho, Western civilization has got to go,” the same tradition of our Western religious inheritance in the ancient church and the Reformation is being cheerfully thrown out of the conservative evangelical churches.

And why? For the same reason the radicals disdained the rest of western culture: It is old. It is irrelevant, impractical, constraining, and confining. It does not allow us to express ourselves in freedom. The same sentiments that lead liberals to abandon traditional values lead conservatives to abandon traditional worship.

Recently I was reading through some church growth literature and under the section on values, a number of the mega-churches stated at the top of the list, “We value individualism and personal expression. We don’t want to tie people down to doctrines, rituals, and rules.”

Modernity’s narcissistic self-preoccupation is alive and well in the evangelical community. If the evangelical activists can lament the ascendancy of the Me Generation in Washington, surely the rest of us can also lament the ascendancy of the Me Generation in the leadership of the evangelical movement . . .

Conclusion

The postmodern person is a disenchanting modernist. He or she is convinced human reason and cleverness cannot achieve universal happiness and is cynical toward political or ideological grand-standing. There is no hope in utopian movements, either liberal or conservative; communitarian or democratic. Fragmentation is prized over a rational, ordered world-view.

NOTES

Yet, we must ask these people whether they have merely exchanged their own universal foundations (like fragmentation) for the older ones (rational order). They know what is wrong with modern ideas, but they have few of their own except by negation. They are against universal systems, utopian progress, and absolutes, but they do not quite know yet what to substitute. There are myriads of proposals, but no single direction—perhaps that is required in a system that glorifies fragmentation and contradiction. Yet . . . there is a new openness to an emphasis on confessional, communal interpretations of reality (and, thus, of Scripture) that avoids the modern arrogance of individual theologians and philosophers reinventing theology from scratch . . .

In our day, a fresh proclamation of the biblical truths of Creation, Divine Sovereignty and Transcendence, Providence, Incarnation, Redemption, Justification, the work of the Holy Spirit, the Second Coming of Christ, and the Consummation will take on new significance, providing a mine from which to draw for a culture looking for transcendent answers. In Christianity, God reveals His name, His identity, and His redemptive plan through the Living and Written Word . . .

Intellectuals are wondering where evil comes from and how to understand it, with secular psychologists asking, “Whatever became of sin?” and national secular periodicals running cover stories on the subject of sin and grace. Ironically, those who will be most relevant in this age will most likely be those who have something to say about the classic questions that were the heart of the Reformation debate. No religious expression will be given the time of day right now unless it connects with the real world and makes a difference in people’s lives.

Therefore, it is not only the explanation of the doctrine of justification, for instance, but its proclamation in the pulpit and its application to such areas as Christian liberty and one’s vocation in the world, the problem of evil and suffering, and the fear of death, will be just as necessary. After every doctrinal presentation, we must ask ourselves the question every postmodern hearer is thinking: “So what? What difference does it make?” . . .

Orthodox ministers must overcome their justified fear of application-oriented sermons and begin to apply saving truth to life here and now, just as pietistic evangelicals need to rediscover the theology and the text of Scripture, so they will have something to apply. This is no time for caving in to the Tower of Babel just as it is crumbling, but a time to recover “the faith once and for all delivered to the saints.” God grant us His Spirit to meet the challenges and opportunities before us.

 **NOTES**

Michael Horton is the editor-in-chief of *Modern Reformation* and a CAPO fellow. Used with permission. All rights reserved.

CONCLUSION

In the highly pluralistic, postmodern context in which we live, the Holy Spirit has set the stage for faithful and fruitful witness to the gospel for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear. I am convinced that if we in the Wesleyan tradition will perceptively read the signs of the times, we can be effective bearers from within our tradition of the Good News in the Lord's vineyard. We should greet postmodernity as a grand opportunity and not as a threat.

FOR FURTHER READING:

If one had to choose four books from the evangelical perspective, explaining the particulars of postmodernism, I would highly recommend the following:

- Roger Lundin, *The Culture of Interpretation* (Eerdmans)
- Gene Veith, *Postmodern Times* (Crossway)
- Thomas Oden, *After Modernity . . . What?* (Zondervan)
- David Wells, *God in the Wasteland* (Eerdmans)

APPLICATION

**NOTES**

1. Spend some time exploring various internet sites for the word “postmodernism.”
2. Write a reflection paper based on the following questions. Be prepared to share that paper with your mentor.
 - What features of postmodernity are most negative for the Christian faith?
 - What features of postmodernity are most positive for the Christian faith?
 - Do you see postmodernity as crisis or opportunity for the Church?

EXAM



NOTES

1. Modernity and Postmodernity may continue to coexist for some time.
 - A. True
 - B. False
2. Postmodernism is more interested in the right idea than how to live.
 - A. True
 - B. False
3. Postmodernity is more open to the idea and practice of religion than modernity.
 - A. True
 - B. False
4. The wide use of the term postmodernism reflects the fact that there is a broad consensus for a definition of what postmodernism is.
 - A. True
 - B. False
5. With which of the following is postmodernism NOT disillusioned?
 - A. science
 - B. the idea of objectivity
 - C. community
 - D. reason
6. Postmodernism offers promising opportunities for the Gospel.
 - A. True
 - B. False
7. The center of Christian growth in the world is moving to _____.
 - A. middle America
 - B. the cities
 - C. the southern hemisphere
 - D. Europe
8. Postmodernism places emphasis on community.
 - A. True
 - B. False



9. Moderns and postmoderns still think that, in one way or another, we can save ourselves.
- A. True
 - B. False

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT



NOTES

Be prepared to discuss the following with your mentor.

1. Review the exam questions and answers. Discuss any issues or questions they raise for you.
2. What features of postmodernity are most negative for the Christian faith?
3. What features of postmodernity are most positive for the Christian faith?
4. Do you see postmodernity as crisis or opportunity for the Church?