

Introduction

Before we enter into a brief treatment of postmodernism, let's ask the question, "Why would we even have a treatment of postmodernism? Isn't this just some heady concept that does not really matter to us in our everyday life?" The answer to that question is that a discussion of postmodernism is vitally important for us. It is so for at least three reasons.

First, we are called as God's people to be as the sons of Issachar, who, 1 Chronicles 12:32 says, "were men that had understanding of the times." We must know the times in which we live. We must not be ignorant of what is going on around us. And if we are to understand the times, we must understand something about postmodernism. In fact, I would go so far as to say that it is impossible really to understand the world around you right now without understanding something of postmodernism. It is the underlying idea, the root, the molding influence that shapes the way people think and act and respond to things in our day, even if not everyone shaped by it knows they are being shaped by it.

Second, we must give a treatment of postmodernism because postmodern thought attacks the very foundation of our faith. There are many very significant false doctrines that attack the faith that we hold dear. But postmodernism is a doctrine that attacks the very idea that this faith may even exist.

Third, it is important to understand postmodernism because its effects are pervasive in our society. Certain pockets of Dutch Reformed churches are perhaps immune from some issues of modern American society. But I submit that even these pockets are not immune from the effects of postmodernism. It is everywhere, and affects almost everything and everyone.

With that in mind, let us take a brief look at this teaching, this mindset, and this worldview called postmodernism.

What Is Postmodernism?

Postmodernism is difficult to define. There are many aspects of it, and various threads to it. However, to retain accuracy and yet keep things simple, I am going to define postmodernism as the idea that there is no such thing as Truth (and do take notice of the capital *T*). What postmodernism means when it says that there is no Truth is that there is no such thing as *absolute* Truth—Truth that is true for all people in all times and in all places. There is no such thing as changeless Truth. There is no such thing as an all-encompassing Truth that stands above us and rains down upon all of us from above and is the same for all of us.

Instead, there are only individual perspectives and opinions. Everyone determines what truth is for himself. Whatever a person decides is true for him is true for him. But it may not be true for another. There is no Truth above us all that all must believe; there is only personal preference. Everyone should be allowed to have his personal preference. No one should try to impose his personal preference for what is true on anyone else, for to do that would be to assume that there is a Truth that is valid for all people.

Thus for postmodernism truth only ever has a lower case *t*. It is never consistent for all peoples in all places and all times. It is not objective. It is never something outside of the individual that he must reckon with, but it comes from within the individual and is merely the product of his desires.

While certainly some things are subjective in this life, the idea that *all* things are subjective is destructive and makes no sense even logically. One can destroy postmodern claims with one argument. All one has to say to someone promoting this idea is this: “You have just said there is no Truth, and that everything depends upon perspective. But by declaring that there

is no Truth, are you not making a statement that you claim is absolutely True? Are you not declaring for all people, all time, and everywhere a Truth when you say that there is no Truth? So how do I know that that statement is True if there is no Truth? The very thing you are saying destroys what you are saying. What you declare to be True destroys what you declare.”

Nonetheless, the postmodernist will simply say that there is only one thing that is True above all of us, which is that there is no Truth. This is the way the world is for the most part thinking and living today, even if not everyone in that world knows to call it postmodernism.

How Postmodernism Came About¹

To understand how we have come to believe this as a society, we have to understand something more about postmodernism. That is, we have to understand why it is called postmodernism. The technical definition of postmodernism is quite simple: postmodernism is the general outlook of people in the West after modernism. That’s the literal meaning of the word: post (after) modernism. Therefore, to understand postmodernism, I must say something about modernism. To do that, I am first going to go back even further—to the time of the Reformation.

At the time of the Reformation, most people agreed on one thing. There is Truth (with a capital *T*) out there. Truth is not something that we fashion inside of us. Truth is something outside of us. It is something that is above us and that comes down to us. We do not decide it for ourselves; it is already decided for us.

Most people at the time of the Reformation also believed that that Truth rained down upon us *from God in his word, the Bible*. The Bible was deemed Truth. It was seen as an

¹ Understand that this is a very simple explanation of the history. I do not believe it is simplistic, but it is simple.

explanation for all of life. There is a way we are supposed to live. There is a way to understand who we are and why we are alive. And that way is found in the word of the God who is in himself Truth.

Man is given reason in order to understand God's word and God's Truth. Nonetheless his reason is subject to God's word. At the time of the Reformation, men understood that some things were a matter of perspective, and God's word made clear either explicitly or by its silence which things could be a matter of perspective. But many things, the most important things, are found as absolutely True in God's word. He has given us absolute Truth applicable to all people at all times irrespective of culture or geographical location.

God gave mankind reason, enabled by the Holy Spirit, to understand his word and discover Truth with a capital T in that word. That is the way true churches view Truth today.

After the Reformation, during what is called the Enlightenment, men began to say that while, yes, there is an absolute Truth out there for all people for all times, we don't need God's revelation to find out what it is. They said the Bible is unscientific. It has so many stories in it that cannot be True; it is just a book of myths and fables. If we want to find out what is really True for all men in all time we need to get rid of the Bible, and instead rely solely on the use of our pure reason. That is modernism.

Modernism said that man's mind is like a calculator, purely objective, and could (at the end of the day) produce error-free conclusions. Through science and discovery therefore, modernists said we will put facts, data, into man's mind, and out will pop the Truth. Man is able by himself to discover what is really True. They were still saying that there is a Truth out there for everybody, only now the word of God is not the way to find it. We must as men band together and make discoveries, throw off God's word, and we will find that Truth on our own.

However, when they did that, eventually men began to discover that it really didn't work that way. They started to think and they started to discover things, but what they found was that not everyone agreed on what was True. They thought if they got rid of the Bible and used only reason, then everyone would come to the same conclusions regarding Truth. After all, if you put the same data into 1000 different calculators, no matter where those calculators are, you will get the same answer every time. They thought they would all discover that Truth that is above all of us, and that explains everything. They thought they would all agree on what is right and wrong simply by their use of reason. However, in the end there was no unanimity. They had not all come to the same conclusions. That perturbed them. They started to think, How can this be? If we all have the ability to reason, why do we not all come to the same conclusions?

They decided that the reason was *not* that they were depraved sinners with depraved motives that controlled their thinking, as the Bible says. The reason, they concluded, was not that their own reason was affected by the fall as the Scriptures state. The reason, they decided, was not that the Reformers had it right, that God's mind was the only mind big enough really to explain everything and therefore we must simply use our reason to understand God's mind in his word. Such a conclusion would require humility, which man does not have apart from Christ.

Instead, they concluded the reason they all came to different conclusions through the use of pure reason was because there was no Truth with a capital *T* out there to discover. There is no Truth above us all that applies to us all, they said. There is nothing absolute. There is only my opinion and your opinion. There is only what is true for me in my own experience and situation, and that changes from person to person, culture to culture. *Everything* is simply personal subjective experience or opinion. Therefore, at the end of the day all that matters is that we eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.

Some Effects of Postmodernism

You can easily see how this idea affects what people think is right and wrong in our society today. Have you ever really sat and thought about the fact that we actually kill our own children in this country? Have you ever thought about how that is possible in a modern, “enlightened” society? The answer, at least in part, is the depraved notion of postmodernism that undergirds how the world thinks of right and wrong.

The Reformation said that the word of God tells us what is right and what is wrong for all times and for all places. Modernism said there is a right and wrong that applies to everyone, but we do not need the Bible to figure it out; we will do it ourselves. Postmodernism says there is nothing that is right for all times and all places. We just make it up as we go along. If we decide it is wrong for now, it is wrong for now. But if we get up tomorrow and decide what was wrong yesterday is now right today, then it is right. There is no Truth above us. All is relative. There is no standard for right and wrong outside of us. Right and wrong is merely what the majority decides it is at this point in time. We used to think it was wrong to kill babies. But then we decided that now it is right to kill our children if we want. Because we have decided it is so, it is so. Right and wrong is whatever we decide they are. There is no absolute. Who are you to say we are wrong? Today it is wrong to rape, but tomorrow who’s to say it is wrong? In fact, there is one postmodern thinker who has wrestled with that very question—can we really say that rape is wrong? Who are we to say? If enough of us agree that it is ok, it will be ok.

What postmodernism is really hit me in college the day after 9/11. I entered my psychology class at a secular university on 9/12. People were very somber, as one can imagine. Nobody said much. There was a general seriousness about what had just happened to our country. Then the psychology professor walked in, and the first thing he said was this: “Now

whatever you're feeling right now, I don't want any of you to say that what those people did flying the planes into the towers was *wrong*. It feels wrong to us. We don't think it is right in our society to fly planes into towers and kill people at this point. But to them in their society that was the right thing to do. Who are we to say? It's all relative." I couldn't believe it. Even murder is relative. The only evil is to say that something is evil. The only wrong is to say that something is wrong. The only Truth is that there is no Truth.

This is what is being taught in many colleges and universities today. This mentality, I dare say, lies behind most if not all classes taught in the humanities at secular universities. There is a reason that in many literature classes there is little or no attempt anymore to discover the intent of the author. There is a reason that in many classes as long your paper on that famous book has some coherence, it gets an *A*, even if it really has nothing to do with what the author intended the book to communicate. The subjective perspective rules.

Religion also becomes simply a matter of personal preference. The goal in religion is not to find out what is True. The goal for the individual is simply to find something that he likes, and if he likes it, then it becomes true for him. No one is right and no one is wrong in religion, for no religion comes down to us from above. All religions, including Christianity, they say have their source in man, and represent various ways man tries to make sense of his own existence. None of them are True. What you like may be the exact opposite of what I like. For you that is truth, whereas for me this is truth. No matter if they contradict each other, for truth is private, personal, relative. Perhaps you have discovered that people today do not so much mind your personal beliefs. They don't really care all that much about what you think. What they mind is if you say they must believe what you believe because the Truth you believe is not True just for

you, it is True for everyone. This makes them angry, for this breaks the cardinal law of postmodernism—there is no Truth that applies to all.

The effect of postmodernism is felt not only in the universities, and not only in the world's view of religions, but also in the church of Jesus Christ. I am sure you have noticed that people in the church world (your church and mine?) do not want to talk about doctrine nearly as much as they used to. They do not want to talk about what is right and wrong. They do not want to open the Bible and discover Truth from God's word. Many times, if you show God's word to people who claim the name of Christ, and point out to them that God's word says this, it is shocking how often you hear this response: "Well, I just don't think God is like that. I just don't believe that." And you say, "It says it right here that he is." "Well, I just don't think so." Fifty to sixty years ago (I am told) people who called themselves Christians would sit down with you and open the word of God and discuss positions on the basis of God's word. Now, often they do not really care if the word says it or not. I am generalizing, of course; this is not true of all. But this is a weakness in the church.

Why is that? It is because the thinking of the world has affected the church. People may not know what postmodernism is, but it has affected them. They think that Truth is whatever they decide it is. Truth is my personal preference. It is not something outside of me that comes down upon me. It is whatever I like and don't like. That is postmodernism in the church.

The Root of this Thinking

What is the root of this thinking? Is postmodernism just a fad, a movement in our world today? The answer is that postmodernism and all its effects is and will continue to be the full flowering of human depravity. Do not get the impression that the idea that one can determine

Truth to be whatever one wants it to be is only a recent notion. It has recently become an “ism,” but it has been around as long as sin has been around. The essence of the appeal of postmodernism to human beings is that it tells every man the same thing the devil told Adam and Eve in the garden: “You will be as God.”

The devil’s temptation in the garden is the same temptation of postmodern thought. The devil told Adam and Eve, “You do not need to submit to God and Truth as though God were above you and Truth rained down upon you. Eat, and you can be god yourself, knowing good and evil. You may determine what is right and wrong for yourself. Who is God to tell you what is right and what is wrong? Who is he to rule over you? Eat and you will be able to throw him off and determine *for yourself* what is true and right. Whatever you want Truth to be, that is what it will be. You will be as God, *determining* good and evil.”

That is why even if people have never heard of postmodernism they are affected by it. This is why it is a temptation for you and me too. It resonates with our depraved nature’s pride. It is the idea that I may be god, and every man loves that idea in his own nature and will follow it apart from Christ.

Pablo Picasso illustrates postmodernism’s connection to the temptation in the garden. Picasso, who embodied postmodernism, painted as though there was no Truth. He also lived as though there was no Truth. He was, in the words of someone close to him, “a monster.” Anyone interested may read for himself. His life is too graphic to describe here. What accounts for his art and for his life? Picasso apparently used to walk around muttering the words, “Truth does not exist, Truth cannot exist. I am god. I am god.”² The devil uses what works, and his first temptation has always been his greatest.

² Os Guinness, *Time For Truth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2000), 84.

Whereas the idea that I may be god has been around since the time of Adam and Eve, I submit to you that the present age is an age in which that idea from the pit of hell has affected almost everything. The cup of iniquity is *almost* full. There has never been a time since the days before the flood when the idea that man is god has had such a thorough complete control of the thoughts of so many men's hearts. It has not yet reached its fullest potential in everyone everywhere, but it is getting close.

The Answer

In days like this, how important it is that we study God's Truth, know it, believe it, confess it, and teach it to the generations following us. How important are the things we have always deemed important: thorough catechism training, Protestant Reformed education, parental responsibilities, developing a truly Reformed world view, preparing the youth for the world they will face. These things are necessary, vitally important, that in the midst of this world we may confess that Jesus and his word is *the Way, the Truth and the Life*.

According to John 18 Jesus is brought before Pontius Pilate to be tried, because the Jews were not allowed to crucify Jesus unless Pilate approved. Pilate interviews Jesus to see if he is worthy of crucifixion as the Jews claim. In the course of the one-on-one trial Pilate asks Jesus, "Art thou a King then?" And Jesus answers in John 18:37, "Thou sayest that I am a king. (*Yes, I am, Pilate. But your Ceasar doesn't have to worry. I am a different kind of King...*) To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the Truth. Every one that is of the Truth heareth my voice."

How does Pilate respond? He responds like postmodernism responds to Christ and his Truth today. John 18:38: “Pilate saith unto him, What is truth?” No genuine question. More like this: Truth! Jesus? Ha, there are only opinions, only perceptions. There is no Truth.

It was not until Pilate died that he learned that Truth with a capital *T* was standing right in front of him. The Son of God made flesh is Truth. Because of that he is the Way and he is the Life.

That is not just what we happen to believe as Protestant Reformed people. That is Truth for everybody, whether they grew up in a village in Bangladesh, in a high rise apartment in New York City, or in a farming community in Iowa. Jesus, embodied now in his word, is Truth—Truth that stands above all men in all situations. The reason we deem the things listed above, such as catechism, Protestant Reformed education, parental duties, etc., important is so that by God’s grace we and our children never respond along with Pilate of the Bible and the postmodern world of our day: “Truth? What is Truth?” But so that we say, “Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior, thou art the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” May it be so among us until the day he returns.

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