

POSTMODERNISM (and Modernism) IN CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

(Chapter 1: The Lay of the Land)

Motivation

In Christian circles, postmodernism is often portrayed as evil and threatening, even by some who have at best a vague idea of what it actually is. Occasionally the opposite is claimed – that postmodernism is a great blessing, correcting all sorts of wrongs. In my opinion, both of those portrayals contain more error than truth. In this course, we will attempt to carefully discern the good from the bad.

While postmodernism presents some new challenges and opportunities, it is also one more instance of the age-old question of how the church responds to (and participates in) trends in human culture.¹ One common reaction to cultural change is knee-jerk opposition, and/or a refusal to acknowledge the change at all. This can result in a church that is irrelevant (a common complaint about the modern church), that is known more for what it is against than what it is for (ditto), and that misses opportunities to change for the better (like how many churches in the U.S. were far too late in affirming the God-given equality of non-white people). Such a church may say that it is refusing to be influenced by culture, failing to recognize that it is really captive to a culture – only instead of a culture of today it is a culture from 1950, or 1850.

On the other end of the spectrum, the reaction in some segments of the church can be to embrace cultural trends automatically, assuming that they represent God at work. This leads to a church that is captive to the winds of social change and unable to prophetically critique the culture. Such a reaction is as intellectually lazy as the unthinking opposition to change mentioned above. There is no shortcut to the task of learning about each particular trend, examining it in light of the teachings of Jesus, and discerning whether it should be rejected, embraced, or a combination of the two. Often, even if we cannot fully embrace something, we may find that we can learn important things from it.

Why should we learn about this particular trend? An obvious answer is that we live in a society where, like it or not, postmodernism is a major influence. Our mission as Christians is to demonstrate and proclaim Jesus to the culture we find ourselves in. We need to understand this aspect of our culture, much as a missionary learns the language and customs of a society in order to present the gospel in terms the people can understand. If we don't understand our postmodern world, we will be like missionaries who can't speak the language (or, just as bad, missionaries who say "If you follow Jesus, you must adopt my culture."), and people aren't going to listen.

However, there is a deeper and perhaps more important reason to learn about postmodernism. The church today² has many problems and challenges. To many, especially young people, the church seems irrelevant and unwelcoming. Many Christians put more faith in partisan politics

¹ The topic of the church's interaction with culture is too big to explore in detail here; I refer interested readers to some books: *A Peculiar People* by Rodney Clapp, *Culture Making* by Andy Crouch, *Resident Aliens* by Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, and *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* by Lesslie Newbigen.

² I mostly have in mind the evangelical Protestant church in the U.S., since that is what I'm most familiar with.

than in the Kingdom of God, to the extent that “Evangelical” is seen as a political label. Anti-intellectualism (and pseudo-intellectualism, where Christians concoct their own warped versions of science, American history, etc.) repels thinking people from the church. Aberrant teachings flourish, such as the “prosperity gospel” and nationalism in the name of God. Individual-centered “me and Jesus” faith produces consumer Christians with no sense of what it means to be part of the interdependent Body of Christ. On many measures of morality, generosity, compassion, etc., those who claim to follow Jesus do not seem to live any differently from their secular neighbors. I believe that many of these problems are related to the fact that the church today is dominated by “modernism.” While postmodernism is far from a cure for all these ills, its critique of modernism does offer some resources for the church.

Therefore, throughout this course we will not treat postmodernism as an adversary, although we will point out negative aspects when warranted. Instead, our focus will be on the health of the church. What aspects of the postmodern critique of modernism are correct, and might tell us ways the modern church is failing? Which aspects of postmodernism might the church embrace in order to be faithful to Jesus? Which aspects should the church reject to be faithful to Jesus? When examined in this way, I think we will find that, while there are radical forms of postmodernism the church should avoid, more moderate forms can provide useful insights to help the church become what God calls it to be.

Preliminaries and Disclaimers

We start with a warning: postmodernism is notoriously hard to define, in part because it is multifaceted. Postmodern means beyond or after modern, but modernism (which is also hard to define) is not just one thing, and different postmodern people would reject certain aspects while keeping others. Even for those who agree on rejecting some aspect of modernism, there will be different ideas of what to replace it with. An analogy is the Protestant Reformation, where many “post-Catholics” parted ways with the Roman Catholic church, but there was much variety among them (Lutherans, Calvinists, Anabaptists, etc.). If you hear a blanket statement about postmodernism being a bad thing, or being a good thing, you probably shouldn’t listen to that person, because it isn’t a thing, it is many things, and we need to sort out which aspects might be good or bad or neutral.

The parenthetical insertion in the course title is significant. I was originally going to call it *Postmodernism in Christian Perspective*. But I quickly realized that you can’t talk about postmodernism without talking about modernism. After all, as hard as postmodernism is to define, it must refer to something after modernism, so we need to start there if we want to have any hope of understanding postmodernism. One important thing to keep in mind is that, while aspects of postmodernism do have problems from a Christian perspective, modernism is at least as problematic in many ways. So we can’t just critique postmodernism – we also need to critique modernism.

At this point, I pause to mention two things that I don’t mean in this discussion. First, I won’t deal with postmodernism in the arts. That is not unrelated to the things we will focus on, but I don’t have enough expertise on that topic to contribute anything worthwhile. Second, there was a famous period in church history, mostly in the U.S. in the early 1900s, called “the fundamentalist/modernist controversies.” The way “modernist” was used in those conflicts is

not the way I am using the term here. Those “modernists” were operating largely along the lines of the modernism I will be discussing, but in many ways so were the fundamentalists (more on that in Chapter 2).

Also, while philosophy is an important part of the picture, my coverage of philosophy will be superficial. This is partly because of lack of expertise, but also because the cultural aspects and the impact of modernism and postmodernism on the church are more important for my purposes. If you are looking for analysis of the philosophy of Kant, or Kierkegaard, or Foucault, you’ve come to the wrong place. But if you are looking for insight about how the Christian church can learn from postmodernism while avoiding its problems (and avoiding the problems of modernism), this material may be helpful.

A final disclaimer is that I am not writing as an expert. You may have seen my course on *Science and Nature in Christian Perspective*³ – on that topic I consider myself an expert. But in this area, my vision is less clear. I think I have some understanding and insight, but in many ways I’m still a pilgrim seeking clarity on these concepts. I hope this material can at least be thought-provoking and point readers in fruitful directions.

A Brief Lay of the Land

In Chapter 2, we will examine “modernism.” We can think about modernism as a change in the way people thought about the world. This started roughly 400 years ago, both in philosophy and in the wider culture, particularly with the movement known as the Enlightenment. Much of modernism and the Enlightenment was about authority. People no longer wanted their lives to be determined by what the King said, or what the Pope said (or in some cases what God said). The Enlightenment’s answer was to say *I’m my own authority, I control my own life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. Truth isn’t what some authority tells me, but if I look at the world objectively, I will reason it out and build my life.* This idea of the autonomous, objective, rational individual, free from external authority, is at the heart of what some call “the modern project.”

There are other things that go along with modernism, like the elevation of science to the main (sometimes the only) way of knowing, the idea of progress, and the separation between “facts” and “values” where if something isn’t a fact that you can prove on a foundation of science and reason it has second-class status. As we discuss these characteristics, we should recognize that this is more or less the world most of us born before perhaps 1970 grew up in, and certainly the world our parents grew up in. We may not be aware of this, like a fish doesn’t think about the water in which it swims, but as people and as the church we have been immersed in modernism.

To begin talking about postmodernism, which will be the topic of Chapter 3, I want to dispel three common myths about it. First, you often hear postmodernism equated with a denial of the existence of truth (which would be incompatible with the universal claim of Jesus to be “the way, the truth, and the life”). That is a misconception, or at least an oversimplification. It is a valid criticism of some postmodernism, but you can have some postmodern views and still believe in truth, including the truth of Jesus.

³ Available at <http://steamdoc.itgo.com/sci-nature/index.html>.

Second, postmodernism is not the opposite of modernism, any more than Protestant is the opposite of Catholic. There are many things in common – postmodern society is something that has grown out of modernism without leaving all of it behind. In fact, some people reject the word “postmodernism” in favor of terms like “late modernism” or “hypermodernism.”

Third, as I’ve already said, it can’t be considered as just one thing, all good or all bad. We should avoid uncritically accepting everything postmodern because it is “what’s happening now,” but we must also avoid the opposite extreme where we throw the baby out with the bathwater, turning our backs on all of it and missing some things we need to learn.

What characterizes postmodernism? As with modernism, it is both something that arose in academic philosophy and in the broader culture, over the past 100 years or so.

Perhaps the greatest insight postmodern thinkers have is that “we’re not God.” Most of them wouldn’t put it that way, but they reject the modern idea that the individual can have a God’s-eye view and directly know objective truth with total clarity and certainty. We all see things from our particular perspective, which is never totally unbiased. That is a valid observation (and one that Christians should be able to affirm), but the trickier question is what to do after we make that observation. Do we give up on the idea of truly knowing anything, or is there another way to think about knowledge?

A second postmodern insight is that sometimes what we think of as “truth” is determined by what powerful people tell us it is supposed to be. The powerful construct grand stories about what goes on in the world and what it means, and this exercise of power has more influence than most people realize. As a result, postmodernism is suspicious of truth claims, especially when they seem to benefit those who wield power (or who are trying to gain power) in a society.

While postmodernism comes in many flavors, for simplicity we can think of hard and soft varieties. When Christians condemn postmodernism, they are usually thinking about “hard” postmodernism, which tends to go beyond the insights that humans abuse power and can never be totally objective to reject any idea of absolute truth or reliable knowledge, to reject the idea that there can be any grand story (like the gospel) that is true for everybody. But not all postmodernism is like that. There are “soft” forms that recognize the truth in many critiques of modernism, without going to reality-denying extremes. Throughout this course, and especially in Chapter 4, we will seek approaches that avoid the problems of hard postmodernism while also avoiding the problems of modernism.

In Chapter 5, we will turn our attention to the church, which has been deeply shaped by the forces of modernism. We will discuss ways in which some postmodern insights might liberate the church from attitudes and practices that owe more to the Enlightenment than to the Bible. With proper discernment, some of these ideas can steer us toward better use of the Bible, help us appreciate and recover the neglected role of Christian community, lead us to share God’s heart for the poor and marginalized, give us healthier ways to deal with doubt and uncertainty, and encourage us to live as authentic ambassadors for the Kingdom of God. The goal will be to help the church better function as the Body of Christ in our postmodern age, and in any age.