POSTMODERNISM (and Modernism) IN CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE
(Chapter 3: Postmodernism)

Origins of Postmodernism

If modernism had been an unquestioned success, we might not be talking about post-modernism. There was a time when it might have looked to many people like the modern project was working, like human reason and scientific progress were really building a better world. We might have thought that in the early 1900s. There was amazing progress in science and technology: diseases were being cured, electricity was changing the way people lived, the Wright brothers flew in 1903, the Panama Canal was built. Socially, prosperity was increasing, the American frontier was tamed (although that probably didn't seem like progress to Native Americans), more people were being educated, people hoped to eliminate poverty, and there was optimism that civilized societies were finally beyond fighting pointless wars.

Then the promise of modernism came crashing down. The scholars say that World War I, with all its death and futility, was a huge blow to modern optimism about progress toward a better world. Then came the Great Depression, and World War II. People realized that science was a mixed blessing – the same scientist who invented the process to make ammonia for fertilizer to grow more food also invented ways to make poison gas for World War I. Science also gave us the threat of nuclear weapons, and it became clear that pollution of our environment was a side-effect of much technology. All this progress, positive though much of it was, failed to fulfill our deepest longings, for meaning and purpose in our lives.

The time was ripe for leaving modernism behind, but before discussing what came next we need to remember two things from Chapter 1. First, postmodernism is not the opposite of modernism; many traits are carried over from one to the other. We should think of postmodernism as a child of modernism, perhaps a rebellious child. Second, postmodernism isn't one easily defined thing; it's a whole hodgepodge of things. I used the analogy of the Protestant Reformation, where there were many "post-Catholics" with some things in common but also much variety.

We can start with the philosophical roots of postmodernism. Scholars point to the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) as the first postmodernist in some ways. His famous statement "God is dead" wasn't a claim about God's health; it was about the loss of any sense of a foundation for values and meaning. Nietzsche felt we could no longer have certainty in the church, the Bible, or any traditional foundation, so he was saying "God might as well be dead for all the good it does for giving our lives a foundation." He advocated making your own world by exercising power. Nietzsche also introduced the term perspectivism to describe how people are not the rational, objective observers that the Enlightenment imagines; instead of seeing pristine reality we can only see things from our particular perspective. Then postmodernism really hit its stride as a recognized condition of society and an intellectual movement in the 1960s and 70s, and the philosophers we will mention later were a part of that.

Like modernism, postmodernism is not just about philosophers – in parallel there were social changes that helped lead to the postmodern condition. One factor is religious pluralism, which has always existed, but as the world gets smaller it becomes a more present reality. My parents

probably never met any Buddhists until they were middle-aged, but I went to college with some and now children grow up among people from a variety of religions. That close contact makes it easier to start wondering if what you think is ultimate truth is really objectively superior to what they think. Another factor is partly a consequence of modernism's focus on the individual – as individualism runs rampant in society, a philosophy that lets you choose what you want to be true is going to be attractive. The move in culture to images and away from the concrete and modern written word is a part of postmodernism. Movements of liberation for women and people of color, while in part springing from the Enlightenment's valuing of the individual, caused people to recognize that the progress of the modern project often mainly benefited those in power at the expense of the marginalized. And as mentioned above, people realized that these modern visions of progress either weren't working as advertised or didn't satisfy their real longings.

Metanarratives

Before proceeding, we need to understand a key concept: Metanarratives. We know what a narrative is – it is another word for "story." It can be a narrative of actual events or it can be a story communicating in another way (like the parables Jesus told). A metanarrative means a "big story." Big in the sense that it is an all-encompassing story that puts all the little stories in their place, that sets out a grand scheme of the way things are.

Some illustrations will be helpful. The story of the voyage of Christopher Columbus in 1492 is a narrative. But that story is part of a larger metanarrative, the big story of exploration and colonialism, of Europeans supposedly bringing civilization and Christianity to the New World. Another metanarrative is the idea that there is a natural order of things (maybe a God-given order), and usually the people who tell that story put themselves at the top of the order, like kings claiming to rule by divine right. The myth of scientism mentioned in Chapter 2, that science is steadily pushing back the ignorant forces of religion, is a metanarrative, as is the related modern story of secularization, that modern people are realizing that past religious beliefs are just extraneous baggage and therefore can simply be subtracted, with what remains after discarding unneeded superstition being the true path of Enlightenment secularism. Another modern metanarrative is that of progress by building a better world through reason, science, and technology. Marxism is another example; it tells a big story about people and economics and history. Last but not least, we can consider the Christian "big story," which Col. 1:19-20 summarizes: *For in him [Jesus] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of the cross.*

We should note that most of these metanarratives have winners and losers, and it is the winners who tell the stories. For example, in the metanarrative of Europeans bringing civilization to the New World, the Europeans are winners, and Native Americans would not tell the story in the same way. In the modern metanarrative of scientism, science and reason are the winners, and religion is the loser. We might think about whether the Christian story has such winners and losers, or whether it is different. We will come back to that question.

Postmodernism via Dead French Guys

Postmodernism is associated with several philosophers from the late 20th Century, most of whom wrote in French. While it would be a vast oversimplification to reduce such a multifaceted phenomenon to the work of these men, a brief examination of their most famous ideas can introduce us to some key ideas in postmodern thought.

Since we just introduced the concept of metanarratives, we will start with Jean-Francois Lyotard (1924-1998), who described the postmodern condition as **incredulity toward metanarratives**. In other words, the postmodern response to metanarratives is "I don't believe it" or maybe "What is your agenda in telling that story?" What he was talking about was not merely that these were big stories, but that metanarratives pretend to be completely unbiased (which no story can be), and especially that the people who tell the stories cast themselves as the winners, making the stories oppressive tools to gain or exercise power. In the extreme, postmodern suspicion of metanarratives leads to rejection of any story that claims to be universally true. A key observation here is that, at least if we tell it correctly, the Christian story isn't a tool of oppression, it is a tool of liberation. It isn't about us being winners and others being losers; it is about a God who sides with the losers, with the oppressed and the marginalized, it is a story where we are all losers but we can all share in the victory and reconciliation of Jesus. So we can say that the Christian story isn't really the kind of metanarrative Lyotard was talking about.

Second, we consider Michel Foucault (1926-1984). Foucault spent much effort analyzing institutions (like prisons and hospitals) in addition to societies, and one key phrase from his work was **power is knowledge**. This reverses the modernist adage that "knowledge is power." It means that what a society or institution counts as knowledge or holds to be right is not determined in an objective, neutral way as the Enlightenment would have it, but rather as an exercise of the powerful dominating the powerless. This would seem to be a valid observation for many aspects of modern society, as long as it does not make us so suspicious of truth claims that we lose the ability to ever decide that anything is true. We might also think about Biblical truth claims – is Biblical truth about power, or is it about strength in weakness and being on the side of the powerless?

The final figure in our postmodern trinity is Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), whose famous line was **there is nothing outside the text**. That takes some explanation. It is about the connection between words and external reality. He wasn't saying that words can't connect at all to reality, although some of his postmodern followers might go that far. His point was that human language can never directly correspond to reality, that everything we read and write and perceive involves some interpretation (you hear the word "deconstruction," which refers to showing that texts and interpretations aren't as objective as they pretend to be). He is basically saying that we see dimly in a mirror and can't have perfect knowledge. But for some, this valid observation tends to slide into "we are all just interpreting, so we can never make any judgment about what is right."

Characteristics (and Excesses) of Postmodernism

As we did with modernism in Chapter 2, we can describe several, often interrelated, aspects of postmodernism. Again we must recognize that we are describing a mosaic of beliefs, attitudes,

and habits and we cannot pretend to capture all aspects of this phenomenon. Different postmodernists would not necessarily embrace all of the things described below, and even on items where they agree they might draw very different conclusions. For each of these points, it will be important to distinguish the basic postmodern insight from the way in which some take matters to extremes.

- Perspectivism. We already mentioned Nietzsche's concept of "perspectivism," meaning that nobody sees the world from the detached, rational view that modernism envisions. No human has a God's-eye view of reality. Each of the writers we mentioned reinforces this point. For Lyotard, metanarratives are not told with an unbiased view; they are told from the perspective of the winners with an agenda of self-justification. For Foucault, what counts as knowledge is determined at least as much by authorities exercising power as by objective reality. For Derrida, no text gives us an objective view of reality; the interpretive perspectives of both the writer and the reader are always in the way. For Christians, the validity of perspectivism should be obvious. As finite humans, it would be foolish to think that we can ever have a clear God's-eye view. The tricky part is what we do with that realization; this will be a key topic below and in Chapters 4 and 5.

- The death of objective truth? The chief complaint one hears about postmodernism in Christian circles is that it rejects "absolute truth." If we accept the idea of perspectivism, one consequence is that we can't know anything with 100% objective certainty, because our view of reality is imperfect. In other words, it is always possible (even likely) that our view of what is true is distorted. For some postmodernists, this leads to relativism – the idea that truth is only relative to the perspectives of individuals and communities. Relativism, at least if taken to the extreme, would say that all perspectives are equally valid, and that what is true for me may not be true for you. Truth becomes more a matter of opinion than a universal reality. That is clearly a problem for Christians for whom Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, not just locally but universally. But it is important to recognize that perspectivism need not lead to total relativism. Ultimately, this postmodern insight tells us about the limits of human knowledge, not about the limits of truth. It does not tell us that there is no absolute truth – only that humans cannot have absolute knowledge of that truth. We will discuss this further in Chapter 4; for now we will merely say that this insight should lead us to humility but it need not lead to relativism.

- Rejection of Foundationalism. Recall that foundationalism is the way modernism conceives of knowledge, with science and reason building on a sturdy foundation of universally self-evident truth. Most philosophers today (not just postmodernists) would say that no such foundation actually exists – that what any person might assume as foundational is inevitably a subjective product of that person's local perspective. The truths that I find self-evident and foundational may not be shared by my neighbor, or by a person of another time or place. Descartes' method of universal doubt has come back to haunt him; when such doubt is applied to the modern foundationalist approach itself, we find that it does not hold up to scrutiny. Postmodernists would differ as to whether the collapse of modern foundationalism dooms our chance of ever having reliable knowledge, or whether there are non-foundationalist ways to know things.

- Hermeneutics of suspicion. Christians may recognize the term "hermeneutics" from Biblical interpretation; it refers to the assumptions and methods we use in approaching and interpreting the text. More generally, it applies to the way we interpret any texts, or even interpretation of actions or systems. The (French, of course) philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005) coined the phrase "hermeneutics of suspicion" to describe an approach that does not take texts at face value, but instead seeks to unmask agendas and assumptions that may lie behind them. This connects to Derrida's deconstruction and to Lyotard's suspicion of metanarratives. The writer of a text is not the only target of suspicion; a postmodernist might also suspect the hidden agendas of other interpreters and readers. This hermeneutic applies not only to texts; institutions such as churches can be interpreted with suspicion. From a Christian perspective, some suspicion is appropriate, since we recognize that those who produced what we are interpreting (whether writings or institutions) were fallible sinners like ourselves. It becomes excessive when the suspicion is so pervasive that the interpreter is unable to see any meaning or positive value.

- Elevating the voices of the powerless. Because postmodernism critiques the use of power, it is not surprising that it tends to elevate the voices of the marginalized and powerless. Special attention is given to those who have often gone unheard in the modern world, like women, people of color, and those in the Third World. This should be welcomed by Christians, since Jesus consistently lifted up the poor and marginalized. Where this can become problematic is if those with power are demonized – for example blaming white males for all the world's ills, perhaps with the implication that their power needs to be stripped and handed to others. A related excess would be treating the newly elevated voices as above critique, rather than recognizing that the lowly are human and fallible just like the haughty. At the extreme, this can turn into merely a new abuse of power, where the oppressed become the oppressors, like what usually happened when the workers were liberated under Communism.[1]

- Celebration of pluralism and difference. Related to the previous point, postmodernism recognizes that those with power (in modern Western culture, often white male Christians with wealth) tend to dictate that society conform to them and adopt their perspective. Postmodernism rejects this cultural hegemony, saying that other perspectives are just as valid and valuable as those of the privileged. Therefore, great value is often placed on pluralism (the existence of multiple, perhaps conflicting views) and on difference and diversity for its own sake. As Christians, we should see the value in diversity among people. Paul commends diversity in the church in his famous analogy of the Body of Christ (see I Cor. 12), where all the diverse parts are needed for proper functioning. Yet there is a danger when difference is celebrated as an unquestioned good – it can lead to fragmentation in groups and cultures and can undercut any hope of finding unity and common ground among people. Paul celebrates the diversity of the Body of Christ, but also insists that the diverse members should work in unity (which is different from uniformity) for the purposes of God's kingdom.

[1] This point is powerfully illustrated in George Orwell's novel *Animal Farm*.

- Cultural construction of knowledge and truth. A hallmark of postmodern thought is that knowledge and truth are not absolute objects to be discovered like a miner might uncover a diamond, but rather that they are, at least to some extent, *constructed* as a result of our social interactions and the culture in which we are immersed. Truth is what the community decides it is – particularly what those with power decide it is. If we accept the insight of perspectivism that nobody has a God's-eye view of reality, it should be obvious that there is some truth to this observation. There is inevitably a social component to any knowledge we think we have gained, and being part of a culture makes certain things plausible and other things implausible. Even for knowledge that we agree on, our knowledge will not be perfectly identical because each of us has a perspective from a particular social context. Communities and institutions can powerfully shape the views of its members. As Christians who affirm the reality of sin, we should not be surprised that those with power try to manipulate what is accepted as knowledge for their own ends. The key issue is the extent to which what we claim to know is socially constructed. At the extreme, some postmodernists would say that knowledge is only socially constructed, or that the social factors are so dominant that we can never hope to find any universal truth, but only things that seem true in local social contexts. This is another way in which postmodernism can lead to total relativism.

- Cultural formation and construction of people. Postmodernists point out that it is not just knowledge that is constructed in a social context, but also people. We are all products of our cultures and contexts, which influence the sort of people we are more than we realize. Foucault's studies of prisons and other institutions showed how people can be molded by their surroundings. As with the social construction of knowledge, to some extent this is a valid insight. We should recognize that where other people come from will have shaped them into something different from ourselves, and it is useful to recognize that our own inclinations and prejudices are not the product of pure modern rationality, but instead reflect in some measure the social contexts of our lives. At its extreme, however, this can lead to a "victim culture," blaming our surroundings for various wrongs rather than taking personal responsibility.

- The individual consumer. This item may be a surprise, since we also listed the consumer mentality and the primacy of the individual as characteristics of modernism. This illustrates the point that postmodernism is not the opposite of modernism. For modernism, the focus is on the individual as a rational thinker and as a consumer driving the modern economy. For postmodernism, it is manifested more as individuals choosing beliefs and lifestyles like shoppers at the market, making choices as consumers of what they want to be true for them. Although it may take different forms, most postmodernism has fully adopted modernism's focus on the individual.

Case Study: Postmodernism and Science

It is fair to say that postmodernism has had little impact on the practice of science. Scientists continue to work in the same way, without thinking about the philosophical issues. The more radical postmodern ideas that paint scientific knowledge as entirely socially constructed are sometimes seen as dangers and/or as objects of ridicule – a famous "ridicule" episode involved

physicist Alan Sokal, who submitted an intentionally nonsensical paper "Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity" to the postmodern journal *Social Text*, which published it without noticing that it was nonsense.

However, if they think about it, many scientists will admit that there is some validity to insights of postmodernism. Real science, done by real people, does not live up to the modern ideal of total objectivity and logic. This does not make science untrustworthy, but it does mean that its results are not always as clear and objective as many scientists (and advocates of the modern project) like to think. Sociologists of science such as Thomas Kuhn and Harry Collins have shown that, especially in areas of science without consensus, human factors such as pride, competition, social agendas, power, and authority can affect the trajectory and conclusions of scientific work. This should not be surprising, since science is performed by humans.

There are some who take postmodern analysis of science to extremes. For example, some take the legitimate point that what passes for knowledge can sometimes be a tool of power to imply that science is just white men exercising their power and deciding what should be true. Some feminist critics have seen the way physics talks about forces acting on objects as reflective of "male" power and violence.[2] The radical postmodern claim that knowledge is only a social construction does not sit well with science; scientists would say that gravity exists regardless of whether the social structures or the people in power believe in it. Sometimes these views are seen as attacks on science itself, producing retaliation such as the Sokal hoax in what are sometimes referred to as the "science wars."

Postmodern attacks on science can also be seen in one surprising location – among religious and political conservatives. Most of these people would profess strong opposition to postmodernism. Yet, when it comes to science that they don't like (such as evolutionary biology or climate science), one hears conspiratorial claims that the scientific consensus is just a social construction of powerful people with agendas. It is ironic when people who in other contexts would decry postmodern relativism say such postmodern-sounding things about science.

Postmodernism and the Church

Much of the Christian church, especially the Evangelical church, views postmodernism as a threat. Forms of postmodernism that involve total relativism and denial of the existence of absolute truth would seem to be in direct conflict with the primary Christian claim that Jesus is the truth, not just in a Christian cultural context but universally. In some parts of the church, this has led to a mentality in which postmodernism is repelled by building up a fortress of doctrine in fully modern form. This may not be the wisest move; as we saw in Chapter 2, the modern project has its own set of problems from a Christian perspective. In a few parts of the church, there have been efforts to constructively appropriate the insights of postmodernism. We will further discuss such efforts in Chapter 5.

[2] An extreme example was provided by the philosopher Sandra Harding, who called Isaac Newton's masterpiece the *Principia* a "rape manual."

Final Thoughts

In evaluating any unfamiliar movement, there is a temptation to focus on the extremes. If we judge postmodernism by its excesses, branding it as "those people who have abandoned the idea of truth," we may throw the baby out with the bathwater and condemn anything that sounds even slightly postmodern, perhaps retreating into some tower of modernism. But judging postmodernism by the extremes is like judging Christianity by sleazy televangelists. We shouldn't pretend that the extremes don't exist, but we shouldn't let them define the whole movement.

I would suggest that a better assessment of postmodernism is "good diagnosis, but often bad prescription." Many of its insights, such as the inability of humans to have a God's-eye view of reality and the degree to which the stories told by the powerful can be tools of oppression, are things that Christians should affirm. Rather than blanket, knee-jerk condemnation, it is more constructive to listen to what the postmodernists have to say – we may find ourselves agreeing with much of their critique of the modern project, even as we disagree with some of the directions they advocate after making those critiques.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, it may be helpful to think of hard and soft postmodernism, where we can reject the extremes of reality-denying "hard" forms while recognizing that the "soft" forms can have valuable things to teach us. The trick will be finding a way to navigate these waters without being swept into the extremes; this navigation will be the topic of Chapter 4.