

POSTMODERNISM (and Modernism) IN CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE (Chapter 2: The Modern Project)

Before we can talk intelligently about Postmodernism, we need to understand what it grew out of. Postmodernism is reacting to what is often referred to as “the modern project,” which has been the dominant way of thinking about things in the Western world for the past 300 years or so. We’ll start with a little history.

Origins of Modernism

The development of modernism combined philosophy with social and cultural factors. On the philosophical side, the first thing to note is that modernism didn’t just appear out of nowhere; some of the building blocks were already present. For example, much of Greek philosophy emphasized logical reasoning, and the separation of the spiritual from the material. Around the 13th Century, scholastics such as Thomas Aquinas combined Greek philosophy with Christianity, and one of their main concepts was a separation between truths of reason and truths of faith, with reason coming first, so that philosophy became a prerequisite for theology. This elevation of human reason helped prepare the way for modernism.

The philosophical aspect of the modern project really took root with the movement known as the Enlightenment, and that began with the French philosopher Rene Descartes (1596-1650). Descartes was commissioned by a Roman Catholic Cardinal to defend the faith against skepticism and to provide support for Christian society in a time of social and political turmoil. He started from a good observation – that we can’t always trust our perceptions or what some authority tells us. His solution was to doubt everything, discarding anything that couldn’t be demonstrated purely by reason. You might think that wouldn’t leave you with much (some would say it doesn’t leave you with anything), but what he decided was beyond doubt was his own existence as a thinking individual. This led to his famous statement: *I think, therefore I am*. We might reword that as *I am a thinking being, therefore I exist*. From that foundation, with logic and reason and science, he claimed you could build all sorts of certain knowledge. As the modern world developed, others didn’t start with “I think, therefore I am,” but Descartes’ idea of the objective individual, starting with a foundation that was beyond doubt and building on it with pure reason, became generally assumed as the only reliable path to knowledge.

Some have noted that this philosophy is self-defeating in a sense. If your method is to doubt everything, then to be consistent you really should doubt your method. Why not doubt the assumption that human reason can be 100% objective and reliable? A philosophical method based on doubting ultimately digs its own grave, because it gives you no reason not to doubt the very foundation of your method.

This brings us to a key concept called foundationalism. Foundationalism depends on finding universal truths that are self-evident beyond a doubt. On that foundation, you build everything else with the tools of science and human reason (which are the only tools the Enlightenment allows). Descartes and his successors thought you could build a lot in that way – not just science and ethics but also theology. We will come back to foundationalism later.

The cultural and social aspects that built the modern world were also important; some would say these factors were more important than the philosophers. At a minimum, they made the things the philosophers were saying seem right. Experts could name many such factors; I'll just give a few examples. One is material prosperity. As the world became more prosperous, it became easier to be your own authority, and as we will discuss below the authority of the individual is at the heart of modernity. The growth of consumer capitalism put the consuming individual at the center of things. The growth of the printed word (and literacy) shaped readers to think more linearly and in terms of abstract propositions; it also led them to think of themselves as objective individuals. The growth of democracy was closely tied to the modern project; America's Founding Fathers were very much advocates of the Enlightenment (*we hold these truths to be self-evident* is classic Enlightenment thought). Science and technology brought impressive advances, so people could look at the telescope, the steam engine, and the electric light and agree with the philosophers that progress through reason was the pinnacle of human achievement.

Characteristics of Modernism

In sketching its history, I haven't actually defined modernism, and I'm not sure it makes sense to try. Like postmodernism, it is not one monolithic thing; it is a mosaic of beliefs and attitudes and habits. Instead, we will list some characteristics of modernism, so that we can begin to get a picture of this complex phenomenon. Anticipating some things we'll discuss later, I will briefly mention some pros and cons from a Christian perspective.

- Primacy of the autonomous, rational, objective individual, rejecting external authority. This is probably the most important product of the Enlightenment – the idea that we all should reason for ourselves, and that the only authority that matters is our own reason. Our identities are more about each of us individually than about being in a community or under an authority. This is accompanied by the assertion that these reasoning individuals can be totally objective, with a “God’s-eye view” of truth that directly corresponds to reality. From a Christian perspective, we can see aspects consistent with the idea that each individual is important in God’s eyes and bears God’s image. It is probably good for us to be free from the authority and oppression of kings and Caesars, although we might think about how other power structures continue to oppress people in the modern world. On the negative side, we should not want to reject all authority; as Christians we are under God’s authority.¹ In addition, recognition of our sinfulness ought to make us suspicious of the ability of human reason to perfectly grasp truth. Perhaps the biggest negative is the elevation of the individual at the expense of the community. God calls us into the Body of Christ in a way that puts others above our individual desires. That kind of self-sacrificing participation in community goes against the grain of modernism. It is interesting that Descartes came up with his approach by shutting himself in his room for days; no wonder it is centered around the individual (I think, therefore I am) with no place for community.
- Foundationalism. As mentioned before, this is the idea that one starts with an unshakeable foundation of self-evident truth and builds everything on that. We’ll see later how this has shaped the modern church in some regrettable ways.

¹ In Matthew 28:18, Jesus says *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.*

- The only truth that counts is that from objective human reason and science. This is, of course, problematic for Christians. For us, many of the most important truths, like the love of Jesus and our call to live as vessels of self-sacrificing love, don't come from human reason. Truth from science and reason is a good thing, and Christians should pursue it because ultimately all truth is God's truth. But ultimately, we miss the most important truths if we limit it in this way.
- Science and technology for mastery over nature. For the modern project, nature is something external for humans to conquer and exploit. To a limited extent, this can go along with our mandate in Genesis 1 to have dominion over the rest of creation. It is good that science and technology can help us manage fisheries and forests, grow food, and build structures to withstand weather and earthquakes. What this misses, however, is the Biblical concept of stewardship, the idea that *the Earth is the Lord's and everything in it*² and that we are called to use science and technology not for our selfish short-term gain, but rather as stewards on behalf of God who calls all of creation "good." The destructive consequences of this aspect of modernism on God's creation have become increasingly evident in recent decades.
- Belief in "progress" (by human efforts). The idea of progress, of history moving toward a goal, is not necessarily bad. In contrast with some religions that see existence as a repeating cycle, Christian theology sees history as moving toward an end, when all things will be reconciled in Jesus Christ. But modernism's vision of progress is very different. It is all about human science and technology and reason building a better world. Some have observed that the modern idea of progress is like the tower of Babel, where humans think that they can build up to Heaven by their own efforts. That story does not end well for the people who are so confident about their progress.
- Human identity as individual consumers. Modernism tends to see people not only as reasoning individuals, but also as consumers. We are defined by what we consume, and much of life consists of choosing what to consume. You only have to watch TV for one evening to see how pervasive that aspect of modernism is. I hope that some negatives there are clear to Christians; in God's eyes what we give is much more important than what we consume. A more subtle problem comes about when we bring a consumer attitude into the church; we'll discuss that later in this chapter.
- Separation of "facts" from "values". In this dichotomy, "facts" (objective truth from science and reason) tend to be viewed as what really counts, and "values" (human preferences, usually including spiritual things) are seen as less important and less real. Christians should see some value in this separation. It is good to be able to distinguish between facts, like how and why the Earth is getting warmer, and values, like what the ethical course of action is in response to these facts. But it is not good for Christians to let God be pushed into this category of things that are less real, where how we view God and how God calls us to live in the world falls in the same category as what flavor of ice cream we prefer.

² Psalm 24:1

Case Study: Modernism and Science

Because of my own interests, and because specific examples can be helpful, we will examine science from both the modern and (in the next chapter) postmodern perspectives. There is some “which came first, the chicken or the egg?” when thinking about modernism and science, since a major characteristic of modernism is its optimism about the capabilities of science to enable human progress. Science and the modern project are intertwined, so instead of worrying about cause and effect we will consider what modern science looks like.

The most obvious connection to science is modernism’s idea of the rational, objective thinker with direct access to reality. This certainly fits with our cultural stereotypes of science – men in white lab coats, or disheveled men in front of blackboards, gathering facts and figuring out Truth. We will discuss later how this may be a misleading picture, but the modern, logical way of thinking does lend itself well to successful science.

Another aspect of modernism is foundationalism. For modern science, the foundation is the real world, and then also our ability to employ the scientific method to gain objective truth about that world (so human reason is also a foundation). This is not a bad philosophy of science. Especially important is the idea that the real world is the ultimate arbiter of right and wrong, so that actual study of that world (rather than pure philosophizing) is necessary. That may seem obvious, but it was not always so. Natural philosophers (a pre-Enlightenment name for what we now call scientists) sometimes did not test their philosophical speculations against nature. So the modern approach to science is a great improvement – as long as we recognize its limitations. Which brings us to a darker side of modern science.

Science is important in modernism, both as a tool for progress and as a paradigm for how to reason and discover truth. This has led to the modern phenomenon that some have called “scientism.” Science is a wonderful and successful tool for gaining knowledge within its domain (study of the internal workings of the natural world). But for scientism, science is the only valid way of knowing, and scientific truth is the only truth that matters. Scientism refuses to acknowledge the limitations of science, either insisting that science speak the final word on areas outside its domain (like ethics or the supernatural) or else saying that these areas don’t exist or don’t matter because they can’t be studied by science.

Like many religions, scientism has a central myth, a story that it tells to convey its core values. In this myth, we have the bad old days where the world was enchanted and people saw gods and demons everywhere. Then along came modern science, providing natural explanations to replace the supernatural, often in spite of the religious people who clung to their old ways. As science marches inexorably forward, religion is relegated to an ever-smaller corner, until that glorious day when civilized society will have left behind such superstition and ignorance. The seductive thing about this particular myth is that there is at least a little truth to it. We now know that lightning and thunder arise from static electricity, not God’s anger. It is good that we can diagnose and treat mental illness that once might have been attributed to demons. And, while it is not as common as the secular storytellers would have us believe, on occasion religious authorities have obstinately stuck to dogma and stood in the way of better understanding of the natural world (the persecution of Galileo is the standard example). But there are at least two things wrong with this myth. First, it assumes that God is found only in the gaps in human knowledge, and that once a natural explanation is found it removes God

from the picture. This “god-of-the-gaps” framing misses not only the Christian doctrine of God’s sovereignty over nature (where natural explanations don’t compete with God but rather show how God works), but also the fact that the Christian conception of God is much more than an explanation to fill in gaps in our understanding. Second, while science has falsified a few interpretations over the years, there is no justification for believing that it must inevitably render all religious beliefs obsolete. To fully accept this modern myth is not scientific; it is an act of faith.

Modernism and the Church

Perhaps the best place to begin considering the way the church has dealt with modernism is to examine the so-called “Fundamentalist/Modernist controversies” that deeply divided many Protestant churches and denominations in the early 20th Century (and that still echo in many places today). The important insight from this history is that both sides of this controversy were “modernist” in the sense I am using that term here.

We can think of the fundamentalist/modernist controversy as an argument about foundations. As Christians, our first reaction to the concept of foundationalism might be that we have a foundation – as the old hymn says, *The church’s one Foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord.*³ But such a foundation doesn’t pass muster for philosophical foundationalism – that requires a foundation that is self-evident, that every rational human can agree on, and until the day when God’s Kingdom is fully consummated, Jesus isn’t something everybody can agree on.

What did the church do with the modern expectation that it needed a foundation that would satisfy the philosophers? There were two main reactions. The modernists (today we would call most of them “liberal mainline Protestants”) decided to make their foundation universal human experience. You can’t use Jesus as a foundation because that is too particular, but many people have religious experience, some sense of something greater than themselves, so they went with that. You can see how that might leave Christian orthodoxy behind.

The fundamentalists went a different direction. They made the Bible the foundation, but in a very modern way, insisting that it be a perfect book by modernism’s standards of perfection. Of course the Bible isn’t universally agreed on like foundationalism demands, so the strategy was to give the Bible that status by the using the Enlightenment’s criteria to establish it as perfect. That has at least two problems. First, while I affirm the inspiration of Scripture, this “perfect book” approach just doesn’t work. It would take us too far afield to talk about all the ways the fundamentalist approach makes the Bible into a house of cards that can’t bear the weight they want to put on it. But there is a second problem, which is that this approach uses human standards to judge the Bible, when we should be looking for it to judge us. Karl Barth, who studied under modernist liberalism but rejected it and moved to a more conservative (but not fundamentalist) place, once said: *If something external to the Word of God is necessary to establish the Word of God as true, then it is greater than the Word of God.* In other words, it demeans the Bible if we insist that it conform to human-constructed ideas of what a foundational book should be.

³ I Cor. 3:11 says *For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.*

For both the modernists and the fundamentalists in this case, I think the root problem was the assumption that the Christian faith had to be constructed along the lines of Enlightenment foundationalism.

We can identify another way in which fundamentalism was influenced by modernism. In the 19th Century, a popular approach to knowledge was Scottish Common Sense Realism (so called because it originated with Enlightenment philosophers in Scotland). George Marsden, the leading scholar of American fundamentalism, described it⁴ as the view that *any sane and unbiased person of common sense could and must perceive the same things* and that *basic truths are much the same for all persons in all times and places*. This was very influential in the development of fundamentalism; it was how people were taught to think about things in conservative seminaries. The center of this approach was Princeton Seminary, led in the mid-19th Century by the venerable conservative Presbyterian Charles Hodge, who was heavily influenced by Common Sense Realism. Princeton is no longer devoted to that philosophy, but Hodge's approach still dominates many conservative Evangelical circles.

There are several problems with this philosophy. First, "common sense" is not always universal; what is common sense for a white American man in 1850 (like Charles Hodge, who among other things thought slavery made sense) doesn't necessarily work for everyone at all times. Second, from a Christian standpoint, the fact that we are finite and sinful should make us hesitant to fully trust our common sense. Third, the Bible says that some of the things of God are foolishness to those without the Holy Spirit (see for example I Cor. 1:18-25 and I Cor. 2:14). Some important Christian truths don't fit with common sense, such as a crucified Messiah, Jesus being fully God and fully human, and "the first shall be last." We can't expect the gospel to make complete sense to people, until or unless the Holy Spirit works on them. This is not to say that there's no value in common sense, or that we shouldn't try to explain the gospel in ways that make sense as much as possible, just that this movement, and much of the fundamentalism that came out of it, expected too much of human common sense.

The reactions of the church to modern science are interesting. By the early 1900s, it had become obvious that some things the Bible seems to say about the natural world (if it is read as a science text) didn't match what science was showing us about the world. This was also a part of the fundamentalist/modernist controversies mentioned above. Modernists said "the Bible is wrong about science" and used that to argue that it was probably wrong about other things, so they demoted the Bible to a lesser role (more of a guide for morality) and tried to base faith on human experience and reason. Fundamentalists wanted to make the Bible their foundation, so they denied the evidence in nature and adopted alternative pseudoscience (what we now call "creationism") to save their view of the Bible. What did the fundamentalists and the modernists have in common? They both had a "modern" view of the Bible, assuming that since science was the #1 way to know truth, for the Bible to be valuable it should meet the standards of a science textbook. Neither side stopped to think that the Bible might be communicating truth in other ways, because in modern thought those other ways (story, parable, figurative language) are second-class truth at best.

⁴ In his book *Fundamentalism and American Culture*

The church also followed modernism's elevation of scientific reasoning to great importance. Even the fundamentalists who reject much of modern science call their work "creation science." Scientific arguments to try and prove God became especially popular in the early 1800s. The work of Rev. William Paley, who argued from "design" in nature, was very influential until the work of Darwin and others destroyed most of Paley's arguments – but the spirit of Paley lives on in the modern "Intelligent Design" movement.

Also interesting is how modern thinking has led the church to take science as its model for other things; doctrines are often expressed in scientific terms. Probably the most influential gospel tract of the 20th Century, the "Four Spiritual Laws" of Campus Crusade for Christ,⁵ starts with these words: *Just as there are physical laws that govern the physical universe, so are there spiritual laws that govern your relationship with God.* That is a very modern way to present the gospel, framing it like scientific laws. Similarly, Charles Hodge, the conservative icon mentioned above, described his approach to the Bible: *The Bible is to the theologian what nature is to the man of science. It is his store-house of facts; and his method of ascertaining what the Bible teaches, is the same as that which the natural philosopher adopts to ascertain what nature teaches.* Hodge saw the Bible as a source of data to be synthesized into a system (his influential 3-volume *Systematic Theology* was published in 1872). We will discuss in Chapter 5 some of the potential problems with considering the Bible primarily as a source for a science-like system.

The Modern Evangelical Church

In this section, we will note some additional ways in which the Enlightenment modernism that saturates our culture has made its way into the church, particularly the Evangelical church. I will particularly emphasize negative aspects, but we should remember that many of these have positive aspects as well. Note that in some cases I will be speaking of extremes – not all Evangelical churches are like this, although most have some element of these items.

We already mentioned modernism being about the individual. One thing this has led to is an incomplete gospel that is only about personal salvation. While personal salvation is an essential part of the picture, in the modern church it can become all about "me and Jesus," without recognizing that salvation means becoming a part of God's family and is lived out in the context of that community. Many modern Christians see the "you" statements in our English translations of the New Testament (such as *You are the light of the world* or *By grace you have been saved*) and automatically assume they are directed to individuals like themselves, when in most such cases the "you" in the original Greek is plural (like *y'all* for the Southerners among us), referring to a community of Jesus-followers. Another example is provided by the famous "Four Spiritual Laws" tract mentioned above; its first law is *God loves you and offers a wonderful plan for your life.* That is very modern in its focus on the individual, and in its consumerism – "wonderful plan for your life" sounds like modern consumer marketing.

The consumerism of modern society also causes us to become consumers of church. The term "church shopping" has become part of our vocabulary. Because of our consumer mentality,

⁵ The organization recently changed its name to "Cru," recognizing the unpleasant historical connotation of "Crusade" for a Christian group.

we expect the professionals to dispense ministry to us rather than understanding that we're all ministers, all important parts of the body of Christ. Worship services can become all about performances by skilled preachers and musicians, setting them apart from the congregation and diminishing the sense of community.

We have already noted the way the church wants the Bible to be a more modern document than it is meant to be. Modernism likes timeless universal ideas (as found in some of the letters of Paul and in the Gospel of John); it doesn't like specific stories (as found in the synoptic Gospels). Of course the Bible has some of both. Too often the modern Evangelical church wants to put all of the Bible into a box where everything is propositions and systematic doctrine. Thankfully, as we will discuss further in Chapter 5, parts of the church are starting to recognize how much of the Bible communicates in narrative forms, for example recovering the Gospel stories of the things Jesus said and did as important sources for shaping our faith.

Finally, modernism likes black and white thinking and certainty. Questions, doubts, shades of gray, mystery, and rethinking some doctrine decided 300 years ago don't tend to be welcomed. We'll talk more about that in Chapter 5.

I hope these observations have made the point that, whatever we may think of postmodernism, the answer to its challenges is not an uncritical embrace of modernism, because modernism has its own set of problems for the Christian community.