

# The Impact of Postmodernism on Our Ministry and Its Antidote

By Stephen P. Valleskey

[Paper prepared for the pastoral conference at Abiding Faith, Ft. Worth, TX, and 26-27 April 1999]

*"All the foundations of the earth are shaken. " (Psalm 82:5)*

What if you lived in a world where truth was no longer valued as noble and good? Where not only the truth of the Bible was challenged, but the category of truth altogether? Where language was viewed as incapable of rendering truth in an objective way? Where truth is put in the same category as beauty, that it's all in the eye of the beholder? Where reality and truth become social constructs? Where all reality is virtual reality? Where colleges and universities encourage the search for truth, but at the same time argue that truth does not exist? Where pragmatism and utilitarianism reign supreme? Where the question asked by teacher and student alike is no longer "Is it true?" but "What use is it?" and "How much is it worth?" Where a rock group like Johnny Rotten and the Sex Pistols defines the standard with "If nothing is true, everything is possible"?

What if you ministered with the gospel in a culture where any attempt at an overarching explanation of the universe and our place in it (metanarrative) was viewed as futile and intrinsically evil? Where fragmentation, indeterminacy, and intense distrust of all universal systems were the hallmark of thought? Where every metanarrative (or "universal and totalizing discourse") was decried as a tool of oppression? Where the prevailing mood of the times signified the death of all metanarratives?

What if you were trying to communicate ideas in an intellectual climate held in the grips of the "hermeneutics of suspicion" which viewed all social intercourse as masks for power? Where history had no objectivity and truth was seen as nothing more than an act of power? Where the so-called scientific objectivity and all Western science's technological achievements were viewed as "texts" that mask the male desire to subjugate, exploit; and sexually abuse "Mother Nature"? Where the whole world becomes a "text" to be deconstructed? Where we live in a "prison house of language"? Where liberation comes from rebelling against existing power structures, including oppressive notions of "knowledge" and "truth," as in gay agenda, feminist agenda, save the whales or other misanthropocentric agenda?

What if you taught Bible class in a culture where there is no more right and wrong? Where everything is based on personal choice or desire? Where true religion is not a set of beliefs about what is real and what is not, but rather religion is a preference, a choice? Where the in-word of the culture is "lifestyle" with its implication of choices of styles in which to live our lives?

What if you lived in a world of art where artists were no longer capable of putting objective meaning into their works? Where since there are no absolutes, all meaning is subjective and relative? Where the reader solely determines the meaning of the book and the viewer solely decides the significance of the painting? Where the distinction between truth and fiction is blurred to the point where everything becomes fiction? Where Andy Warhol says, "the reason why I'm painting this way is that I want to be a machine"?

What if you lived in an environment where the argument was seriously advanced (by a former Sierra Club president) that the destruction of human life is no more tragic than the destruction of the wilderness, that "while the death of young men in war is unfortunate, it is no more serious than the touching of mountains and wilderness areas by humankind"? Where a Finnish Green Party activist contends that human beings are an evolutionary mistake, a cancer on the earth, and expresses a greater sympathy for threatened insect species than for children dying of hunger in Africa? Where to regard one's own species superior to any other is branded "species-ism"? Where a president of the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals says that "A rat is a pig is a dog is a boy" in the conviction that a human child is not innately better and should have no higher privileges than other members of the animal kingdom? Where the only issue in the abortion debate becomes choice? Where to destroy an eagle's egg can get you six months and a \$10,000 fine, but to kill a human in the womb

gets you off scot-free? Where a conscienceless killer like Dr. Death (Kevorkian) becomes a kind of priest of the New Age administering his own brand of last rites?

How would you like to rightly divide law and gospel in a "therapeutic culture" where a sense of psychological well-being, not truth, is the controlling value? To send your children to school for an outcome-based education that by grades avoidance removes us one step farther from a life governed by any measure of objectivity?

How would you like to formulate your theology in the context of a pluralism of ideas that gives equal weight to any and every opinion as long as it is not the majority opinion and it expresses tolerance of every other view?<sup>i</sup>

Welcome to the postmodern world!

Seventy percent of Americans today believe that there are no absolutes. While the majority of Americans (60 percent) still believes that the Bible is totally accurate in all it teaches, unbelievably two out of three Americans reject the notion of absolute truth. Three out of five adults do not believe in Satan. Nearly two out of three adults contend that the choice of one religious faith over another is irrelevant because all faiths teach the same basic lessons about life. Three out of five say that all people pray to the same god, regardless of what name or character we ascribe to it. Americans are nearly evenly divided regarding whether or not Christ was perfect, almost half of the public believing that Jesus made mistakes while he was on earth.<sup>ii</sup> And this in the face of the fact that the majority of Americans accept the Bible as God's truth. This has led pollster George Barna to write a book called "Absolute Confusion," and Barna and others to raise the question: What's going on here?<sup>iii</sup>

No one of us will want to deny that we live in times of epochal change, that the impact of this change on our gospel ministry has been monumental, and that failure to read and understand the times in which we have been called to serve will be to the detriment and loss of the gospel.

Irving Kristol, a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, describes the current time as "a shaking of the foundations of the modern world."<sup>iv</sup> One perceptive student of our culture writes, "A massive intellectual revolution is taking place that is perhaps as great as that which marked off the modern world from the Middle Ages... The principles forged during the Enlightenment. . .which formed the foundations of the modern mentality, are crumbling."<sup>v</sup> It will be, in part, a purpose of this paper to evaluate whether statements of that sort are hyperbolic and excessive, or if what we are living through is in fact that dramatic and earth-shaking.

We live, we are told, in "postmodern" times. What that means is not perfectly agreed upon. To some, postmodernism represents "the final escape from the stultifying legacy of 'modernism,' the European theology, philosophy, colonialism, racism and domination that have characterized Western civilization since the times of Bacon and Descartes." Others less friendly to postmodernism see the movement as "the attempt by disgruntled left-wing intellectuals to destroy Western civilization." Still others tend to dismiss it as "a weird collection of hermetically obscure writers who are really talking about nothing at all."<sup>vi</sup>

Contributing to the difficulty of definition is the fact that the term "postmodern" is used to qualify a wide variety of distinct or barely overlapping fields - art, architecture, philosophy, theology, economics, literature, history, communications, politics, education - and does not necessarily mean the same thing as it moves from one field to the next. The way we use the term "baroque" provides something of a parallel. In music baroque represents one of the highest attainments achieved in the arts, while in architecture baroque stands for gaudy and excessive. The great advances in architecture that spurred medieval church builders to new creative heights - such as the discovery of flying buttresses to support the massive cathedral roofs independent of the walls, leaving the nonbearing walls free to incorporate large areas of stained glass - were all in place prior to the baroque era. This left baroque architects little to do than embellish and adorn, which they did to excess. Baroque music by contrast was composed during an intensely creative period and is notable for its restraint and brevity of statement. So not all baroque is baroque, at least not in the same sense. And not all postmodern means one and the same thing.

Some suggest a distinction between "postmodern" as a description of the times in which we live and "postmodernist" as a philosophic outlook and cultural mindset that is largely existentialist, nihilist and relativist.

If we accept that distinction as legitimate, and we see no reason not to, we all become "postmoderns" by virtue of living in postmodern times, but as confessional Lutherans we reject the tenets of "postmodernism." This is not to say that in postmodern times there are not also many who still press the modern or even pre-modern viewpoints. But they (and we) do so within the context of a world that by broad consensus has become postmodern.

Since a precise definition is elusive, some see postmodernism more as a wait-and-see-what-will-happen-next era. The main point of agreement among postmodernists is that the modern experiment has ended (or failed), and it is not yet clear what will happen next, so we may call it postmodern for now. One writer deplors the overuse of the term and calls for a moratorium on or, at least, sharp curtailment in its use:

Postmodernism now qualifies as one of those words whose linguistic career resembles that of a kitchen sponge. I have in mind a sponge that, when first purchased, is kept in a special place (usually by the kitchen sink) and reserved for a specific task or two (scrubbing dishes, say, and wiping off counters). Over time, someone uses it for first one and then another quite different job (removing a carpet stain, washing out the shower). Soon, the sponge may be found anywhere, even the garage. It has become worthless for most purposes; a pattern of random and expanding usage has rendered it so.

The word "postmodern" is now far Bough along in this process that the first temptation is to toss it out. But, for certain things, it still works better than any other word at our disposal. Therefore, it makes sense to restore its utility by using it less promiscuously.

I propose a scholarly moratorium on using "postmodern" as a code word for blame-or for praise. In cases where there are readily available, and more specific, alternatives, let's use them. If one is concerned about nihilism or relativism creeping into scholarship, say so.

Let's also agree that because of the many fundamental changes in the world in recent years—from means of communication to geopolitical configurations—we are living in a post-something era, the exact nature of which remains unclear.

Clearly, dangers exist in the scholarly strategies sometimes called postmodern. Playfulness and self-reflexivity can quickly become self-indulgent ends in *themselves*. An obsession with questioning all traditional narratives can be paralyzing. Remaining open to every conceivable alternative plot, for example, can keep historians from getting on with their work.<sup>vii</sup>

Postmodern playfulness has led some critics to speak of the "unbearable lightness of postmodernism."

What Indiana University's Jeffrey Wasserstrom says above about education applies as well to theology. We theologians will want to guard against a trendy labeling of every irregularity that appears on the contemporary cultural or theological scene as "postmodernist"

### Origins of Postmodernism

British historian Arnold Toynbee is sometimes credited with coining the term "postmodern" in his "A Study of History" published in 1939.<sup>viii</sup> In fact, it appeared as early as 1917 in a work by the German philosopher Rudolf Pannwitz to describe the nihilism of 20th century Western culture, a theme he picked up on from Friedrich Nietzsche.<sup>ix</sup> The Spanish literary critic Federico de Onis used it in 1934 to refer to the backlash against literary modernism.<sup>x</sup> In 1939 it passed into the English language in two different ways, through British theologian Bernard Bell to mean the recognition of the failure of secular modernism and a return to religion,<sup>xi</sup> and through Toynbee, in his work above, to describe a new historical epoch he saw in the making with the rise of the working class in post-World War I society, although elsewhere he appears to have discerned postmodernism to have emerged as early as the 1870s.

The term "postmodernism" came into prominence in the 1950s and 1960s in the jargon of literary criticism as a reaction against aesthetic modernism, and in the 1970s appeared in architecture in the same way. According to the much heralded pronouncement of Charles Jencks, who has been called the "single most influential proponent of architectural postmodernism," the modern world died and postmodernism was born at 3:32 PM in the afternoon on July 15, 1972 in St. Louis, Missouri, when the Pruitt-Igoe housing project in St.

Louis, which had stood as the epitome of modernity in utilizing technology to create a utopian environment, was abandoned as a dismal failure by its developers and government planners at a loss of millions of dollars and razed with dynamite. To Jencks, this event symbolized the death of modernity and the birth of postmodernity.

In the 1980s the term "postmodern" began to appear in philosophy as a general reaction against modern rationalism and "foundationalism," the attempt to establish the foundations of knowledge, which had been the preoccupation of philosophy since the time of Rene Descartes, or arguably since Plato raised his philosophic objections to Homer and the mythology of the poets. How do we know what we know. Postmodernism takes the side of the poets against Plato, and in this respect may be seen as just the latest wave in the critique of the Enlightenment and its excessive reliance on reason as the only path to truth, along the lines of the nineteenth century Romantic reaction to rationalism.

With postmodernism there is a reopening of 'the ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy' after roughly 2500 years in which philosophy, reason, and finally science in their various forms sought the attenuation or expurgation of everything not themselves on the question of truth.<sup>xii</sup>

That is to say, postmodernism is not all bad and may even be viewed as an improbable ally in the fight against rationalism. Postmodernism is every bit as opposed as Christian orthodoxy to the pretentious and blatantly groundless claims of modernism that there is no truth other than that which conforms to the canons of human reason. Let's not forget that rationalism and the Enlightenment have been no friends to the Christian faith in their a priori rejection of the possibility of revelation. The stated aim of the Enlightenment was to free humankind from the superstitious grip of religion. Postmodernism at least leaves open the question of religion as a source of truth, but at some expense to reason, and ultimately at the expense of truth itself. But what is it they say about the enemy of my enemy being my friend?

### **From Modernism to Postmodernism**

In order to come to grips with postmodernism we need to understand the "modernism" against which postmodernism is reacting. Some see the beginnings of the modern era in the Renaissance and the Reformation with the breakdown of the authority of the medieval church. Others see it as one and the same with the Age of the Enlightenment. One writer limits the modern era to the precise two hundred year period delineated by the fall of the Bastille in 1789 and the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989.<sup>xiii</sup> Others go all the way back to Plato and his battles with the poets and mythology to find the beginnings of the modern era. While it is difficult, and finally not that important, to fix a precise starting and ending point for any intellectual era, we may say with assurance that by World War I, at least, a new form of human society had developed in Europe and North America that had been several centuries in the making.

For our purposes we will call the premodern era in Western civilization the broad period from the birth of philosophy in Thales through the Renaissance and Reformation until the close of the religious wars and the Peace of Westphalia in the middle of the seventeenth century. The modern era then would cover roughly the period commonly called the Enlightenment or the Age of Reason (1650-1800) to the present, when it is, or is not, being supplanted by something that is not yet, or is yet to come, which we call postmodernism.

That the modern world has not been just a matter of machines, technology, industrialization and higher living standards is highlighted by sociologist Peter Berger's profound question: Are we simply ancient Egyptians in airplanes?<sup>xiv</sup> The answer obviously is that the change is much deeper than just in the tools we use, but in the human mind and culture.

A description of the modern mind would include "forward-looking," "strong belief in progress," "utopian," "teleological" (things are headed toward a goal), and a general disdain for the past and history in favor of the future. Truth is attainable in a modern world. Human reason and technology hold the solution to all problems. We can build the model human society on the universal foundation of reason, if only ignorance and superstition can be left behind. Bacon provided the scientific methodology. Only that which can be empirically demonstrated is to be allowed. The modern project from Descartes on has sought to replace God at the center of the universe with the "autonomous thinking self." (*Cogito, ergo sum.*) As it has played itself out, modernism has

been characterized by individualism, freedom, capitalism, democratic rule, and the rise of machine technologies and industrialization.

Unlike premodernism before it, modernism, by and large, rejected the supernatural. The thinkers of the Enlightenment did not want to do away with religion altogether, but rather worked to devise a rational religion, a faith that did not depend on revelation. The result was Deism. Higher biblical criticism accommodated modernism by trying to shape a faith that was devoid of miracles, the incarnation and other supernatural doctrines. Modernist theologians worked to "demythologize" the Bible. Every age has its eager-to-please liberal theologians who try to reinterpret Christianity according to the latest intellectual and cultural fads. The end of the twentieth century is no exception. Today, surprisingly, it is in many cases former evangelicals with their megashift theologies who have jumped onto the postmodern bandwagon and are trying to accommodate the tenets of postmodernism to Christian faith.

Modernism scored some heady victories in the technological advances of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but at a cost. Even while modernism's tower of Babel was going up, Nietzsche was probing at the foundations and speaking of the "insufferable weightlessness" of the project with God no longer at the center. Modernism was by and large unable to deliver on what it promised. The promises of liberation turned out to be masks for oppression and domination. After colonialism, slavery, two world wars, communism, Nazism and nuclear bombs, it is no longer clear that reason, technology and science hold the key to building the ideal world. The idea of progress, too, has been called into question over the past several decades. Industrialization and technological advance have been accompanied by massive ecological waste and destruction.

To its harshest critics modernism has been "a movement of ethnic and class domination, European imperialism, anthropocentrism, the destruction of nature, the dissolution of community and tradition, and the rise of alienation." There are postmodernists who will go so far as to call the West's attempts to make its values universal "intellectual terrorism." More kindly critics say, "modernity cannot achieve what it hopes, e.g., that objective truth or freedom is unavailable, or that modernity's gains are balanced by losses."<sup>xv</sup>

For all its vaunted achievements in science and technology the twentieth century is passing into history. Its modernist mentality is no longer relevant to many. Whatever good the twentieth century brought is canceled out by the destruction of the environment, the threat of nuclear holocaust, the excesses of individualism and rampant greed and the various deadly "isms" that it spawned. But some postmodernists concede, "there is no alternative either to modernity or to its discontents."<sup>xvi</sup>

### **Existentialism as the Philosophic Basis of Postmodernism**

As we close out the twentieth century and head into the third millennium of Christian history, modernism's "happy project" is being inundated by a flood of cynicism and pessimism. After the two world wars (to end all wars), existentialism has turned on modernity with a vengeance. Confidence has been lost in the project, and utopia is no longer seen as an attainable goal. The past has gained new respect; now it's the future that is the problem. Reason is not the solution but part of the problem. Perhaps, Sartre declared, suicide is the best way out.

The philosophic basis of postmodernism is existentialism. Existentialism is the philosophy of the absurd. We live in an absurd, meaningless universe in which nothing is certain, nothing can be known. There is no truth. There are no absolutes of right or wrong. Everything is relative. Hope is an illusion. Life is without meaning or hope.

Nihilistic views of this sort are not entirely new. Similar ideas had surfaced at the tail end of Greek philosophy as the golden era of Greece ground to a halt in cynicism and skepticism. After all was said in ancient Greece, the conclusion was that we cannot know anything for certain. It was the repudiation of the best of human reasoning of the ancient world, the work in philosophy of Aristotle, Socrates and Plato, in medicine of Galen and Hippocrates, in mathematics of Euclid and Pythagoras, in science of Archimedes. It was the grudging acknowledgment of frustrated philosophers that without a fixed point in the universe, a center, namely, a God who has spoken to the world and revealed his will, all the best human thinking swirls around insecurely.

Diogenes, the cynic philosopher, walked the streets of Athens with his lantern searching for an honest man, but could not find one. Under intense scrutiny every statement that can be made can be proven in a certain sense to be untrue if there is no reference to an eternal, abiding truth as exists in God alone.

Pyrrho (b. ca. 360 BC) announced the age of reason over. Certainty is not possible. Every hypothesis had been conceived, aired and forgotten, and the universe had kept its secret. Aristotle had agreed with Plato on just one point—the possibility of attaining ultimate truth, and Pyrrho voiced his suspicions about even that. Pyrrho believed the sensory world didn't exist. He honestly thought everything he saw around him was just a projection of his mind. He told everybody they shouldn't worry about things because nothing actually existed anyway. The townspeople were not impressed with his philosophy, and, if we are to believe the story, one day got a good laugh at his expense. Here was Pyrrho, who said nothing really existed, and he was running down the street, being chased by a particularly vicious dog. In a desperate move, he grabbed hold of a tree branch and swung himself up to safety. The crowds gathered around and called up to him, "Hey, Pyrrho! Why are you running from a dog that doesn't even exist?"

Greek cynic philosophy was the existentialism of its day, with one notable difference. Whereas Greek cynicism, like existentialism today, believed that nothing is certain, nothing is true, it at least held out the prospect in theory that someday someone might discover truth. But modern-day existentialism goes a step farther. It not only holds that nothing can be known for sure, but also insists that it is impossible that anyone will ever know anything. The question, of course, that existentialists do not answer and cannot answer, is: If nothing can be known for certain, how can they be so certain that nothing can be known?

Since the 1920s existentialism has ruled as the dominant philosophy of Europe. It emerged in this country as a significant force after the Second World War. There is a reason for the time lag in crossing the Atlantic that we will come to later. Here we will simply note that this writer is old enough to remember the abrupt change from the "happy" movies of the postwar (World War II) era to the dark, brooding, existential themes of the early and mid 1950s: Tennessee Williams' "A Streetcar Named Desire," "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," "Days of Wine and Roses," Marlon Brando's "On the Waterfront." These were the movies of this writer's impressionistic teen years. Arthur Miller, in his play, "Death of a Salesman," puts as epitaph on his central character, Willie Lohman: "Poor guy, he never knew who he was." As a statement of existential gloom Albert Camus wrote, "There is no escape from the human dilemma." Jean Luc Godard produced a film, "No Exit," in which the world ends in a massive traffic jam. "The French Connection" has the crook in the last frame sauntering down the road whistling a happy tune to himself since he got away with it. Crime does pay. We live in an absurd and meaningless universe. It makes no difference whether you do right or wrong, we're all going to end up six feet under anyway, and when you're dead, you're dead. The important thing is simply to choose and act.

Existentialism grew on European soil out of the ashes of despair left in the wake of the massive destruction and evil that was unleashed in the First World War. Building on Darwin's "Origin of Species" (1859) and intoxicated with the unprecedented successes of its technological breakthroughs, the West in the last quarter of the nineteenth century was marked by a buoyant and optimistic spirit. It was "modernism" at its confident best. The myth of automatic human progress was widely embraced. The human race, it was felt, was rapidly evolving onward and upward, not only physically and technologically, but also spiritually and morally. Soon we would master not only the rails and seas and skies, but human nature itself. The French philosopher Coue captured the spirit of the times with his silly little maxim, "Every day in every way I am getting better and better." Unfortunately, it was a philosophy of life that failed miserably for its author who ended his life prematurely by suicide at age 60.

The optimistic outlook that held Europe in its embrace at the turn of the century was rudely shattered by the unexpected savagery and barbarity of the war that devastated Europe from 1914-18. At that point it became no longer possible to speak glibly of "every day in every way I am getting better and better." There was a dark side to human nature that was being underreported and under-acknowledged. The war created a vacuum of thought in Europe that the existential philosophers of the early 1920s rushed in to fill. The existentialists saw all too clearly the dark side of human nature and developed their philosophy of existential gloom and despair

around it. In fact, their description of the dark side of human nature is often not far off the mark as regards the depraved state of fallen humankind. We theologians can learn from their powers of observation. Their philosophy, unfortunately, tragically does not go beyond the gloom and despair of a fallen world. It is a philosophy of no hope. We in America, who were spared the immediacy of the devastations of the First World War, were initially less vulnerable than our European cousins to the inroads of existential gloom.

The dilemma of life in an existential world where there are no absolutes of right and wrong was underscored by Jean Paul Sartre, the French high priest of existential philosophy in his day (d. 1979), who wrote that "for me to help a little old lady across the street, or for me to take her cane and strike her down is equally meaningless and absurd. The important thing is to choose and act." Sartre of course was not advocating that we go around striking down little old ladies with their canes, but simply showing the futility of trying to make the simplest moral judgment in a world where there is no God and no moral absolutes. If there is no God, and therefore no standard by which to judge right from wrong, on what basis then can we determine that it is right to step on an ant and kill it, or wrong to kill a fellow human being? Sartre and the existentialist thinkers almost seem to fear most that people will be frozen into inactivity given the lack of basis for making any judgment. Hence Sartre's famous counsel to "choose and act" may be understood as advice just to do something, anything, as better than doing nothing.

Existentialism is no longer an exclusively European phenomenon. It washed up on America's shores at the end of the Second World War fifty years ago and has become a fixture of our culture. It is not just the domain of the academic elite. Through the arts it has become the commonplace of our culture, filtering down and casting its pall over the ordinary life of common man. Already we have noted the pervasive influence on our culture of movies bearing existential themes. The artists of the classical age Western civilization occupied themselves with form and order and beauty. They believed that God had gifted them with an eye to see things that ordinary mortals could not see. Thus in painting a landscape or a portrait they were able to "capture" something that we ordinary mortals otherwise might just pass by without seeing at all. But in today's existentialist world the concepts of beauty and form and order do not exist. Thus one contemporary painter produces works of art by placing a canvas on his driveway with various tubes of different colored paint on it, and then running back and forth over it at random on his little child's tricycle. That is an existential statement in the world of art that we live in an absurd, meaningless universe. A few years back a work of art in the New York Metropolitan Art Museum sold for several thousand dollars that consisted in a canvas painted entirely black. Yoko Ono, the widow of John Lennon, produces a book of photographs consisting in nothing but 300 bare rear ends. That is expressing the philosophy of the absurd in an art form. Andy Warhol's pop art quintessentially captures the spirit of existential absurdity.

The classical composers of music in Western civilization likewise did not believe they had the ability to create anything in the strict sense. They believed the harmonies of the universe had been created and placed into the universe by God at the time of creation. But God had given them an exceptional ear to hear what ordinary mortals were incapable of hearing and to set down on paper these harmonies of the universe for everyone to hear and enjoy. Obviously, this type of harmonic, ordered universe does not exist for the existentialist mind. So today a composer like John Cage will produce a composition by recording electronic blips and bleeps on tape, cut the tape into little pieces and then splice the pieces back together at random, and it will play at Carnegie Hall. That is a musical statement of existentialism's world of chaos and disorder. Nihilist rap and acid rock are grandchildren of the movement.

### **The Legacy of the 1960s: Nietzsche's Revenge**

If existentialism is the philosophic basis of postmodernism, it is an existentialism that has come to us funneled through the radicalism of the 1960s. To come to an understanding of postmodernism, one cannot ignore the social turmoil of the 1960s and the legacy that has come down to us from that tumultuous era.

Friedrich Nietzsche's nihilistic ideas did not gain wide credence in his lifetime and were dismissed by the general populace as the ranting of a madman, if indeed the common people were even aware of his existence

and work. His writings, however, survived alive and well in academia for a century, and have now come with a vengeance on the common man. One man who has played a prominent role in this is the French philosopher, Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche's truest disciple."<sup>xvii</sup> Foucault and fellow-Frenchmen Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jacques Derrida are three main proponents of postmodernist thought.

Foucault was born in France in 1926. He came from a prominent family, his father and both grandfathers being surgeons, his father also a professor of anatomy at a medical school. Christened Paul Michel, he later dropped the "Paul" so as not to bear the name of the father he loathed. His parents were only nominally religious, but due to political circumstances sent him to a Catholic school during World War II for his last three years of secondary education, from which he emerged with a loathing for monks and religion. During the leftist student revolts of 1968 he aligned himself with a radical Maoist cohort. From his chair at the prestigious College de France Foucault lectured and wrote extensively while engaging in continuous political activities and travel, to Tunisia, Poland, Iran and repeated trips to California, where in San Francisco he gave free reins to his homosexual impulses in seeking the "complete total pleasure," the "limit experience" he associated with madness, sex, drugs and ultimately with death itself, which came to him by AIDS in 1984.

As a true student of Nietzsche, Foucault was a nihilist, that is, he argued that reality cannot be known. We have no way of demonstrating that reality corresponds to that which we perceive with our senses. Descartes' famous maxim, which actually originated with St. Augustine, "I think, therefore I am," may in fact only be "I think that I think." In this way the "thinking self" of Descartes, Descartes' one certain point of reality in the universe, which in fact gave to the modern project its whole impetus, is repudiated. Foucault was not the originator of the critique of Descartes, but he embraced it wholeheartedly. The rejection of the "autonomous self" of modernism is a prominent feature of postmodern thought. The individual self does not exist independently, but only as part of the larger society that shapes him and makes him what he is.

### **Will to Power**

According to Foucault, Western scholarship has been subject for centuries to three fundamental errors: 1) that an objective body of knowledge exists and is waiting to be discovered, 2) that they actually possess such knowledge and that it is neutral or value-free, and 3) that the pursuit of knowledge benefits all humankind rather than just a specific class.<sup>xviii</sup>

After the student uprisings in 1968 Foucault occupied himself with what became the main theme of his writings: power. Again taking his cue from Nietzsche, Foucault saw all human life, intellectual activity and social intercourse as a mask for the will to power. History is a particularly oppressive force that must be dissolved. Historians, according to Foucault, conceal the disconnectedness of singular events by resorting to the language of universals. They are dishonest in their claims to objectivity. History can make no claims to being value-free or neutral. The practice of history is not driven by a disinterested quest for truth, but arises from desire to control the past in order to validate present structures.

Truth is a fabrication or fiction, "a system of ordered procedure for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements."<sup>xix</sup> Truth stands in a reciprocal relationship with the systems of power that produce and sustain it. Truth is just the product of the practices that make it possible. The power of knowledge is to arbitrarily, for its own purposes, engage in the invention of truth.

Human knowledge does not merely allow us to exercise power over nature, as Bacon had said. Knowledge is violence. The act of knowing, Foucault says, is always an act of violence. The appropriate activity of the scholar is the perpetual critique of presently existing structures. History rightly understood is the means to propagate useful myths that will disorder order and turn the present into a past.

Because modern scholarship assumes that knowledge is neutral, the practitioners of modern scholarship remain blind to their own will to power. Foucault and his disciples use genealogy, another borrowed concept from Nietzsche, as a method to dissect and analyze how a certain body of knowledge came to be, and thus to disrupt or disorient the present. Knowledge therefore is no longer used to attain truth but to destroy truth.



The notion of an "objective" science is repudiated. Science is ideology inextricably bound up in the games of power.

The role of scholarship is to unmask the hidden will to power and thus disempower the forces that subjugate the powerless and oppressed, the minorities, gays and lesbians, and feminists.

### **Metanarratives**

Much of the terminology of postmodernism comes from the language of literary criticism. French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard (b. 1926) published a short book in 1979, "The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge," that exerted considerable force in galvanizing postmodernism as a movement. Lyotard defines postmodernism as "incredulity toward metanarratives."<sup>xx</sup> A "narrative," a term obviously borrowed from the literary field, in Lyotard's definition becomes the "legitimizing myth" each society creates to sustain social relations within the society and to form the basis of its legitimacy. History can be viewed as a series of transitions from one defining myth to another. The Marxist narrative of an inevitable revolution that would lead to the utopia of international communism has come and gone. The postmodern outlook entails the end of any appeal to an over-arching, universally applicable myth ("metanarrative"). Not only have all the reigning master narratives lost their credibility, but the idea of a grand narrative itself is no longer credible. What we are left with is a huge variety of competing narratives in the world, none of which dare lay claim to precedence over any other.

Metanarratives are not only intellectually untenable, but are inextricably associated with oppression. As neo-Marxist Terry Eagleton puts it:

Post-modernism signals the death of such "metanarratives" whose secretly terrorist function was to ground and legitimate the illusion of a "universal" human history. We are now in the process of waking from the nightmare of modernity, with its manipulative reason and fetish of the totality, into the laid-back pluralism of the post-modern, that heterogeneous range of lifestyles and language games which has renounced the nostalgic urge to totalize and legitimate itself... Science and philosophy must jettison their grandiose claims and view themselves as just another set of narratives.<sup>xxi</sup>

Postmodernism is the worldview to end all worldviews. "This phenomenon (postmodernism) marks the end of a single, universal worldview. The postmodern ethos resists unified, all-encompassing, and universally valid explanations."<sup>xxii</sup>

Another name strongly associated with postmodernism is Jacques Derrida. Born to Jewish parents in Algiers in 1930, Derrida launched his academic career in 1955, teaching philosophy at the ENS and the Sorbonne, and after 1972 splitting his teaching time between Paris and the U.S., especially Johns Hopkins and Yale.

The least accessible of the postmodernist philosophers, Derrida composed works that are exceedingly obscure. He attacked traditional philosophy on the grounds that philosophy presumes to set itself outside literature to pass judgment on literary forms while not owning up to the fact that philosophy is a literary genie itself that needs to be criticized by the same standards it applies to other disciplines.

### **Deconstructing Language and Society**

Derrida decries what he terms the "logocentrism" of Western philosophy, that is, the philosophic approach that looks to the logos or word or language as the carrier of meaning. The suggestion that a word or statement has a singular, objective meaning is an illusion. The written word, separated from its immediate context, is subject to an untold variety of interpretations. Meaning thus is never static, but changes with time and with changing contexts. Meaning is not fixed by the speaker, but is brought to the text by the varied experiences of the hearer.

Applying literary criticism to life Derrida came to view all of life as a text to be "deconstructed." "Deconstruction" is a mode of analysis that purports to take apart all expressions of objective meaning to expose them as masks for cultural power and rationalizations for oppression - the oppression of minorities by majorities, women by men, blacks by whites, gays by heterosexuals.

Not only language, but truth and reality itself are all "social constructs" to be deconstructed. All reality is virtual reality. Each society or group constructs its own version of truth. Consequently, there are as many different forms of truth or "reality" in the world as there are people, each equally valid as the next, and no form of truth in any way superior to any other. This is the principle of relativity, taken from the realm of physics and applied to the moral and spiritual realm. If truth is relative, one idea is as good as another. "You have to decide what's right for you," we are told on the talk shows. Each person chooses his own version of truth.

Not everyone is nonplused by the obscure fashion of Derrida's writings. Here is one modernist reaction:

Those who do not follow these things have to know that Derrida has been an enormously influential savant in the past two decades. He can mean many things to different people, but in general he has been seen as contributing to the relativization of everything, including religious witness, and to the notion that there are no stable meanings to what most used to consider stable. The key word planted into the vocabulary by Derridians is *deconstruction*, which remains in fashion in many American circles long after it's been shelved among the antiques across the Atlantic. Mark Lilla:

"The persistent American fascination with Derrida and deconstruction has nothing to do with his current status in French philosophy, which is marginal at best. This raises a number of interesting questions about how and why his work has been received with open arms by American postmodernists and what they think they are embracing. Derrida is often asked about his American success and always responds with the same joke: 'La déconstruction, c'est l'Amérique.' By which he apparently means that America has become something of the decentered, democratic swirl he tries to reproduce in his own thought. He may be on to something here, for if deconstruction is not America, it has certainly become an Americanism." Which means that there is no center - there are no centers, everything swirls.... Lilla, again:

"No wonder a tour through the postmodernism section of any American bookshop is such a disconcerting experience. The most illiberal, anti-Enlightenment notions are put forward with a smile and the assurance that, followed out to their logical conclusion, they could only lead us into the democratic promised land, where all God's children will join hands in singing the national anthem. It is an uplifting vision and Americans believe in uplift. That so many of them seem to have found it in the dark and forbidding works of Derrida attests to the strength of Americans' self-confidence and their awesome capacity to think well of anyone and any idea. Not for nothing do the French still call us *les grands enfants*.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

If postmodernism is in part Nietzsche's revenge from the grave on a world that gave him little heed in his time, it may also be seen as the Frenchman's revenge. It is not an unusual phenomenon in history for a vanquished people to conquer their victors with their culture, and that appears to be one aftermath of the two world wars. Had it not been for the pessimism engendered by the wars, the nihilism of Nietzsche might have been left to rest in peace in the grave.

### **Gospel Ministry in a Postmodern Age**

Postmodernism shifts the battleground for us who are in the gospel ministry, but it does not alter the fact that the battle goes on. We still must "contend for the faith that was once entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3). It's just that if we continue to fight the battles of modernism with people who have moved beyond modernism, we will not hold their attention.

John Brenner in his Reformation Lecture to the Gulf Circuit congregations in October 1998 suggested a seven point response for meeting the challenge of Postmodernism: 1) Fill the spiritual vacuum with God's truth. 2) Be bold ambassadors of Christ; don't apologize for the teachings of the Bible. 3) Apply God's truth to our

contemporary culture; condemn what God condemns; proclaim full and free forgiveness in Christ. 4) Trust the efficacy and sufficiency of Scripture. 5) Recognize the importance of words and clear communication. 6) Recognize the relationship between the cognitive, affective, and volitional in Christian education. 7) Understand the importance of Christian fellowship in this age of insecurity and loss of a sense of purpose and belonging.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Paul Kelm offers five strategies to consider in addressing a postmodern culture in a study paper presented to the Board for Parish Services in January 1999: 1) Create a standing subcommittee of the Commission of Adult Discipleship whose focus is on group life and fellowship. 2) Choose four parish pastors and two campus ministries to conduct pilot projects in outreach to postmoderns. 3) Choose five congregations, based on their openness to the concept, that will redesign confirmation instruction around the relational strategies, as well as the visual and experiential mode of learning, suggested by contemporary culture, and with thematic emphases necessitated by the challenges and denials inherent in contemporary culture. 4) Create a task force charged with developing a strategy to assist congregations in involving their young adult members more actively in the ministry of the church. 5) Conduct a weekend "think tank" whose purpose is to discuss and establish the significant points of impact that a changing culture has on: a) members' understanding and exercise of their faith; b) the church's understanding of and strategies for outreach to the unchurched; c) pastors' and teachers' ability to address the issues and challenges of contemporary ministry.<sup>xxv</sup>

Let this writer say that I for one enjoy immensely the ministry of the gospel in a postmodern world. In a pluralistic culture, where every viewpoint and shade of opinion is given equal hearing and status, there is of course the downside of the tragic loss to the faith of our young people (and sometimes mature members) in a marketplace of opinions with which they cannot cope. But if the choice were given between ministering with the gospel in the more fixed world, I knew in the early days of my ministry when the lines were clearly drawn, and children tended to follow their parents in the faith by convention if not by conviction, I'll take the free marketplace of ideas anytime and the access to people with the gospel that presents to us. I can't remember when I last sat down to speak with anyone who said to me something like, "I'm sorry, we're Catholic and not interested in what you have to say."

I for one am overjoyed at the prospect of being done with the pontifical statements of a Carl Sagan (might we hope, the world's last modern man?), rest his soul, of Cosmos fame prostrating himself before the altar of Dame Reason on TV and in Parade Magazine to a popular audience. In a final Parade article, Sagan's widow tells us that just before he died (of cancer) he told her he was not afraid, and that his only regret was that he knew there was nothing after death and they would never meet again. We can delight to have as unlikely bedfellow postmodernism to join us in saying to him, "Carl, you don't really know that at all. You just think you know that because as a product of your modernist upbringing and mindset you never were able to break out of the narrow confines of rationalism with its simplistic, untenable dogma that human reason is the only source of knowledge and truth."

When Carleton Toppe taught us the course in nineteenth century Romanticism at Northwestern College, the significance of the critique of sovereign reason that came from that quarter did not fully register with us at the time. But the fathers of our church had a broad understanding of what was going on in the world and rightly included that curricular material in our development. We did not agree then with the "theologies" or lifestyles of Shelley, Keats, and certainly not Lord Byron, anymore than we agree now with postmodernist excess, but that didn't prevent us from drawing what good could be gained from Romanticism's reaction against the outrageous and "irrational" claims of human reason to be the only path to truth. "Science is now climbing down - or being pulled - from the Herculean statement of Galileo that the conclusions of natural science are true and necessary, and the judgment of man has nothing to do with them."<sup>xxvi</sup> "Postmodernism is saying that loud and clear, and in that it is a welcome voice.

Postmodernist existentialists preach chaos and confusion. The postmodernism they promote is ridiculous and absurd. But they are not the real authors of the confusion. The child has another father. It's modernism with its attempt to remove God and his revelation from the center of the universe and substitute man as the measure of all things that is the real culprit. Postmodernists from Nietzsche to the present are at least brutally honest in insisting that if what modernism says is true about God and revelation, then the foundation of life as we have

known it is gone, and nothing is certain. Everything swirls. Modernists lie through their teeth in wanting to deny God and revelation while at the same time retaining that which rests on God, namely, truth, morality, meaning, and an all-encompassing worldview (metanarrative). You can't have it both ways.

C.S. Lewis has been called an "apostle to postmoderns." In his series of wartime essays entitled, "Right and Wrong as a Clue to the Meaning of the Universe," he tells us to listen to the peoples of the world who almost universally and even unconsciously appeal to a standard of right and wrong with expressions like, "That's not fair" or "I got here first." People everywhere may not agree perfectly on what is right and wrong, but they will agree that there is such a thing as right and wrong. An African, for example, may not agree with me on how many wives a man should have, but he will agree that a man does not have the right to take any woman he pleases. Now where did people throughout the world get this peculiar idea that there is such a thing as right and wrong? After dismissing a variety of shallow attempts to base our judgment of right and wrong on things like majority vote, Lewis demonstrates beyond question that if there is no god who has spoken to our world, right and wrong are a fiction and people everywhere have deluded themselves on this point. There is then no right or wrong. But it was with a profound sense of relief, he says, when he moved from atheism and agnosticism to faith in Christ that he no longer had to believe that the vast majority of people who had ever lived were fools. There is a right and wrong because there is a God and he has spoken to our world.

Philosophically it may be possible to say that there is no truth, but that doesn't translate into reality. We still have to live in the real world where two plus two equals four. Every time. In the real world a thing still cannot be itself and not itself at the same time. No one can consistently hold to philosophical absurdity, no matter how logically powerful the arguments may be. Permit a candid comment by eighteenth century skeptic David Hume.

Should it be asked me whether I sincerely assent to this argument which I have been to such pains to inculcate, and whether I be really one of those skeptics who hold that all is uncertain.... I should reply.... that neither I nor any other person was ever sincerely and constantly of that opinion.... I dine, I play backgammon, I converse and am merry with my friends; and when, after three or four hours' amusement, I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold and strained and ridiculous that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any further. <sup>xxvii</sup>

People may have been taught that there are no moral absolutes. They may even believe that. But in the real world they still have to deal with the moral wreckage of their lives. They don't need the gospel any less. When we have worked our way gently past the pluralism ("one view is as good as the next"; "we all worship the same god; we just call him by different names"), the moral relativism ("what's right for me may be wrong for you; what's wrong for me may be right for you") and the nihilism ("you can't really know anything for sure, so what difference does anything make?"), I think we will find the people of our postmodern age hungering and thirsting for the gospel.

Is there an alternative to the rationalist excesses of modernism and the irrational tendencies of postmodernism? It's called Christian orthodoxy.

In ministering to a postmodern world don't ever apologize for the gospel; it's still God's power for salvation to everyone who believes (Romans 1:16). Resist the temptation of triumphalism to build our church instead of Christ's church by substituting for the theology of the cross - based on our humility and the suffering of Christ - the theology of glory based on power and pride. While postmodernism encourages the rise of New Age neo-pagan spiritualities and irrationalist cults, its "Christian" manifestation may be seen in McChurch with its consumerist religion based on the megashift theology of fallen evangelicals who have abandoned law and gospel ministry in favor of proclaiming a touchy-feely, therapeutic god who's there to make us feel good about ourselves, but who bears little resemblance to the Holy One of Israel. "Consumerism in the church dilutes its message, changes the church's character, perverts the gospel, and negates the church's authority." <sup>xxviii</sup> Law and gospel, sin and grace, is still the only path to Christ's church.

Recognize that postmodernism with its emphasis on choice will make this generation vulnerable to decision theology. Take advantage of the newfound postmodern openness to the past (as opposed to the

modernist disdain), and walk this generation back to the great theologians of the Christian faith, Paul, Augustine, Luther and Calvin who all underscored the total depravity of the human mind and the bondage of the will to sin, and in this way lead them to a deeper and richer understanding of the Bible and its message.

Utilize again the postmodernist appreciation of the past by searching for answers to your worship needs by digging deep to the roots of the church's liturgical heritage. Revising worship services to make them more emotional and entertaining can only teach the congregation subjectivity and spiritual hedonism. Learn respect for the postmodernist desire for community (modernism stressed the individual; postmodernism the group), and let our congregations be all the Scripture says they can be in love and support and fellowship of believers with and for each other.

In the assigned theme you asked for the antidote to the impact of postmodernism on our ministry. In a nutshell the antidote is the power God had given us, the only power we have, the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ (Romans 1:16-17).

Soli deo gloria!

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## Endnotes

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- <sup>i</sup> The entire introductory section is put together as a postmodern collage of statements and phrases from Veith's book, *Postmodern Times*.
- <sup>ii</sup> Barna, p.80.
- <sup>iii</sup> Barna, see particularly chapter four, "The Content of Our Faith," pp.71ff. °
- <sup>iv</sup> Fields, p.7.
- <sup>v</sup> Fields, p. 7.
- <sup>vi</sup> Cahoone, p.1.
- <sup>vii</sup> Wasserstrom, Jeffrey, in *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 9-11-98, quoted in *Context*, 1-1-99.
- <sup>viii</sup> Cahoone, p.3
- <sup>ix</sup> Cahoone, p.3
- <sup>x</sup> Cahoone, p.3
- <sup>xi</sup> Cahoone, p.3
- <sup>xii</sup> Harwood, p.2
- <sup>xiii</sup> Oden, p.7
- <sup>xiv</sup> Quoted in Cahoone, p. 11
- <sup>xv</sup> Cahoone, p.12
- <sup>xvi</sup> Cahoone, p. 12
- <sup>xvii</sup> Grenz, p.124
- <sup>xviii</sup> Grenz, p. 131
- <sup>xix</sup> Grenz, p.133.
- <sup>xx</sup> Cahoone, p.481
- <sup>xxi</sup> Quoted in Harvey, p.9.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Grenz, p.11-12
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Marty, *Context*, 12-1-98, p. 4-5
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Brenner, pp.6-7
- <sup>xxv</sup> Kelm, pp. 11-12
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Harwood, p.2.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Durant, Will, *The Age of Voltaire*, 144
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Veith, p.213