

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

The Christian World View— Postmodernism #2

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John 18:33-38

Before we begin tonight I have just a few announcements, some of which pertain to our study this summer, and some which don't. And the first announcement has to do with books. I've mentioned the two books that I'm about to tell you about a couple of times during the course of our study this summer, and Doug has managed to get hold of these two books (which are pretty hard to get hold of).



One is a book by Harry Blamires. I had mentioned to you earlier in the summer, Blamires has a number of books in print. He's an educator from Kent, in England; he's taught at Oxford; he was a student of C. S. Lewis in the English department at Oxford, and has followed in his footsteps writing in the area of education and worldview. And his book *The Christian Mind* is the first book, perhaps, that he published that caught a lot of folks' attention in terms of the way he presented these issues. If you go by the Library Bookstore, you should be able to find a copy of Harry Blamires' *The Christian Mind*. Really, if you stumble across a Blamires' book in the bookstore, it's always worth getting. So anything that you see by him would be well worth your time.

The second book that I mentioned, and I just mentioned this one last week, is Dinesh D'Souza's book, *Illiberal Education*. That book was, I believe, published sometime in the early '90's. D'Souza was a staff member in the Reagan administration, lectures on college campuses all over the place on areas from education policy to racism, to this and that and the other. Outstanding writer. You will occasionally see his columns in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *The National Review*, et cetera. His book, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus*.

There is a sense in which D'Souza's book illustrates the point that Allen Bloom made in his book *The Closing of the American Mind*, and I'm going to quote from that book tonight,

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because it's the best single representation of how Postmodernism has impacted the college and university campuses of the United States. But what D'Souza does is, he takes Bloom's brilliant point out of the sphere of theory and he shows you how that point is working out in practice all over the nation. I'll give you an example that was shared with me by one of our staff members tonight, later on. But that book will be available next week in our Library Bookstore. So, I want to thank Doug for letting me know that, and I wanted to let you know about that.

Now, if you have your Bibles, let me ask you to turn with me to John, the Gospel of John, and the eighteenth chapter. Since we're looking at Postmodernism ... we looked at Postmodernism last week, and this week we're looking at "Postmodernism Goes to College," it seemed appropriate to go to this passage which actually reflects something of the spirit of Postmodernism being in existence some twenty centuries before Postmodernism became a coined term. And I want to direct your attention to John 18, beginning in verse 33. This is Jesus on the night of His betrayal, already having been taken before the priests, now having been taken before Pilate, the Roman official; and here is the interview between Jesus and Pilate.

John 18:33-38

"Pilate therefore entered again into the Praetorium, and summoned Jesus, and said to Him, "You are the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Are you saying this on your own initiative, or did others tell you about Me?" Pilate answered, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests delivered You up to me; what have You done?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting, that I might not be delivered up to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm." Pilate therefore said to Him, "So You are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say correctly that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears My voice." Pilate said to Him, "What is truth?"

That is so Postmodern! It is also so Roman. Notice his interest is in power, not in truth. He wants to know if Jesus is a King. He doesn't care about Jesus' message. All he's interested in is if Jesus is on a power trip. That's all he cares about, and he's a Roman! That's just so classical Roman. It's also so Postmodernism: "What is truth?"

Now John, recording those words of Pilate, knows that you remember that something like four hours earlier than this interview Jesus had been asked a question by His disciples. Are you remembering the question? Turn back to John 14. Thomas, of all people, has asked Him a question in John 14:5: "Thomas said to Him, "Lord we do not know where You are going; how do we know the way?"

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And John knows that you remember when you hear Pilate cynically saying, “What is truth?” —John knows that you remember that Jesus had answered doubting Thomas by saying, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through Me.” And so here’s cynical Pilate saying, “What is truth?” And Truth is standing in front of him. It’s just ... it’s colossally ironic, but you know what? It’s a picture of the gospel speaking to this postmodern world of ours that doesn’t believe in truth any more, and so inoculates itself against the message of truth and hope and life. So that’s what we’re going to look at in the college setting tonight.

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I. The cultural move to Postmodernism

Let me just remind you of a couple of things that we said last week. We gave a definition of Postmodernism last week, but let me start off with three definitions tonight. We’ll come back to that definition of Postmodernism, because first of all, the short definition of it was a pretty multi-syllabic definition, and we want to make sure we’ve got it clear in our minds. *But I want you to be aware of some precursors to Postmodernism, and I want to speak three terms to you: Modernization; Modernity; and, Postmodern.* Just keep those in your mind for a minute, and I want to define those things, because Modernization sets the stage for what sociologists call Modernity; and Modernity sets the stage for what we call Postmodernism.

What do we mean by Modernization? Well, sociologically speaking, by Modernization we mean *that process of reorganization of our society that has occurred via urbanization* (the cities becoming bigger and more central to our culture); industrialization; the communications and transportation revolution. Sociologists will point out that all those things—the communication and transportation revolution, industrialization, and urbanization—have resulted in a reorganization of our society. We don’t function like we used to, because of those things. Those things have changed a lot of realities about the way we normally would have functioned. If you go back before the Industrial Revolution, or you go back before the urbanization explosion that really began in the nineteenth century, and you go back before the communications and transportation revolution (which is primarily a twentieth century phenomenon), life looks very different. You live very differently.

Now, sociologists make this observation: those very kinds of hard changes to society create what they call “new plausibility structures.” By that, they simply mean that *those changes make you have a tendency to view the world differently than people would have before those changes.* And so, the effect of Modernization is what they call the “Plausibility Structure of Modernity.” So, Modernization—all these technological and industrial advances—Modernization leads to Modernity.

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What is Modernity?" Well, it's the result of Modernization. *It's the thought-world, or the outlook that is produced by our experience of Modernization, and it disposes us to believe certain key myths.* Think of it: the immigration patterns of the nineteenth century changed America from being predominantly a Protestant country to being a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious entity. We've always talked about America being a melting pot. The bottom line is, before the massive immigration changes of the nineteenth century, we were predominantly a Protestant country. We weren't, of course, according to our Constitution; but we were socially and culturally a Protestant country.

That has been changed. Current sociologists are already preparing us for the time when those of Anglo-Saxon descent are a distinct minority in America. Now, you couldn't even have conceived of such a thing in 1850.

Now, what impact does that have? Well, think of the way we look at the world now, in terms of pluralism—the idea that you can't say that any one religion or any one worldview is better than another. Well, in 1850 that idea in a predominantly Protestant society would not have had much plausibility to it. You would have been surrounded by people who basically thought like you thought. The big arguments would have been between Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Baptists! Well, Lutherans, Presbyterians and Baptists look like kissing-cousins in 2004, when you look at the landscape of belief in the United States. So, the very societal changed, the demographic changes that we've gone through in our society have created a greater plausibility for someone who wants to look out at the world and say that all religions are the same. Because we're surrounded by a multi-cultural, multi-religious society, and to get along with those folks you don't want to be saying that they're dead wrong about the most important thing in life all the time!

So, the social change creates a mental climate where you can buy into things more easily than you might have bought into them before. Now that doesn't make those things right or wrong, or true or false. In fact, we're going to argue that some of those social changes have made it easier for us to buy into things that are wrong, rather than to buy into things that are right. But you need to understand that process: that Modernization leads to Modernity—this outlook which has, in large measure, grown out of some of these realities of the communications and transportation revolution, industrialization, and urbanization—has predisposed us to look at the world in a particular way, especially with regard to individualism, relativism, pluralism, and privatization (and I'll define those in just a moment).

Now, in the wake of that—that thought-world, that outlook that sociologists call Modernity—comes what we call **Postmodernism**, which is a worldview. And Postmodernism, you remember, we said—here's the big multi-syllabic three-word definition—*Postmodernism means an incredulity to metanarratives.* Now, nobody but

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linguists and English professors are with me at this point, so let me just back up and say all that means is this: *the Postmodernist doesn't think and doesn't like people to come up with one overarching story that explains everything, and claim it to be true in contrast to other overarching stories that try and explain everything.* So, it's fine for the Hindu to have his story, and for the American Indian to have his story, and for the Presbyterian to have his story, and the atheist to have his story, and the Naturalist to have his story ... as long as none of them claim that they have The Story.

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You remember I shared with you that my Russian history professor made a statement in class. We were discussing the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, the unlikely victory of this minority party in Russian politics, which changed the landscape of the twentieth century, and he was talking about Bolsheviks and he began to compare them to Puritans. And he said, "You know, the Bolsheviks were really a lot like the Puritans. They thought they had found truth with a capital "T"." And then he paused and he said, "Now just remember, any time you meet anyone who thinks that he or she has found truth with a capital "T", you run in the opposite direction as fast as you can." Now the history stopped there, and what we got was a little bit of a worldview lesson. And what was the worldview lesson? It was a worldview lesson in Relativism. (If I had known it, I could have called it Postmodernism then, but I was a junior in college—what did I know? But that's what he was doing.) He was assessing this claim to absolute truth in light of a commitment to no one story being authoritative, no one story being true, no one explanatory framework being true. This is the essence of Postmodernism.

II. Influence of Postmodernism on education

Now what happens when that goes to college? What happens when that kind of a commitment, that there is no authoritative story that gives an overarching explanation of the whole of life, what happens when that goes to college? Well, *Allen Bloom says that when that goes to college the possibility of education ceases, because the function of the university becomes to convince you that there is no truth to be learned.* And that's why Dinesh D'Souza calls his book *Illiberal Education. The education experience is really not open to learning. It precludes the possibility of learning. Once you have decided that there is nothing true to learn, how can you learn anything true? The university becomes the place that continues to reinforce in you your own presupposition, your own worldview that there is no such thing as absolute truth.*

Listen to what Allen Bloom says about this in his *Closing of the American Mind*. This book was published back in the 1980's, and here's what he's saying about students:

"There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of. Almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative. If this

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belief is put to the test, one can count on the students' reaction. They will be uncomprehending. That anyone should regard the proposition as not self-evident astonishes them, as though he were calling into question two plus two equals four. These are things you don't even have to think about.

"The students' backgrounds are as various as America can provide. Some are religious, some atheists; some to the left, some to the right. Some intend to be scientists, some, humanists or professionals or businessmen. Some are poor, some rich. They are unified only in their relativism and in their allegiance to equality, and the two are related in moral intention. The relativity of truth is not a theoretical insight, but a moral postulate. It is the condition of a free society (or so they see it).

"They have all been equipped with this framework early on. It is the modern replacement for the inalienable rights that used to be the traditional American grounds for a free society. That it is a moral issue for students is revealed by the character of their response when challenged: a combination of disbelief and indignation: "Are you an absolutist?" — the only alternative they know, uttered in the same tone as, "Are you a monarchist?" or "Do you really believe in witches?" The latter leads into the indignation, for someone who believes in witches might well be a witch-hunter, or a Salem judge.

"The danger they have been taught to fear from Absolutism is not error, but intolerance. Relativism is necessary to openness, and this is the only virtue which all primary education for more than fifty years has been dedicated to inculcating. The true believer is the real danger. The point is not to correct the mistakes and to really be right; the point of education is rather not to think that you are right at all."

Fifty years ago, when you were in college, you might have had a liberal in your college religion department trying to convince you that you were wrong. But your own children have someone sitting in the chair today, not who is trying to convince them that he or she is wrong, but that everybody's wrong, and everybody's right; and nobody's wrong, and nobody's right; and that may be true for you, but it's not true for them. It's a very, very different dynamic, and it poses very different challenges for you as parents who are preparing young people for that kind of environment.

When my dad went to college, he went to college as a veteran of the Second World War. He had been a Marine in the South Pacific, came back from North China and enrolled in Wofford College, which was a college not unlike Millsaps, right across the street. The Methodist college of South Carolina had very liberal religion professors, and in his religion class in the first semester his religion professor went after historic evangelical

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Christianity hammer and tong. But his premise was, it was wrong. And he was trying to convince the class that their closely held beliefs were wrong.

In the final exam, the students were to give fifteen psychological reasons why Jesus felt the need to die, because Jesus' death was explained as the consequence of some sort of psychological malfunction. My father did not answer any of the questions in the way the professor had wanted the questions to be answered, and signed his test and handed it in with these words at the bottom: "You don't have guts enough to fail me." He took that course three more times at Wofford College, and finally passed as a senior with a D minus.

That's a classic picture of a conflict between a liberal and a conservative in the old world, before Postmodernism. Now the conflict is entirely different. Now the conflict is not between the professor who says, "You're stupid and wrong, and I'm smart and right." It's between the professor who says, "Our problem is that you believe you're right, and you need to come to understand that there's no such thing as truth at all; and that what you think is true is fine for you, as long as you don't impose it on anybody else."

Now the danger that poses for us is that in Sunday School and at your kitchen table, your young person may hear you saying, "This is what we believe; this is why we believe it; this is where we believe it from." And he or she may nod his or her head, "Yeah. I believe that's true." And you, hearing them from that old framework, hear them affirming the same truth that you believe to be universally and absolutely true. But in their mind what they are saying is not, "I believe that this is universally and absolutely true." They're saying, "OK, Mom, OK Dad. I can embrace that that's true for us." But when they get into their high school classroom here in town, or their college or university classroom out of town (or in town), they have a harder time believing that what they believe is true is absolutely and universally true for everyone in their class, even dear friends they have met who have radically different worldviews.

III. Impact of postmodernism on religion and Christians in school

And so, Postmodernism impacts religion and Christians in the educational system in the following six ways:

1. First of all, it asserts that all religions boil down to the same thing. Now, don't try and confuse somebody with the facts on this. You know, it doesn't matter whether you can show that a Muslim does not in fact have the same doctrinal beliefs and commitments that an evangelical Christian has. The assumption will be made on the part of the Postmodernist that all religions boil down to the same thing.

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2. Secondly, what's true for you may not be true for me.

3. Thirdly, all religious systems, followed sincerely, lead to the same spiritual reality. Woe unto you if you suggest that the sincere believer of another religious system is not going to end up with the same eternal reward that you expect for yourself.

4. Fourth, no religious assertions can claim to be true, and all of them are subject to revision.

5. Fifth, truth claims are simply linguistic constructs, and they are derived from our own presuppositions. They're not based on anything real. They don't derive from something transcendent. They basically come from our language, and they are derived from the things that we have already presupposed about the world. In other words, truth is our own personal grid imposed upon the world. It's not something discovered in the world that forms the way that we look at the world.

6. And sixth, religious assertions are good insofar as they help people live in harmony. So, you can believe what you want, as long as it leads to harmony. That's why, in almost all of the cases of your students in university, going into university this year, going into orientation courses, one of the key things that will be beat into their heads is their moral judgments and their truth claims are perfectly fine, as long as they impose them on no one else.

I was told by a staff member this afternoon to take a look at his daughter's web log. She's a recruiter for a major state university in a nearby state, a state that thinks of itself as a "whole 'nother country"—and they have an orientation week for freshmen. And one of the things they do at that orientation week is, they make jolly well sure that you understand that heterosexuality is no better than homosexuality. They have instituted a gender-sensitivity training component of the orientation curriculum, and are even now establishing same-sex dorm halls, and establishing recruiting quotas for homosexual students in comparison to the heterosexual population. And every student going through that orientation class is going to be told that "you must respect this as a legitimate lifestyle, and you cannot impose your own bigotry on other people if you disagree. You want to think that privately, that's fine: you keep it to yourself. The way we're going to operate in public is, we're going to accept this as equally valid, because religious assertions are good only insofar as they contribute to the harmony of the community." And should you ever contribute to the disharmony of the community, your religious assertions have lost their value.

There you see Postmodernism working out in the university. Over the next few weeks, Derek's going to explore with us the impact of Postmodernity on the church. We'll be

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looking at the Bible and the glorious truth claims of the Bible, as well as the Christian doctrine of God, and how that biblical teaching about who God is helps us to speak to this particular situation in our own day and time.

Thanks for hanging with me through two weeks on Postmodernism. You get a blue ribbon for your patience! Let's stand and pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank You that Jesus is the way and the truth, and the life; and even when we speak in a culture which is cynical about truth, we take great joy and comfort in the thought that the disciples had to speak to a culture that was also skeptical about the truth, and in which there were every manner of truth claim under the sun, and yet the gospel prevailed. And it prevailed precisely because it was true, and Jesus is the truth. And we thank You that that's still true today. Help us to live in confidence, but also with discernment, in our own day and time about this important reality. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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