

Why Should Christians Think about Postmodernism?

Postmodernist epistemology is a pretty abstract topic. So what are the practical lessons that we can glean from thinking about it?

First, it helps us to avoid two errors. We should cherish and cultivate some elements of postmodernism and abominate others. So any response to it that is either completely negative or uncritically positive is wrong. Complete rejection of everything postmodern is culturally backward, intellectually wrongheaded, and denies the common grace found in every culture. Yet we should be wary of those who think of themselves as “postmodern Christians” or “post-evangelicals” or the like. By and large, they dismiss modernism (or some caricature of it) with scorn while uncritically adopting a post-modern agenda without careful biblical reflection. “We want relational truth, we want Jesus the truth incarnate, not propositional truth,” they say. This is wise in its affirmation and foolish in its denial. For example, there are at least eight “believe that _____” clauses in John’s Gospel, where what is to be believed is some propositional truth (see John 11:27, 42; 14:10; etc.). Some of these cases make it clear that believing some specific proposition is essential for salvation (see John 8:24; 20:31). Scripture can be expounded in inaccurate, boring, and irrelevant ways, but this does not mean that we should give up the faithful exposition of God’s Word by which we are taught not to sin against him (see Ps. 119:11). Almighty God esteems the person who is humble and contrite and who trembles at his word (see Isa. 66:2). And godly leaders are charged with making a habit of regular and deep reflection on that word (see Deut. 17:18–20; Josh. 1:8–9; 2 Tim. 3:14–17).

More specifically, postmodern emphases can enhance our Christian lives in these ways.

1. Postmodern openness to “spirituality”—which often means something like “authenticity”—encourages us to ensure integrity, humility, and consistency between our teaching and our conduct. If people visit our churches and face condescension, dismissiveness, self-righteousness, or what is perceived as religious cant and sloganeering, they will leave pretty quickly. As far as I can see, postmodern visitors cope equally well with innovative styles of churchmanship and more conservative styles, provided they “read” what is going on as genuine, authentic, sincere, humble, and unfaked. These have always been Christian values, so here postmodernism merely provides us with an extra incentive to be what we should.

2. Postmoderns often value personal relationships over truth structures. Of course, we do not want to sacrifice the gospel that was “once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3), but it is always good to be reminded that lost men and women are not mere potential information receptacles. They are people—God’s image bearers. We should always mirror Jesus’ attitude as he wept over Jerusalem (see Luke 19:41–42). There are countless ways we can adjust our evangelistic priorities if we remember this.

3. An astonishingly high proportion of Western preaching during the later modern period focused on the Bible’s discourse texts. Preachers paid relatively little attention to its many narrative passages. Of course, we must always teach the whole counsel of God, but how we do that can vary enormously. Many of us

need to learn how to preach from the whole range of literary genres in the Bible, including the narrative passages, instead of remaining comfortably at home in the more linear thought of its discursive texts.

At the same time, we should confront and correct postmodernism on these matters.

1. While postmoderns tend to like narrative, they are deeply suspicious of “metanarrative”—the big story that makes sense of all the little stories. But the Bible’s sweeping story line, from Genesis to Revelation, is the metanarrative within which all the individual narratives of the Bible, and our own stories, must be interpreted. With biblical illiteracy growing both within and outside the church, the need to emphasize the Bible’s main story line becomes increasingly urgent. This big story line helps to establish a Christian worldview. Unless we are content to drop isolated Christian insights into the shifting sands of alien worldviews, we must reestablish this story line in the minds of Christians and then draw the connections that enable this metanarrative to give us a Christian worldview.

2. Among other things, this means reestablishing the horror and obscenity of all idolatry. We must preserve the biblical insistence that salvation means being reconciled to God and thus to others, that we are God’s image-bearers and so our first obligation is to recognize our creatureliness and dependence with gratitude and faith, and that this “world” is passing away and so our hope is set on the new heaven and the new earth, the home of righteousness. We are so adept at teaching Christians to be fulfilled,

and so practiced at inviting them to live the abundant life, that we neglect to prepare them to die well. Yet only those who are passionate about laying up treasures in heaven are equipped to live and serve well here.

3. Because of the postmodern penchant for open-ended interpretation, it is becoming more and more important for Bible teachers—whether they are speaking to large crowds or leading small groups or counseling others one-on-one—to show that their teaching and encouraging are grounded in Scripture. Now, of all times, we must not back away from God’s Word. Instead, we must become more explicitly scriptural, so that Christians see that we always trace the most fundamental issues back to what God has said. Then if someone replies, “Oh, that’s just your interpretation,” we must never let this evasion go unchallenged. With the text open before us, we must ask our challenger what his or her interpretation is and then examine what Scripture actually says. Where there is uncertainty, we should admit it; where an interpretation—whether theirs or ours—is weak or false, it must give way to Scripture.

Common grace assures us that no worldview is entirely mistaken, the pervasive power of sin assures us that no worldview in any way removed from Scripture is benign. Let God be true, and every worldview a liar.

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