



From the Modern to the Postmodern in the West: Viewing the Twentieth Century in Perspective

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Join me in attending in a service of Christian worship. The group meets in a junior high school auditorium. Approximately 400 persons are gathered on this Sunday morning, with the average age being about 27. Most are there because a friend has invited them. This church does almost no direct advertising. The majority of participants have little or no background in Christian churches or the Christian faith.

The genre of music is a version of Christian rock that has a cynical edge complemented by several traditional hymns recast within a rock format. Candles are prominently displayed and are used to cast a mood of reflective contemplation. Furniture representing the Christian sacraments is visibly located on the stage. A video clip from a recent movie is used to set up the message.

The message is delivered in an exegetical teaching style and lasts for about 45 minutes. They are in the 12th chapter of Genesis, going through the book at

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For all its challenges, postmodernism presents the church with a tremendous missional opportunity. By learning to minister from the margins, the church will rediscover the true power of the gospel.

about a chapter a week. The pastor weaves into the message of Abraham's call several quotes from the mystical/contemplative tradition of the faith—mostly Catholic examples—in addition to framing the call in missional terms by drawing on the work of Lesslie Newbigin.

Following the service, the majority of those attending hang around for about an hour of conversation over coffee. During this time, the pastor conducts an informal discussion group for those who want to explore further the issues in the message. Other leaders provide opportunities for people to share concerns in small groups where persons pray for and with them.¹

AS THE LINE GOES, “THIS IS NOT YOUR FATHER’S OR YOUR MOTHER’S CHURCH.” IT reflects the dramatically changed context in which we now find ourselves. This context is increasingly being defined as “postmodern.” This Gen-X congregation represents an interesting mixture—elements of the historic Christian faith embedded within a style and format that displays many postmodern characteristics. Most mainline denominational congregations would find this to be “strange” space, primarily for liturgical reasons. Many evangelical congregations would find this “uncomfortable” space, primarily because of a question whether the gospel is being compromised to the culture.

It appears that postmodernism increasingly represents the cultural air that we breathe. The challenges before the church are becoming clearer. It will either learn to contextualize the gospel and congregations into this new cultural setting or it will find itself increasingly marginalized and irrelevant to the next generation. While generational adjustments have always been somewhat normative for the church, it appears that the scope of change in the present shift is calling for fundamental rethinking of how we understand both the gospel and the church.

In this brief article I will attempt to address two issues. First, the emergence of postmodernism will be placed within the historical context of modernity, modernism, and hypermodernity. Second, a number of potential bridges for the gospel and church within postmodernism will be identified.

I. POSTMODERNISM IN CONTEXT—SO, WHAT’S NEW?

1. Modernity and the Modern World

Michel Foucault was right: ideas have ideology embedded within them that have the power to shape social relations. This is especially true when such ideas are used by those in political control.² This ideological power is evident in the use of the word “modern.” This conception of the present world was promoted by the northern humanists as the renaissance was peaking in the fifteenth century and the reformation was beginning in the sixteenth century. “Before the end of the seven-

¹A composite picture of a Gen-X church as shared by the “young leaders” (Mark Driscoll, Chris Seay, Andrew Jones, Ron Johnson, Brad Cecil, and Doug Pagitt) at the Leadership Network conference on “Gathering of Church Champions” in Dallas, Texas, during January 1999.

²Michel Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, ed. by Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York: Routledge, 1988) 58.

teenth century, the periodization of history became fixed in the divisions familiar to us: ancient, medieval, and modern.”³ The enlightenment solidified these divisions into an ideology, an ideology that privileged the notion of a “modern world.” The modern world was superior and more progressive, because it was a world shaped by autonomous reason (Descartes) and scientific experience (Locke).

The purpose of enlightenment thinking was to center authority somewhere other than the king or the bishop. New theories were developed: about the “self”—the subject as a rational, central actor; about “truth”—as objective, universal, and capable of being discovered through science; and about “society”—as socially constructed and amenable to development and progress. This enlightenment tradition has shaped the past 400 years of western culture, and, through the colonial expansion of the west, it has also significantly impacted the rest of the world.

2. *Modernism*

The accomplishments of this “modern” world in the west have been profound. But not all was well within this new world order. Many felt that the drive to make life rational often suppressed the *emotive* aspect of human existence. Others felt that the drive to frame truth in objective categories of scientific knowledge often suppressed the *intuitive* aspect of human existence. And Christians, of course, clearly saw that placing authority inside the human mind or the social order effectively removed God from the equation, thus denying the *spiritual* side of life. These impulses towards the emotive, intuitive, and spiritual coalesced in the nineteenth-century movement known as “romanticism,” and in twentieth-century “modernism.” While this “modernist” movement is a birth twin to modernity, they are not identical twins. In many ways, modernism represents the underside of modernity—trying to recover what is lost by the tendency of modernity to collapse the human, the particular, and the unique into its univocal system of truth. Perhaps the influence of modernism is most clearly seen in the field of art, where there were rapid changes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—from representation to impressionism, to expressionism, to abstract (with numerous other movements woven within these primary shifts). As will be noted below, there are strong connections between modernism and what we now call the postmodern.

3. *Hypermodernity*

The twentieth-century developments within modernity have seen their logic intensified and globalized through the emergence of late capitalism. Fredric Jameson theorized three epochs of capitalist expansion: market capitalism (1700-1850), monopoly capitalism (1850-1950), and late capitalism (1950 to present). In the latter phase, multinational corporations function within an international banking system that lies outside national boundaries or political controls.⁴ While

³Bard Thompson, *Humanists and Reformers: A History of the Renaissance and Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 30-31.

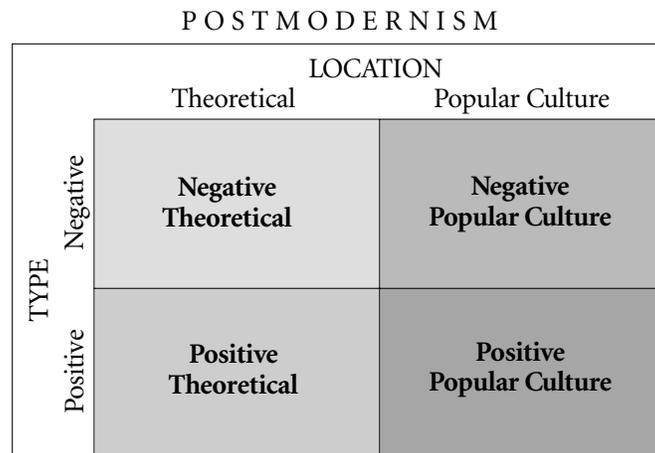
⁴Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review* 146 (1984) 53-92.

Jameson refers to this as postmodernity, others refer to this in terms of hypermodernity or radicalized modernity.⁵

Regardless of its name, the effects noted include the following: the shift from production-centered capitalism to one that is consumer-centered, the commodification of all of life, the increased mobility of capital flows, the increased scope and pace of change, and the collapse of time and space restrictions on information flows and consumption patterns. This emerging world culture of hypermodernity parallels postmodernism, but moves in the opposite direction. The postmodern tends to privilege diversity, the local, and the particular, while hypermodernity privileges a homogeneous global culture that is layered across the local and the particular cultures of the world. The homogeneous character of hypermodernity is illustrated by the freedom today to travel almost anywhere in the world by jet, stay at western-styled motels, drink Coke, eat at McDonalds, and never seriously interact with a local culture.

4. The Postmodern Turn

The 1960s and 1970s are now being identified as the turning point toward postmodernism. In the midst of the social upheavals of those decades, new ways of theorizing about theory itself began to take shape. During the 1940s and '50s, the structuralists, while decentering the rational self of modernity, tried to maintain a unified social order of functional systems by finding the inner codes of meaning in language and behavior. In reaction, the post-structuralists worked to deconstruct such notions of functionality, demonstrating both inconsistencies within such codes as well as their socially constructed character.⁶ As this shift began to unfold, two types of postmodernism emerged, one that is negative (hard) and one that is positive (soft). Each of these can be found in two different locations: theoretical critique and popular culture.



⁵Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 1990) 55-88.

⁶A helpful discussion of this can be found in Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* (New York: Guilford, 1991) 1-33.

Negative, theoretical postmodernism is represented by a number of theorists who began to criticize the whole enlightenment project for its faulty foundations. Michel Foucault discussed the inherent ideology and power present in the use of supposedly “objective and factual truth.” Jean François Lyotard noted the insufficiency of any one narrative to serve as a metanarrative for the whole of a society. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari theorized that the deeper nature of humans is rooted more in desire and intensity than in rationality and objectivity. Jean Baudrillard explored the shift to a sign culture where symbolic meanings are disassociated from actual referents. The work of these theorists identifies a world that is characterized by relativism, where social constructions of meaning are arbitrary at best.⁷

Negative, popular-culture postmodernism is reflected in the nihilism associated with the increase in teen-age suicides and the expanding drug culture among young people. A recent example of this version of postmodernism can be seen in the film about World War II, *A Thin Red Line*. In this movie the nihilistic relativism of all of life’s constructed meanings is presented with brutal, artistic forcefulness.

Positive, theoretical postmodernism is represented by theorists such as Steven Best and Douglas Kellner who shift the category of knowledge from *relativism* to *relativity*. While rejecting the totalizing of modernity’s assumptions of objectivity and universal truth, they propose the development of a “critical social theory” that takes seriously the idea that we *can* know the world around us. There is a reality that can be known, even though our knowledge is rooted in a particular perspective and represents an interpretation of reality.⁸ This *relativity* of knowing recognizes the embeddedness of all human knowing, but seeks to avoid falling into nihilistic relativism.

Positive, popular-culture postmodernism is reflected in the playfulness, collage, and irony that can be seen in much of contemporary life. One example is the mix-and-match clothing styles of many youth, who are defying the existence of perceived “conventional” codes. The recent film, *Sleepless in Seattle*, represents a clear portrayal of such a positive postmodernism. This love story uses an older movie, *An Affair to Remember*, as the controlling narrative within which magic, destiny, love, and romance are woven together with suffering, death, and loneliness. While nihilism lurks just below the surface, the characters avoid feeling the force of it as they construct new meaning for their lives.

5. Interwoven Layers

We now find ourselves in a complex world, one that is simultaneously modern, hypermodern, and postmodern. Modernity has not been replaced or superseded by the latter two; rather, the hypermodern and postmodern are now layered within the on-going realities of modernity. This co-mingling of all three presents a

⁷A fuller discussion of these developments can be found by Craig Van Gelder, “Mission in the Emerging Postmodern Condition,” in *The Church Between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America*, ed. George H. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 127-133.

⁸Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Theory*, 256-304.

unique challenge to the church. Which worldview does the church represent? Which reality does the church seek to engage through mission?

II. THE GOSPEL AND CHURCH IN THE MIDST OF POSTMODERNISM

The gospel and the church in mission are basic Christian themes, foundational to framing the Christian faith. In recent decades, ecumenical and evangelical churches, Roman Catholics and Orthodox have discovered a measure of common ground in understanding both the gospel and the church. The gospel is increasingly coming to be understood in terms of the reign of God as announced by Jesus Christ and inaugurated in his person and work. And the church is increasingly coming to be understood as missionary in its very nature, participating in the mission of the triune God to all of creation by serving as sign, foretaste, and instrument.

Two other significant missiological themes accompany these theological developments in understanding the content of the gospel and the character of the church. The first concerns the contextual conditioning of all understandings of the gospel and expressions of the church. It is becoming clear that the truth of the gospel and the validity of the church are both mediated through the reality of culture and context. The second concerns the inherent translatability of both the gospel and the church into any and every culture and context. This theme has perhaps best been developed by Lamin Sanneh, who explores how the African church was reshaped by the power of an eternal gospel that takes on universal relevance as it sheds its European colonial clothing.⁹

Possible bridges are available to those who would be missionaries to persons living within the worldview of postmodernism. Looking for such bridges is a sound missiological principle, and the history of missions is filled with examples of how this has worked over the centuries.¹⁰ The footprints of God are always already present in every culture and context. The church in the United States must realize the extent to which the generation being raised in the present postmodern culture is fully secularized, even in the midst of millions of Christians and thousands of congregations. While there may be a postmodern “enemy” within the church, there is also a great missional opportunity available among secularized persons. The following list represents several bridges available to congregations that are willing to engage their context missiologically. (It should be noted that these possible bridges could be complemented with a similar list of barriers and pitfalls, but the purpose of this essay is to focus on points of contact that might function as possible bridges.)

Spirituality. One of the remarkable developments over the past several decades has been the re-enchantment of western culture.¹¹ This stands in stark contrast

⁹Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989).

¹⁰A quite popular example is Don Richardson, *Peace Child* (Glendale, CA: Gospel Light, 1974).

¹¹Richard J. Mouw, “The Missionary Location of North American Churches,” in *Confident Witness—Changing World*, ed. Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

to the scientific positivism of mid-century that presented itself as a dominant worldview, one where the god-hypothesis had been canceled out. Today many views of spirituality are woven into the fabric of postmodern culture, ranging from angels to new age, to astrology, to amalgamated eastern religions. Although the emerging generation may be highly secular, they represent a new variety of secular persons—spiritual secularists. The possibility of God and the supernatural are taken for granted, thus presenting a bridge to the gospel. What presents a challenge is the relativized and highly personalized character that often accompanies their conception of “god.”

Community. Persons shaped by the postmodern perspective tend to be on a journey that is seeking community. The promise of the enlightenment to produce an emancipated freedom for the self-authenticated, rational individual has become the iron cage of individualism in the postmodern world. Any sense of personal identity or meaning has collapsed. The result for many has been a renewed desire to discover, locate, and belong to community. A natural bridge exists for the gospel to be proclaimed by an inviting Christian community that knows how to accept people where they are. The challenge is to move beyond the mistrust embedded against organized religion and to address with healing the fragmentation and brokenness that is so common to many of these persons.

Story/Narrative. Persons shaped by the postmodern culture have grown skeptical of principles, rules, and laws that are abstracted into truths that must be obeyed or followed. This skepticism is deeply rooted in the mistrust of supposedly objective science, although it is not unrelated to the way organized religion has also been presented. Postmodernism’s sense of the embeddedness of human knowledge and the perspectival character of all knowing means that understanding is rooted within a narrative, a story. A natural bridge exists for the gospel to be proclaimed as a narrative story—as God’s story about life and its meaning—within which all can come to know themselves. The challenge is the fact that we are adrift in a postmodern sea of competing stories, all of which are perceived as being socially constructed and relative. As seen in the movie *Sleepless in Seattle*, in a postmodern world any old movie will do for constructing a personal narrative.

Experiential. The generation shaped by postmodernism trusts its feelings as much or more than it does its thoughts. In fact, the chaotic and competing character of numerous truth claims causes many to turn to their feelings, instincts, and intuition as surer and more reliable sources of knowledge. This has been reinforced by the recent assertion that emotional intelligence functions as strongly as rational intelligence in shaping one’s view of life.¹² Postmodern persons want to *experience* life as much as or more than they want to *understand* life. A natural bridge exists for a gospel as good news that can proclaim an experiential encounter with the living God as central to the faith experience. The challenge is the need of this experiential encounter to be balanced by an intelligible understanding of the faith, and the re-

¹²Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* (New York: Bantam, 1995).

alization that, while Christian experience brings peace and joy, these often come in the midst of pain and suffering.

Holism/Relatedness. The modern worldview based on Newtonian physics broke the world into discrete particles and sought to discover the cause-and-effect relationships among them. The social order that paralleled this view of the physical world emphasized autonomous individuals being responsible to construct purpose and meaning through a social contract. The postmodern worldview, although privileging diversity, the local, and the particular, does emphasize the interrelatedness of all of life. A natural bridge exists for presenting a gospel that understands life from the perspective of the interrelatedness of God's created order and God's re-creational intent. The challenge is to develop a Christian understanding of holism that functions in the midst of sin and evil in the world.

Particularity. What on the surface may appear to be a major problem of the postmodern worldview, the privileging of the particular, can in fact be a bridge. In the Christian gospel, God takes culture and context seriously, as demonstrated most clearly in the incarnation. Christ became not only flesh, he became Jewish flesh. The good news is that God's message can become real within any context, any particularity. The challenge is to help postmodern persons understand that while particularity may clothe the truth of God, it does not limit its truthfulness—the finite can bear the infinite.

Irony. An interesting characteristic of the postmodern worldview is its emphasis on irony. Surprise, contrast, contradiction, and collage are all expected and appreciated. On one level this may function as a relativizing of truth, but on another level it can also function as a natural bridge to the gospel. The gospel of the reign of God as announced by Jesus is full of surprise, irony, contrast, and even contradiction to what people expected him to do and say.

Wider Rationality. The modern worldview depended on reason to construct a new reality out of experience. The result was rationalism and positivistic scientism. The bankruptness of this worldview is increasingly evident in a postmodern world. It is critical, however, that we not lose an understanding of the importance of rationality to our human condition. This presents a natural bridge for the gospel, especially when it is presented as God's story, for God's story provides a wider rationality for explaining our human existence. The challenge is to learn to invite people into discovering the satisfaction of this wider rationality without imposing it up front as a principle-based truth system.

These examples suggest that bridges exist to the postmodern worldview and to persons who are shaped by this perspective. While not without its challenges, postmodernism presents the church in the United States with a tremendous missional opportunity. The biggest challenge facing the church today lies within its own ranks, not in its attempt to relate to the postmodern context. The lingering vestiges of modernity continue to seduce the church into thinking that it can have

domain or maintain control. Postmodernity invites the church to rediscover its particularity, but also its inherent marginality. The sooner the church begins intentionally to minister from the margins, the sooner it will begin to rediscover the true power of the gospel and the fuller potential of being the church. ⊕