The Way Out of No Way: Modern Impediments to Postmodern Discipleship

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After more than two decades of academic and commercial overuse, the word “postmodern” still evokes overtones of impenetrably turgid prose, libertinism, nihilistic obsession with power, and edgy fashion statements. Such associations are borne out by enough examples to provide Christians with ample reason to distance themselves from all things postmodern. Although some admirable theologians write opaque postmodern tomes, some promote counterintuitive arguments in favor of sexual license, some provide unsettling analyses of Christian abuses of power, and some can successfully wear clothes from cutting-edge designers, we should exercise caution before jumping on board the Postmodern Express.

Our caution is all the more appropriate when we hear the claim that we live in a postmodern age, and that we therefore must do one or another thing. Such claims oversimplify matters to an intolerable degree; too much hinges on just what one means by “postmodern,” who and where “we” are, and what we want to do with ourselves and our neighbors. Plenty of people will manage their vocations quite satisfactorily without any attention whatever to the alleged postmodernity of our age. One would have a hard time pinning down just what such hucksters mean by

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“postmodern,” or connecting their compulsory postmodernity with more careful analyses of culture by theoreticians, philosophers, and critics. When the promoters of “necessary” contemporaneity begin dictating terms to the faithful, the faithful rightly intuit an idolatrous investment in things that are passing away, rather than in an enduring gospel in which they share with the saints.

Nonetheless, Christians should not simply disregard the work of postmodern critics, since one pivotal element in almost any version of “postmodern” thought involves a critique of modern culture, a culture with which most contemporary Christians have already infused their theology (self-consciously or not). To the extent that postmodern thought equips Christians to profess their faith in a way distinct from the legacy of modernity—a legacy that has been pressed upon the church by a previous generation of cultural enforcers—then faithful Christians do well to attend to their postmodern neighbors. In this context, we might recall Paul’s advice that whatever is true, honorable, commendable, if there be any excellence or praiseworthy thing, we should think about it (Phil 4:8). Many praiseworthy ideas appear counterintuitive, even ridiculous at first blush. Since many of the less publicized, less spectacular manifestations of postmodern thought stand to reinvigorate the understanding and practice of Christian theology, discerning believers can strengthen their faith by critically appropriating postmodern insights consonant with the faith as we have received it from our forebears, as we hope to pass it on to our heirs.

**Knowledge and Narrative**

The notion of “postmodernity” attained a great deal of its cultural currency in the wake of Jean-François Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition*, a report commissioned by the Conseil des Universités of the province of Quebec.¹ Lyotard’s monograph broaches a great many topics pertinent to postmodernity and theological faith, but his book begins by making the case that the texture of what we call “knowledge” differs depending on the sorts of knowledge about which we’re talking. He specifically distinguishes “scientific knowledge,” in which “knowing” is legitimated by numbers, experiments, laws, and productivity (among other criteria), from “narrative knowledge,” which is legitimated with respect to relationships, character, customs, and metanarratives. In the latter regard, Lyotard cites the French expressions *savoir-faire* (different from but comparable to “know-how”) and *savoir-vivre* (“living well”).² Such knowledge is real and effective—but it differs profoundly from the sort of knowledge that splits atoms and synthesizes new pharmaceuticals for treating psychological disorders.

The difference between scientific knowledge and narrative knowledge pertains to theological discourse in a variety of ways. First, that difference calls into

²Ibid., 18.
question the tendency to try to assimilate theological discourse to models from the sciences. We will not have the opportunity to quantify God’s attributes, or to run double-blind experiments to test the doctrine of the Trinity. Theologians legitimate their claims through a process of attestation and precedent, but we do not produce “discoveries” with testable implications for future research. Developments in theology involve social processes of proposal, interrogation, refinement, assent, and disputation, but not measurement, proof, or formulas.

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Moreover, Lyotard argues that narrative knowledge and scientific knowledge conflict in numerous ways. The simplest sphere of conflict involves social prestige; scientific disdain for “old wives’ tales,” “myths,” and “fables” corresponds to populist anti-intellectualism. Where abstract prestige gives way to concrete resources, narrative frequently prevails, which provides one reason that congressional hearings so frequently resort to affecting anecdotal testimony rather than statistical analysis. The conflict between scientific and narrative knowledge is intensified to the extent that scientific knowledge aims to articulate causes and effects; Lyotard points out that the narrative mode inhabits explanations of experiments, discoveries, and predictions despite science’s stake in distancing itself from the more primitive narrative mode of knowledge.

Nonetheless, scientific knowledge occupies the role of a salvific deliverer in many discourses. Where “progress” (in technology, medical treatment, genetics, industrial chemistry) promises a fuller, happier, richer life, scientific knowledge legitimates itself with respect to its capacity to deliver desirable goods. Scientists presumably operate from an agnostic skepticism with regard to metanarratives of liberation, of redemption from mortality, of prosperity, but the subject of science comfortably draws on the power that it can exercise as the preeminent dispenser of cultural goods. Science keeps death at bay, brings pleasure, heals our ills, and scientists expect authority commensurate with their role in these metanarratives.

Scientific knowledge and narrative knowledge come into conflict over their relation to ethics as well. Science, strictly speaking, has little to say relative to questions of “justice” or “well-being”; science can tell us whether two samples of DNA match, but can say nothing about what would constitute a just treatment of a convicted criminal. Science can extend lifespans, but science has no answer to the question of how to live well. Moreover, the concerns of ethics intersect the pursuit of science only obliquely; scientific inquiry involves no intrinsic interest in ethics (so that scientific research frequently occasions controversy over whether we ought
The disjunction between scientific knowledge and ethics extends also to the scientist’s character: So long as the scientist reports her experimental results truthfully, her truth claims do not depend on her moral probity. An abusive, egotistical, self-indulgent, impious scientist who conducts productive research that others can replicate in independent testing has produced reliable knowledge regardless of her behavior, but her character bears only a tenuous relation to her scientific knowledge.

Narrative knowledge, on the other hand, functions most powerfully when it addresses just these sorts of questions about which science must remain mute. Narrative knowledge concerns itself with causes and consequences, especially when those cause-and-effect relationships depend on subtle factors. Narrative knowledge connects character and knowledge intimately; in many contexts, the character of the narrator determines the legitimacy of what she is claiming (“consider the source”). The same exploitive, arrogant researcher who generates impressive scientific results would be a poor source for the sort of narrative knowledge that expounds goodness and engenders humanity.

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The distinction between scientific knowledge and narrative knowledge can inform theological discourse in various ways. Obviously, it reinforces the distinction between cosmological research results and the narrative accounts of creation in Genesis. Further, though, it provides a perspective on the goals and methods of theological education (from the catechesis of children to the formation of disciples to the training of congregational leaders). To the extent that theology is a body of narrative knowledge, we should be cautiously critical about efforts to render theology “scientific.” Some such efforts mean only that their sponsors pursue theology in a rigorous, systematic way. Other attempts to assimilate theology to scientific knowledge, however, trade on the great cultural prestige of science as vehicle for salvation, and try to attach a theological caboose to the engine of science. When readers encounter arguments that ascribe scientific value to theological claims, they would do well to look closely to ascertain in just what sense “science” is being used.

The Bible, after all, instructs us about God, Israel, and Jesus in preponderantly narrative modes. Even the ecumenical creeds lean heavily on a narrative substructure, and much that perplexes beginning students of patristic theology can be
clarified if one reads the early theologians as reasoning through narrative modes, rather than propositional logics. A postmodern perspective on Christian knowledge might highlight the role that character—the actual lived practice of discipleship—plays in theological understanding. It might acclaim certain modes of “narrative theology” as more promising than rival efforts at a disinterested, “scientific” theology. The perspective of postmodern thought offers grounds to question glib (modern) dismissals of the Bible as a primitive form of science and to work with the characteristic idioms of narrative wisdom with which Scripture works.

Perhaps—for instance—our catechisms, creeds, and confessions do not so much catalogue a system of scientific definitions of God as they constitute authoritative expressions of the way we know God. Where the modern sense of “knowledge” tends to drive us toward a fruitless impasse between liberals and fundamentalists, we may reassess what we mean by “knowing.” Such a reassessment of how “knowledge” works in Christian discourse not only attenuates our unacknowledged debt to modern culture, but also redirects the attention of modern Christians to those among our sisters and brothers whom modernity relegated to the margins of theology. People who did not recognize themselves in the icon of the modern Universal Subject (made in European man’s image) stand to strengthen postmodern discipleship as they participate as full partners in a less imperiously scientific, more generously narrative practice of our shared faith.

NATIONAL IDOLATRY

The ascendancy of scientific knowledge in modernity is mirrored by the predominance of the nation-state, a political entity that gradually has displaced other forms of political organization. Where once states were governed by personal authority, comprised as much territory as the polity’s armed forces could commandeer and protect, and experienced relatively frequent transitions in government, the modern nation-state has authority defined by some sort of constitutional organization, fixed borders, and more persistent bureaucratic government with partisan changes. The modern nation-state shares some characteristics with preceding forms of political organization, but in the circumstances of modern culture, the nation-state has exercised a novel influence over the popular imagination.

For instance, the principles of the first three commandments of the Decalogue constitute a head-on challenge to the modern nation-state. They are addressed not to a nation-state, but to a bunch of people wandering around in the wilderness (with unclear political boundaries, subject to spontaneous conquest or loss). The relevance of the Commandments doesn’t depend on an established civil government enacting these principles into public policy nor on each individual adopting them as a personal code. The Commandments are addressed to a people, a particular community. The God who teaches Israel how to live in the Decalogue is the same God who delivered them from slavery in Egypt; God has already ex-
tended divine mercy to Israel as a basis for Israel trusting in God. “Deliverance” now constitutes a further revelation of God’s identity, so that everything else we will learn about God should cohere with this demonstration of freedom. This liberating God requires that any other allegiance must be set aside in favor of our allegiance to the Lord; not that other deities don’t exist—the next commandment goes on to allow that they are real in some sense, since God commands that we not bow down to them or worship them. Our allegiance to this God takes precedence over any other possible priority; any other god, any other possible rival for our commitment, must give way to the Lord God who brings us out of slavery. God’s unwillingness to allow anyone or anything to intervene between God and humanity comes to expression in the commandment, “You shall not make for yourself an idol”; we may not participate in any of the plausible, popular, culturally acceptable practices that infringe on our unique commitment to God. And the third commandment enjoins against lying in general or against swearing by God’s name in a false cause. The sense of this commandment, though, permits a broader interpretation—and its proximity to the commandment against bearing false witness suggests that this verse concerns something different, something more pertinent to the preceding verses. In context, that difference seems to entail claiming God’s authority for purposes that are not God’s. We are not free to profane God’s name by ascribing to God’s will, God’s wisdom, that which we intend for our own aims.

To summarize, then, the first three commandments articulate a theology by which we align ourselves with a God who claims priority over all other interests or motivations, whom we may not draw down from heaven in the tangible, visible form, nor may we substitute for this invisible God a more congenially accessible champion. We may not dress up our intents and purposes by wrapping them in God’s radiance. The God of the Decalogue is uniquely authoritative, cannot be fashioned after our own image (pace Feuerbach), and cannot be controlled: God is absolute, aniconic, and useless. God does not exist for our use. We cannot honor this God by soft-pedalling God’s uncompromising will, or by painting God in our image, or by bossing other people around in the name of God. We honor the God who brought us out of slavery into freedom by the practice of godliness, of standing firm for God.

As you may have ascertained from this description, the characteristics of the Decalogue’s God comport poorly with priorities of the modern nation-state. The transition from patriotic respect to misplaced reverence is facilitated by several factors. In part, people understandably long for a more available God, a God whom one can rally to urgent causes. In part, such a transition serves the interests of the state. Some part of the transition serves other interests. However one distributes the causes, they combine to engender an atmosphere in which the state draws to itself allegiance, iconic sanctity, and effectuality that properly pertain only to the Lord.

So it is that recent legal reasoning in the United States turns on such ques-
tions as whether the Pledge of Allegiance’s “under God” clause entails enough of a theological affirmation to transgress the establishment clause of the First Amendment, or whether the flag of the United States is sacred. When these questions come to the floor of legislative bodies, Christians (and Jews) can be found advocating a pledge of allegiance to a national flag that stands in a direct line of descent from the insignias, emblems, and standards by which nations invoked totemic deities in battle, so that two millennia ago, faithful believers were willing to lay down their lives rather than venerate, or even tolerate, these representations of rival gods. Tertullian rejected the imperial regimental standards as incompatible with Christ; "But a figure of speech is never simply a figure, never just a metaphor. One need not alter the Constitution to justify a metaphor."

and when a Roman procurator brought flags that honored Caesar into the city of Jerusalem—not into the Temple, mind you, but just within the city limits—a crowd of Judeans staged a five-day demonstration to have the standards removed. And when that procurator threatened to execute them, they volunteered to be killed rather than permit these idolatrous emblems to remain within the city of Jerusalem. Despite the fact that Pontius Pilate was not asking the Jerusalemites to pledge allegiance to the standards, the people resisted the very existence of the iconic representation of imperial power within the holy city. In the twenty-first century, on the other hand, a unanimous vote of the U.S. Senate has affirmed the premise that U.S. Christians ought to pledge their allegiance to the flag (and to the republic for which it stands), and the House of Representatives passed a proposed amendment to the Constitution that reads, “The Congress shall have power to prohibit the physical desecration of the flag of the United States.” Such an amendment presupposes that the flag of the United States is in some sense sacred; and that claim of sanctity stands diametrically opposed to the teaching of the Decalogue, as the citizens of Jerusalem knew, as Christian conscripts into the Roman army knew.

It will be said that the flag’s sanctity is figural: “Of course no one regards the flag as the symbol of a transcendent divine national entity, and the flag doesn’t signify the genius of the President or the totemic protector of an army division.” But a figure of speech is never simply a figure, never just a metaphor. As it turns out, the vehemence with which politicians leapt to defend the state’s interest in inculcating obedient allegiance to the flag, and to define the flag as a sacred object that one might be punished for treating impiously, bespeaks a more than merely metaphorical sensitivity at this point. One need not alter the Constitution to justify a metaphor.

Instances of the sacralization of state authority make for stark examples; more subtly, the models of political society that constitute the nation-state infuse
the church’s deliberations about how its own common life should be ordered, how theological terms should be defined. The church’s interest in “justice,” for instance, presumably bears the marks of God’s preferential sympathy for the poor and dispossessed, for mercy over retribution, for forgiveness over condemnation. The church’s brand of justice reflects, with Paul, that it would be better to suffer wrongs than to sue others. Nonetheless, the churches tend to treat “justice” on the nation-state’s model, as the equal distribution of social goods. The church complies with the nation-state’s agenda for homeland security and offers only tenuous objections to deploying armed violence to enforce international policy. In such situations, the church accommodates, even embraces, the image of the nation-state as a visible, effective anointed agent for realizing divine purposes—and thus belies the Commandments and overrides the teaching and example of Jesus.

**Chief Ends of Postmodern Faith**

These examples point to just two (among many possible) dimensions of modernity and postmodernity where theologically interested readers may find their practice as disciples of the crucified Messiah strengthened by postmodern thought. We would err if we simply replaced the wisdom of the saints with the theory of the postmodern critics, but we would err just as much if we refused to remove beams from our eyes simply because the wrong person pointed them out to us. The church of modernity struggled to articulate the gospel of Christ under cultural conditions that diverged radically from those to which the church had grown accustomed, and in the process it assimilated elements of the modernity to which it preached repentance and grace. As we recognize that assimilation and endeavor to recuperate from it, we stand to benefit greatly from some among the astringent medicines that postmodern theorists prescribe. Our unselfconscious modernity itself may constitute a proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God, from which we may learn to extricate ourselves by taking captive the critical insights that postmodern theorists deploy against modernity. ☞

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