

- a. Humans can communicate with each other accurately, though not exhaustively. (We should point out postmodernism's tendency toward the *either-or* fallacy.)
- b. Postmodernism is as arrogant and dogmatic about uncertainty as modernism has been about certainty.
- c. "Bringing the margins to the center" assumes a universal morality and a metanarrative.

## B. On Christian Ground

### 1. *An Omniscient God Who Speaks Makes Knowledge Possible.*

By giving an overview of the Christian metanarrative, we can show postmoderns why language slips and yet why we can still communicate. First, we can say that God made and sustains the world through language and that He has given us the capacity for language by making us in His image (Gen. 1; Heb. 1). Second, we should acknowledge that our language often slips because we are finite and fallen (Gen. 3). In this fallen world, knowledge is indeed often a power play. Our world is also a world where deconstruction takes place. Third, we should affirm that God is redeeming this world to Himself and that language plays a primary role in this work. God stabilizes human knowledge and language by sharing with us some of His knowledge. (Consider using the theme of the Gospel of John to help make this point.) God counteracts the infirmities of our finitude and fallenness. He enables us to read God's Word the way it was meant to be read, and He enables us to speak with God effectively. Christianity solves the problem of knowledge that postmodernism says are unsolvable.

### 2. *We Cannot Live Without Truth; We Cannot Have Truth Without God.*

Postmoderns believe we should learn to live without truth. But we are not able to do this. Having the truth and living on that basis is woven into our being. Postmodernism is, in other words, unlivable. Perhaps we would do well to follow the example of Francis Schaeffer. He would often encourage people with postmodern tendencies to try to live consistently with their beliefs. He called this "taking the roof off." By getting people to think through the practical ramifications of their worldviews, he would expose them to the snow, wind, and rain of their errant beliefs. It is hard to dismiss Christianity when philosophically you have no roof over your head.

### 3. *Christianity Values True Freedom.*

We should point out that there is something oppressive about postmodernism. One of the surest ways to hurt people is to tell them that morally anything goes. It is instructive that Michel Foucault died of AIDS. God's moral code is part of the structure of the universe. Christianity has rules, but these rules are designed to free us.

### 4. *True Community Comes from the Triune God Who Fellowship with Humans.*

Postmoderns say knowledge is a community production, and one cannot enjoy life apart from participation in a community. For the most part, Christianity agrees. Ultimate reality is a community: God is triune. But the power and necessity of community do not make knowledge impossible. The God of truth is part of the Christian's community. And in Christianity the joy of community extends beyond one's relationship with God. Our Lord has designed His salvation so that redemption is enjoyed in community. Whatever postmodernism promises its adherents, it cannot compare to the joy and glory of being part of the church, the body of Jesus Christ (cf. 1 John 1:1-4).

## EVANGELIZING POSTMODERNS: GIVING HOPE TO THE DISILLUSIONED

Bryan Smith  
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**Introduction:** The late twentieth century saw the rise of a worldview very different from modernism. It has come to be called postmodernism, and it is the driving force behind many significant cultural changes in Western civilization. Conservative Christians have difficulty evangelizing to postmoderns. Postmoderns scare us. They call into question the fundamental assumptions of our society. Their political positions and their personal choices seem to threaten our way of life. But Christians should not fear. Our God is in control of all things. He has told us we should "not fear [unbelievers'] intimidation" (1 Pet. 3:14). And it is out of this confidence that Christians are to defend their beliefs. The next verse states, "But sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you" (v. 15). Postmoderns are part of the "everyone" we are to reach. And I believe that God wants us to give them an account of our hope because He intends to win many of these people to Himself.

### I. *What Is Postmodernism?*

Postmodernism is a rejection of modernism. The following summary statement by Heath White captures the essence of postmodernism in the historical flow of Western culture: "Premoderns placed their trust in authority. Moderns lost their confidence in authority and placed it in human reason instead. Postmoderns kept the modern distrust of authority but lost their trust in reason and have found nothing to replace it. This is the crux of all postmodern thought" (*Postmodernism 101*, 41).

#### A. **Key Tenets of Postmodernism**

##### 1. *Suspicion of All Metanarratives*

Postmoderns make extensive use of the concept of narrative. Narratives enable us to understand ourselves and the world around us. Stories (our own personal histories, the history of the company we work for, etc.) are not simply things to be interpreted. They enable us to interpret. Such stories are good and useful as long as they remain *local narratives*, narratives that are limited in scope and applicability. Once they become a *metanarrative*, however, problems arise. A metanarrative is any story that is believed to be the overarching story for human history. The moment people believe they know how to bind all local narratives into a single unifying narrative is the moment that oppression begins.

##### 2. *Antifoundationalist View of Knowledge*

Modernism has always been concerned with having a solid foundation for all human knowing. Postmodernism believes that there is no foundation for knowledge. This antifoundationalist view of knowledge has led to three emphases.

- a. *Knowledge is reflexive.* Postmoderns contend that knowledge is not something that corresponds to reality. Knowledge is a human construction. Human language does not point to reality. It only points to itself. We do not define words by reference to reality; we define words with other words. Therefore, we are never able to know an author's meaning through language. A text does not bring us into the mind of the

author; it brings us only to itself—a self filled with contradictions and indeterminacy. Jacques Derrida was famous for making this point and attempting to prove it through *deconstruction*.

- b. *Knowledge is a community production.* We know the world through our communities. Our desire for acceptance in these communities circumscribes our ability think and ask questions. These communities (family, work, friends, political affiliations, etc.) shape not just our view of the world out there; they also shape our knowledge of ourselves. These communities have produced us. Descartes' idea of removing oneself from one's community is therefore pointless. But it is also undesirable. Community gives us meaning and satisfaction. It also aids in directing our investigations.
- c. *Knowledge is power.* Modernism often used this statement to emphasize that education and science enable us to get stuff done. Postmodernism uses this mantra differently. "Knowledge is power" means that knowledge is not truth; it is instead a tool for creating and sustaining power. Michel Foucault, who popularized this idea, stated it this way: "'Truth' is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A regime of truth" (from an interview titled "Truth and Power").

### 3. *Rejection of Moral Absolutes*

Postmodernism was born toward the end of humanity's most violent century. It attributes this violence, in part, to belief in universal standards of morality. When people are confident they know what is right and wrong, they feel justified in oppressing others. The only way to insure that oppression does not happen is to deny people moral authority. No one should have the right to tell others how they should live.

## B. Popular Manifestations: "Bringing the Margins to the Center"

Just as words on a page are placed in the center by the existence of the margins, so (say the postmoderns) the humans at the center of culture have gained their privileged position through the marginalizing of certain people and ideas. Postmoderns aim to take what is marginalized and bring it to the center.

### 1. *Deconstructing Narratives*

Derrida's deconstruction has had a huge impact on how our culture is critiqued and shaped. It is not difficult to find examples of deconstructed historical narratives. Why should we have children celebrate Columbus Day? Is this the beginning of civilization in the western hemisphere, or is it the beginning of Europe's oppression of the peoples of North and South America. This is not an event to be celebrated; it is to be mourned.

### 2. *Emphasis on Tolerance*

Modernism emphasized tolerance, but postmodernism's emphasis comes closer to being consistent. What modernism called freedom was in fact forced secularism. This was best seen in higher education. Now, however, that attitude has changed in many places. Christians are welcomed to be Christians and be part of academia. But this tolerance has opposed Christianity too. Postmodernism's tolerance has encouraged suspicion of all kinds of dogmatism. Confident belief in anything is seen as a cloak for insecurity and latent desires for power. I should add here that I have noticed this attitude of suspicion even among many Christian young people.

Suspicion of dogmatism is one of the most pervasive effects of postmodernism.

### 3. *Multiculturalism*

Modernism sees the world divided into the free and the bound, the modernized and the un-modernized. Christianity sees the world divided into the saved and the lost, the evangelized and the un-evangelized. Postmodernism sees value in all the communities of the world. Other cultures do not need our culture; they instead need for us to understand and appreciate them. From elementary history textbooks to cultural specials on PBS, one can see that postmodernism has converted much of society to multiculturalism—the belief that other cultures should be studied for appreciation, not for critical evaluation.

## II. General Observations for Conversing with Postmoderns

How do Christians relate to people who reject moral absolutes and even a traditional view of language and knowledge? I believe the following Scripture passages give us valuable information that begins to show us the way.

### A. **Genesis 1:26-27**

### B. **Romans 1:18-32; 2:14-15**

### C. **Acts 17:16-34**

This passage records Paul's sermon at Mars' Hill. Paul's audience that day was not a group of postmoderns. It was a group of polytheistic premoderns. But the people he addressed were characterized by pluralism and tolerance. Paul's strategy that day is therefore instructive for us.

#### 1. *Paul Began with Agreement.*

#### 2. *Paul Worked Toward Disagreement.*

#### 3. *Paul Presented Christianity as a Metanarrative.*

The Athenians had no familiarity with Christianity. So he presented the essence of the Christian message by telling its grand story. After all, the Bible's message is most basically a metanarrative: God made the world for His own glory; this world has fallen into a tragic state because of human sin; and God is at work to redeem this world to Himself. Many postmoderns, like the Athenians, are ignorant of the Bible's story. They are familiar with the failures of popes, televangelists, and pulpit-pounding preachers. Few, however, are familiar with the Bible itself. When we talk with postmoderns, we must give much of our time and attention to telling the story of Scripture. Although they will oppose our claim that this story is *the* metanarrative, they will likely listen to our presentation because it is a narrative.

## III. Specific Advice for Evangelizing Postmoderns

Last week we talked about conversing with modernists through two complementary moves. That approach may also work well when conversing with postmoderns.

### A. **On Postmodern Ground**

#### 1. *Agreement*

a. Modernism cannot deliver on its promises.

b. Knowledge is presuppositional and worldviewish.

c. Human interactions are more sinister than they appear.

d. Community plays a significant role in how humans view themselves and the world.

#### 2. *Problems*