

# Evangelism and Postmodernism

## Presenting the Christian Gospel in a Postmodern World

By Maher Samuel

Many of the greatest Christian apologists of our time have a strong negative attitude towards postmodernism. Seeing it as a threat to Christianity, they may value modernism instead with its emphasis on reason and objective truth. This essay, however, will aim to show that both modernism and postmodernism, as different philosophies, create different challenges as well as different opportunities for the evangelist to present the gospel. This essay will focus on how postmodernism, in particular, creates an opportunity for evangelism, in spite of all of the challenges it presents.

This is important, first, because it shows that the Christian gospel is cross-cultural – that is, there is no one specific culture that is a necessary pre-condition for the gospel to be effective. If there were, that would greatly weaken the gospel. The second reason it is important is because it encourages a kind of Christian maturity that helps the Christian to contextualize the message of the gospel in any culture. In effect, it begins, as Jesus did, from where the person stands intellectually and not from a set of ideas believed by the evangelist. The gospel is person-centered in this way. It does not seek to convince people of ideas but to transform their lives.

The essay will discuss Genesis 1-11, highlighting how scripture draws a connection between culture and the human identity as the image of God (*Imago-Dei*), and it proceeds to show the scatteredness and deep sense of loss of the human condition as a result of rejecting God. Moreover, the essay will outline some of the basic claims of postmodernism and the kind of challenges it poses to Christianity. Finally, it will be argued that the things postmodernists emphasize – the lack of a fixed human nature, the imperfection of reason, the absence of objective truth and reality, and the limitation of language – draw a deep parallel with the biblical story found in Genesis 1-11. Bearing in mind this philosophical parallel between scripture and postmodernism, practical advice on how the Christian gospel can be presented in a postmodern world will be discussed in the remaining part of the essay.

### **The *Imago-Dei* and the culture mandate<sup>1</sup>**

In Genesis 1:26-27, we reach the apex of the creation story, man's creation in the image of God. God has brought order out of chaos. He has prepared everything to make the earth ready for his new project, the man project – while in verse 28, we find the culture mandate. Man is created in God's image:

- Constitutionally humans are embodied spirits; they are in the likeness of God, who is himself spirit.

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<sup>1</sup> “The term "culture" stems from the Latin term *colere*, meaning "to cultivate, till, tend," thus the feminine *cultura* meaning "tilling, culture, cultivation." From this the term "culture" has come to refer generally to what is civilized or refined, perhaps even educated. "A human group's self-selected and self-tailored problem-solving tool" - Lara Thompson.

- Relationally, they are male and female, i.e. they are capable of entering into a free, conscious, and intimate relationship with each other because they are created in the likeness of the relational triune God.
- Functionally, they are created in God's image to be his vice-regents on earth, to have dominion, and to create civilization.

The ultimate goal of the creation of man is for him to live in an intimate relationship with God in his presence, transferring the invisible spiritual and moral nature of God, which is love and light, to the visible material world through culture and civilization. As a result of this, human potential is actualized as man is free to create culture through expressions of creativity, intellect, and art. Yet, God's glory is also manifested as these cultural expressions are a mere reflection of God's moral nature. The idea in Genesis that man is tasked with creating culture and civilization is discussed by Emile Brunner:

Because man, and man alone, has been created in the image of God, and for communion with the Creator, therefore he may and should make the earth subject to himself, and should have dominion over all other creatures. The call to create civilization which this involves, is not indeed the essence of real humanity, but it is its necessary presupposition.<sup>2</sup>

The fall occurs in Genesis 3 when man, against his design and finitude, chooses to claim for himself God's own role to define and determine good and evil. It then culminates in Cain who rejects God's redemptive plan, which is based on animal sacrifice. Cain goes out of God's presence and immediately begins to establish a civilization without God. He builds a city, naming it Enoch after his son. This city reflects the distortion of human nature as shown in the violence of Lamech. By introducing polygamy, Lamech rejects marriage as intended by God and attempts the overthrow of the original social structure. While the city has inventions such as music and poetry, it has no altar, no temple, and no God. Civilization without God becomes unbearable as the earth is filled with violence and corruption, and ultimately man loses his very humanity. Bruner observes:

When man seeks his supreme end in culture and civilization, and puts this in place of God, and turns it into an absolute, the germ of inhumanity has been introduced into his life. True civilization and true culture can only develop where the cultural creation and activity is directed and ordered from a center which transcends culture.<sup>3</sup>

Eventually, God, out of necessity, interferes by bringing judgment through the flood, demolishing man and his civilization. He re-sets the man project, creating a new Adam, namely Noah. God renews the cultural mandate in Genesis 9:1. Unfortunately, Noah repeats the pattern set by Adam and Eve, and by the end of chapter 9 we encounter the familiar themes of man's fall: a tree, nakedness, and a curse. As Adam's fall culminated in Cain, Noah's culminates in Nimrod who, like Cain, builds a city.<sup>4</sup> This time, however, the city is characterized by the tower of Babel. Possibly one of the earliest examples of a skyscraper in

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<sup>2</sup> Emile Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 67.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>4</sup> It can be inferred from Genesis 10, that Nimrod has an essential role in building the city, and thus, the tower.

antiquity, the tower supposedly represents strength and unity, despite separation from God. It is meant as an act of rebellion against God, attempting to affirm both unity and division – that is, it seeks unity between one man and another, but division between man and God. In Genesis 11:7, God disrupts man’s plans to build the tower by giving the builders different tongues. Thus, through a linguistic barrier, they become unable to communicate or unite, eventually becoming entirely scattered. By this sort of judgment, it can be argued that God was revealing the future of humanity. In human beings’ failed attempt to unite with each other while being separate from God, they become scattered and confused.

### **Postmodernism vs. Modernism**

Alister McGrath highlights in *Mere Apologetics* the period in history in which modernism had its greatest influence, and he explains some of modernism’s basic claims:

The dominant culture environment of the west from about 1750 to 1960, is usually defined as modernity. This outlook was shaped by a belief in a universal human reason, common to all people and times, capable of gaining access to the deeper structures of the world. Reason was the key that unlocked the mysteries of life and argument was its tool of persuasion. Rational argument became the trusted tool of this cultural age.<sup>5</sup>

McGrath’s explanation thus serves to show how reason has somewhat replaced God in the post-enlightenment age. Man not only believes that truth exists but that it can be fully accessed and understood through reason. All of man’s problems can thus be overcome through unified and objective rationality, with particular emphasis on the scientific method as the epitome of rational thinking. In contrast, in postmodernism objective truth simply does not exist. J.P. Moreland explains it this way:

[Postmodernism] represents a form of cultural relativism about such things as reality, truth, reason, value, linguistic meaning, the self and other notions. On a postmodernist view, there is no such thing as objective reality, truth, value, reason and so forth. All these are social constructions, creations of linguistic practices and, as such, are relative not to individuals, but to social groups that share a narrative.... For the postmodernist, if one claims to have the truth in the correspondence sense, this assertion is a power move that victimizes those judged not to have the truth.<sup>6</sup>

Postmodernism thus disregards the idea that as humans we have access to objective truth. Moreover, it argues not only that we simply cannot have access to truth but that any claim to being able to do so is an act of oppression and a power play. Kevin Vanhoozer describes the pessimistic stance of postmodernists as they ridicule the optimism of modernism. In this view, what used to give hope to modernists as the ultimate solution to the human predicament, namely reason, is found to be deeply limiting:

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<sup>5</sup>Alister McGrath, *Mere Apologetics: How to Help Seekers and Skeptics Find Faith* (London: SPCK Publishing, 2016), 27.

<sup>6</sup>J.P. Moreland, “Truth, Contemporary Philosophy, and the Postmodern Turn.” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48, no.1 (March 2005): 77-88. The correspondence theory of truth holds that there is an objective reality that human beings can state as propositions.

If the modern world was characterized by an optimistic belief in reason to solve our problems, the postmodern world is marked by a loss of faith. Postmodern thinkers see modernism, and everything for that matter, as myths – human creations. Modernism relied on the myths of the omniscience of Reason, human progress, and human perfectibility. Postmodern philosophy questions all these assumptions. According to postmodernists, all human thinking is conditioned by our place in culture and history and by language itself. All perspectives, especially that of the bourgeois western male rationalist, are finite and relative. Man is not homo sapiens, the wise or knowing animal, but rather the myth-making animal. Man creates values; man makes himself. Instead of trying to discover our fixed nature, the postmodern tendency is to think in terms of social constructivism.<sup>7</sup>

Vanhoozer thus emphasizes the postmodern realization of human finitude. It is not that all things in reality can be understood and explained objectively and independently of the human subject; on the contrary, what we think of as reality is merely our own subjective conception of the world outside of us.

### **The philosophical parallel between postmodernism and Christianity**

These basic claims of postmodernism are generally parallel to what scripture describes as the human condition after the fall. Four elements in particular, in postmodernism can be highlighted and examined in light of scripture: lack of a fixed human nature, the imperfection of reason, the absence of objective truth and reality, and the limitation of language.

#### **The lack of a fixed human nature**

Postmodernists reject the idea of a divinely created fixed human self. Hence, human nature is not something to be discovered but rather to be created. Michel Foucault emphasizes this idea in his work on human sexuality. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy's* entry on Foucault explains this in the following way:

Foucault's last two books are an attempt to make a contribution to the task of rethinking ethics, but they are also a continuation of his attempt to rethink the subject. Now the focus is on the forms of understanding that subjects create about themselves and the practices by which they transform their mode of being. In his study of ancient Greek ethics, Foucault continued to pursue his idea that there was no true self that could be deciphered and emancipated, but that the self was something that had been—and must be—created.<sup>8</sup>

In the above reflection on Genesis 1-11, it was inferred that scripture places great weight on human nature and its relation to man's role in creating civilization. It was precisely because man is created in the image of a triune God, a God whose nature is that of love and

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<sup>7</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer, *Theological Anthropology*. An unpublished lecture given at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. 2013. Course: ST5102.

<sup>8</sup>Gutting, Gary and Oksala, Johanna, "Michel Foucault", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), accessed November 20, 2018, <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/foucault/>>.

of light, that man was then tasked with creating a civilization that reflects God's moral nature. The postmodernists, including Foucault, in their rejection of God are entirely consistent. They understand that without a narrative within which man is created in the image of God a fixed human nature will be lost. Moreover, they understand the radical implications that this loss may have for civilization, culture, and ethics. As Lamech introduced polygamy in recognition that without God human sexuality becomes merely a matter of personal desire, postmodernists also understand that, without a fixed human nature, sexuality is nothing but the unique inclinations of the human subject.

### **The imperfection of reason**

Postmodernists are also deeply aware of the imperfection of human reason. Foucault describes this idea quite radically: "Reason is the ultimate language of madness."<sup>9</sup> Christians should be aware that although reason is a fundamental characteristic of human nature and should be deeply valued, it is not, as modernists assert, the key to all human problems. The Christian understanding is that without God man is depraved, which includes man's faculty of reason. Corrupted by sin, human beings are, thus, deeply limited. As the apostle Paul explains, "Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done" (Romans 1:28).

### **The absence of objective truth and reality**

From the recognition that human reason is deeply limited, it follows that truth, as something that is to be understood by reason, is considered to be absent. Reality for postmodernists is a subjective social construction. Philosophers point out that affirming the limitations of reason points to a problem: the denial of the existence of objective truth and reality is in itself a truth claim. In this situation, postmodernists are caught in a contradiction. By denying that it is possible to know anything absolute about truth or reality, postmodernists have already made a truth claim about reality. However, in the denial of the existence of reality, postmodernists are consistent with the biblical diagnosis of man's state after doing away with God. According to the apostles Paul and John, the reality of the world after rejecting God is deeply fake and entirely based on deception. Moreover, the prophets of the Old Testament frequently asserted that truth is absent from the earth. The Bible does not say that there is no truth but that in a world without God truth is absent. And the goal of God's redemptive economy is to regain it. Thus, when postmodernists understand and recognize humanity's inability to access truth in a godless world, they are in agreement with the biblical narrative.

### **The limitation of language**

Following from what has been explained above, it makes sense to discuss postmodernists' understanding of language. The classical structuralist idea of language is that it consists of signifiers and signified; where the signifier is the sound uttered, and the signified is the thing in reality to which the sound uttered is referring. As noted above, the problem for postmodernists is that they do not think we can actually have access to reality. Thus, the signified, which we think we are signifying in reality, is merely our subjective conception of reality. In this view, all that we claim to know about reality is merely a linguistic expression of our own subjective experience. Vanhoozer explains this in the following way: "Both [Richard] Rorty and [Jacques] Derrida have exposed the irony in metaphysics: the metaphysician sets out to speak about the real but ends up saying something about

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<sup>9</sup>Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 63.

himself.”<sup>10</sup> Postmodernists argue that all claims made about objective reality are actually claims made about the subjective self. It is important however, to note that postmodernists still understand language to be based on signifiers and signified. However, they understand the signified to be in itself another signifier. If all that we can refer to is merely our own subjective experience and that subjective experience translates into language meaning signifiers, then, by attempting to refer to reality, we are merely referring to the linguistic translation of our own subjective experience. The signifier only refers to another signifier, and this chain of signifiers is endless. Vanhoozer explains this as follows:

Nietzsche, the patron saint of postmodernity, prophesized accurately: if God is dead, then it’s interpretation “all the way down.” Formulation never reaches fact. No one formulation can ever be regarded as final. As in interpretation, so in life: everything becomes undecidable.<sup>11</sup>

Language is thus highly limited in postmodernists understanding. What takes place as a result of the tower of Babel (Genesis 11) can be interpreted to be compatible with the postmodernist understanding of the limitation of language. God interferes and changes the languages of the men building the tower of Babel, revealing the deepest problem that comes about as a result of this rejection of God: the human condition after declaring the death of God is that of scatterdness and confusion. As explained by the postmodernist, objective reality is lost, and language itself loses its capacity to be a method of communication about such reality. It becomes entirely subjective; and similar to the builders of the tower of Babel, the postmodernists lament their deep sense of loss and disintegration.

### **Practical advice on how to evangelize postmodernists**

#### **Focus on relationality and not just rationality**

Although the Christian faith is rational, it is inherently relational. Christian salvation is not the rational acceptance of proved facts about Jesus, but rather it is the acceptance and trusting of Jesus himself as a savior. Therefore, focusing on the beauty of the person of Jesus and on the need of humanity for him is more appealing to postmodernists than rationally proving the facts of the gospel. Recent studies on American university students show that, in the 1960s and 1970s, students were more inclined to accept the gospel because they were intellectually persuaded by it; whereas, starting in the 1990s, they are more likely to report loving the person of Jesus, becoming part of a warm church-like community, and experiencing the joy and liberating effect of encountering Jesus as reasons for accepting the Christian gospel. This represents a shift from believing and then belonging, to belonging and then believing. This does not of course mean that we ought to disregard reason and not attempt to defend the faith rationally; rather, it suggests that we ought to do so only when it is needed. We should always be careful to observe when our audience needs more than just persuasion through reason.

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<sup>10</sup>Kevin Vanhoozer, "Pilgrim's Digress: Christian Thinking on and about the Post/Modern Way," in *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views*, ed. By Myron B. Penner (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005), 75.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 78.

### **Share the story**

Christian evangelists have a great advantage in that the Christian truth is revealed in a story and not in arguments or just mere abstract propositions. It is of course factual and we can argue rationally and historically for it, yet it is inherently a narrative. The truth about Jesus is provided in a story, and the whole truth about God is presented in a story. Hence, when postmodernists say "don't tell me that you have the truth, just share your story," it is not wise to argue for the objectivity of the Christian truth; rather, it is then better to share the truth of the biblical story in a narrative.

### **Preach the abundant life, not the lazy afterlife**

As explained above, postmodernists do not believe in a discoverable fixed human nature and meaning of life. However, it remains true that all human beings deeply desire to discover their unique selves and to live a meaningful life. This is the appeal at the core of the Christian gospel. We preach that the savior, Jesus Christ, takes the sinner on a journey of healing that restores distorted humanity's unactualized uniqueness and lost purpose. We thus ought not reduce the Christian gospel to a free entry ticket into heaven or an insurance policy against hell. This gospel will appeal to postmodernists who emphasize experience. We should not preach about abstract future realities; rather, we should invite postmodernists to experience a life of satisfaction. With this approach, the evangelist can then communicate to postmodernists the kind of joy that he as a subject is experiencing.

### **Conclusion**

In the first part of this essay, I reflected upon Genesis 1-11. In light of this reflection, one first notices that, after the fall, man did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God. From Cain to Nimrod, human nature is deeply depraved, and civilization and culture are deeply corrupted. Modernism and postmodernism are no exceptions as they too are just as distorted. However, if modernism is the building of the city and the tower, postmodernism is the recognition of confusion and scatteredness. Postmodernists recognize this confusion through their admittance of the lack of a fixed human nature, the imperfection of reason, the absence of access to objective reality, and finally, the limitation of language. It is precisely because postmodernists admit of these things that they are in fundamental agreement with the biblical diagnosis of man's condition after the fall. The correspondence between scripture and postmodernism creates the opportunity for evangelism. This is why, in spite of all the challenges it presents, postmodernism, in particular, creates an opportunity for evangelism. In order to seize this opportunity, we as evangelists we must adopt an approach suitable to reach a postmodern world.

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