

THE DANCE OF TRUTH

Postmodernism and the Evangelical

By Don Hudson

We want God to make sense, to be reasonable, to act according to how *we* think God should act. This kind of thinking, though, is not far from where we live today. If I give money to the church, then God will bless me financially. If I have my “quiet time” in scripture, then God will bless my day. If I raise my children right, then surely they will turn out right. In themselves these actions are good and right; however, we have to ask ourselves, “Do our motives emerge from the desire to give a place to the mystery of faith, or, rather, to conquer mystery?”

I am troubled by a movement very common in Christian circles today called “Raising Kids God’s Way.” Even the title smacks of modernist arrogance—that the method I use to raise my children would be *God’s* way. It is tragic enough that the authors of this training method use scripture in egregious ways, encourage dubious medical practices, and promote the deadening of passion and imagination in our children. But more sadly, they are teaching the quintessential promise of modernism: If I do A, then God will do B.

Terrified, bewildered parents want a guarantee. I know this passion for a guarantee by personal experience. I want something in my life that will guarantee me that if I do this, then God is obligated to do such-and-so. Thank God, though, for our five year olds whose unrestrained passions remind us that God is whimsical and untamed. Thank God for our “foolish” teenagers who drive the foolishness out of our hesitant, fearful hearts. If you want a good picture of postmodernism, then think of the five year old who disrupts the best laid plans of the family or the teenager who begins to question a parent’s faith. This is why the postmodern moment is so terrifying to us. It is a reminder that we are out of control, and a place where we are invited to trust a God who is beyond our comprehension. We want guarantees, and conveniently for Christians, we can “invent” a God who gives such a guarantee. In other words, Christians can use the methods and the thinking of modernism to project an image of a God who removes

questions and doubts. Modernism, then, becomes a way of thinking which attempts to tame and reduce God to logical categories so that our worlds will be predictable. It is the quest for the absolute presence of God—we can use our minds, our reason, to prove the existence of God. Modernism at its extreme is the belief that the human mind can comprehend reality whether it be something as lofty as God or as mundane as weather patterns. Referring back to Melville's quote at the beginning of this essay, just as Captain Ahab madly hunted the great, mysterious white whale, modernism has been the furious pursuit of God in order to conquer the ultimate mystery.

If we can say that modernism is the delirious launch and thrust of the harpoon at the God who has been sighted, that frenzied quest to pierce and capture the incomprehensible God, then perhaps we can say that postmodernism is the appalling, haunting moment when the harpoon misses the target, we have launched ourselves into the howling maelstrom, and the sighted God has disappeared into the deep blue sea. Thus, we no longer live in a culture which promotes this naïve assumption of modernism: that we can actually comprehend God. Most likely, modernist arrogance reached its height, the top of Babel, in the thought of Hegel, the German philosopher. Incredibly, Hegel actually believed that his philosophy had finally solved the mystery of the trinity. Listen to the words of Gadamer, a more contemporary German philosopher: "Hegelian philosophy claimed above all to have comprehended the truth of the Christian message in conceptual form. This included even the deepest mystery of Christian doctrine, the mystery of the trinity." Hegel could actually believe in his idealistic, but naïve, philosophy because he was a child of the nineteenth century. Little could he have known what lay in store for the twentieth century. Little did he know that his positive philosophy would be a major force that would lead to the Holocaust.

As we approach the twenty-first century, our postmodern culture asks a very different question than our modernist ancestors of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: We are asking, "Where is God?" You promised that God would be there. Auschwitz. Hiroshima. My Lai. You said we could prove God's existence. Mao Tse-tung. Pinochet. Pol Pot. You said that God made sense. The Cultural Revolution in China. The Red Terror in Ukraine. Stalin's bloody purges in Russia. You said that God has spoken in history. Prague 1968. Chiapas 1996. Laramie 1998. You said that we were getting better and better, that "even God could not sink this ship!" The finality of the German gas chamber. The isolation of the American prison cell. The horror of the Chilean torture chamber. "Where is God?" Indeed. "Man of sorrows, disappearing into the crowd."

But there is another disappearance here at the end of modernism, one just as insidious as these physical manifestations mentioned in the previous paragraph. This other disappearance is the loss of

meaning. We are deluged with data. Never in the history of humanity have there been more words, more images, more sensory data than in our time. Everywhere we turn, we are assaulted by images without substance, advertisements without ethics, and words without meaning. How does the church speak about the tragedy of the twentieth century? How does the church speak to this postmodern world?

We are at the end of the modernist experiment, and we have forfeited, we are missing, truth and goodness. Only beauty remains, but beauty appears to be dislocated and homeless, because, to borrow from Gertrude Stein, “there is no there there” anymore. How do we reconcile beauty and Auschwitz; how do we reconcile beauty and vacuous Madison Avenue? We have launched out into the deep and cast our harpoon, but we have missed, we are missing God. We *miss* God: we have missed in our attempt to grasp the incomprehensible, and thus we are missing, we are yearning and are pining for God. If modernism was the confident demand for the presence of God, the building of Babel, then postmodernism can be the passion to sift through the ruins of the twentieth century, the rubble of Babel, in a search for the absent God. It is no secret that our culture is experiencing a profound sense of alienation. We are alienated from ourselves, from others and from God. This is what I mean by the absence of God—not that God has abandoned us, but that we are estranged from God and others.

Simply put, the question is this. How, then, does one talk about this search for the absence of God? How do we represent the *Deus absconditus*, the hidden God, who in Flannery O’Connor’s terms is the ragged figure who runs from tree to tree in our minds? How do we represent the God who got away? What place does modernist thought give to the *person* of God much less the *hiddenness* of God? We must ask and attempt to answer the question: how does the absence of God play out in our theology and in our culture?

Enter postmodernism. Postmodern thought comes upon the scene to remind us that faith is the dance of presence *and* absence, grace *and* tragedy, assurance *and* doubt. Perhaps the postmodern moment is the most effective way to reveal the hidden God. In this issue we want to argue that postmodern thought critiques the arrogance of modernism, and in so doing, offers the church one of its greatest opportunities to present the gospel. In other words, postmodern thought does have something to offer the church. Unfortunately though, there is a quite a bit of confusion going on in evangelical circles around the word “postmodern.” If the “new age movement” was the heresy that bedeviled the evangelical church in the eighties, then postmodernism is supposedly that new heresy creeping into the church as we move into the twenty-first century. Within the last two years I have heard and read many of the standard evangelical responses to postmodernism, and quite frankly, I have been shocked not only by the strident, reactionary tone but, more so, the obvious

superficial misreadings and misunderstandings of what postmodernism is all about. When most evangelicals speak of postmodernism they use all-encompassing words such as “relativistic,” “nihilistic,” or the “death of truth” (as if truth could really die). But we must examine this issue carefully.

More times than not, we do not expend the energy to carefully, thoughtfully understand and explore views with which we disagree, i.e. postmodernism. As a result, whether implicitly or explicitly, we end up rejecting opposing views out of cozy ignorance rather than costly study. More tragically though, the theology of the church can inadvertently reflect worldly thinking rather than solid, scriptural thinking. Evangelical seminaries emphasize rationalist, analytical methodology over relationship; the Religious Right pushes morality rather than holiness; the church is in the business of recruiting more soldiers to defend the truth rather than sending believers out into the world to love and care for those who cannot care for themselves; mission organizations send out missionaries to save the pagans with the implicit message that the ones who are being saved must be delivered not only from their sins but their culture; some parachurch organizations present the gospel to others in a way that seeks to convince unbelievers of the truth of Christ rather than inviting them to a significant relationship with Christ.

Quite frankly I am concerned that certain pockets of evangelical Christianity have uncritically cast their lots with modernist thinking. I recall the first time I attended a class in what many evangelicals would call a liberal seminary. This particular seminary was reputed to be an “open” institution, but I was astounded by the arrogance and intolerance of both the instructors and a number of the students. What terrified me the most, though, was the shock I felt when I began to realize that I was back in a “fundamentalist” institution. At different times in the class, I thought I had come upon a more dangerous fundamentalism—the tyranny of seeing through the eyes of tolerance. Same hermeneutic as fundamentalism, just different theology. Years previously I had left a fundamentalist institution for the purpose of finding teaching that would not place God in a box, an institution whose sole purpose was not to build fences around the untamed God.

One of the basic problems with the postmodern debate is this: more times than not, some evangelicals are viewing postmodernism from within a modernist worldview. Postmodernism begins, though, by questioning the entire modernist enterprise while at the same time bringing forth new ways of thinking and inviting new voices to the discussion of faith. It is important to understand that my intent is not to throw out the advances of modernism and turn wholeheartedly toward postmodernism. In the end, both are human philosophies which emphasize certain aspects of truth while at the same time harboring serious errors. I would be the first to agree that postmodernism must be critiqued, but we have much to learn from

the postmodern spectacle. As we begin, let me venture forth my very simple definition as long as we understand that my definition is not all-encompassing: postmodernism is a reversal in rationalist thinking which opens the door to mystery.

The Postmodern Spectacle

It would be impossible to even begin to present a comprehensive view of postmodernism, so allow me to mention a few integral elements to postmodern thinking. I will discuss four categories: the postmodern moment is a turn, a downturn, a re-turn, and a ride in the rumble seat.

In the first place, postmodernism is a *turn in language*. The Italian author Umberto Eco, claims that postmodernism is “a way of operating” or simply, an entirely different way of thinking about language and reading. Essentially, postmodern thought would argue that God cannot be encircled, surrounded, or encompassed with language. As humans this side of Paradise, we can never know God perfectly; thus we never have an unadulterated, privileged view of God. Luther said a long time ago that there is a problem with the interpreter—we are blind to truth (John 9:41: “If you were blind, you would not have sin; but since you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.”). Yes, the postmodernist would say, but there is also a problem with language. Language communicates, but language also confuses and thus invites interpretation at every reading. Language is mysterious and calls for a profound humility on the part of the reader.

Modernism, and I must add, evangelical seminaries, have taught that the right methodology will correct wrong readings of the Bible. But most postmodern thinkers would argue that the strong arm of methodology merely sets up the reader to exit the text just as he or she entered the text. In other words, methodology does not critique the interpreter—the reader’s prejudices and arrogance. As the German philosopher, Schleiermacher, said a century ago: “You can have all the right tools and right beliefs and still miss the meaning of the text.” Postmodern thinkers would merely say that the process of reading is not as innocent or as unbiased as modernist thinkers have contended.

Let me turn to one place in the Bible that has been consistently misread with modernist prejudices. Judges has been and continues to be a very difficult text in the Bible. There is one place in particular that frustrates the reader. Judges 1:8 states that Jerusalem was destroyed by the tribe of Judah and Judges 1:21 tells us that Jerusalem was not destroyed by the Benjamites but in fact, “the Jebusites have lived in Jerusalem among the Benjamites to this day.” What are we to do with these contradictory statements? Must we agree with the modernist historical critic that what we have here is an editorial discrepancy of the first order? Evangelicals, in defense of

the text, have joined the interpretive fray but have done so with a similar modernist, historical methodology in the attempt to explain away the problem. Modernism (evangelical or liberal) states that contradictions like this cannot exist in the Bible or in a “good” story. In doing so, both interpretive schools, under the influence of modernist presuppositions, have missed the meaning that this troubling gap is signifying.

A postmodern reading would ask instead, “Why is the text presenting two contradictory views within the same chapter?” “What message does this gap signify and how does this same thing happen somewhere else within the Bible?” Modernism, whether liberal or evangelical, asks the question, “How can I resolve this discrepancy?” In other words, the text is illogical or seemingly inaccurate so I must somehow make the text work. If I’m evangelical, I assume that God would only use that which is logical to reveal truth. Thus I would turn to history or archeology in my attempt to resolve this discrepancy. Furthermore, as an evangelical, I assume that God writes stories that are linear and logical. Postmodernist thought, however, asks this question to the evangelical: “What if the way I read the Bible is more modernist than biblical?” Postmodernism would say that there’s a fox in the hen house and that fox could be the evangelical’s *uncritical* modern way of thinking. Perhaps God reveals himself in mysterious ways that I could never imagine. When I read the Bible, I need to think how God would write the story more than how I think God *should* write the story.

Furthermore, postmodernism asks the question: “Are there other places in art and literature where the same thing is happening?” In other words, maybe the same thing appears in other stories and art forms outside of the Bible. These other places can inform my understanding of the scriptures. It may be that the narrator of Judges desired to present two disparate views simultaneously much the same way that Picasso painted. Picasso, in order to present a new view of reality, used Braque’s concept of simultaneity to reveal multiple meanings within the one text. Thus, his painting, *Woman Seated*, displays the profile of a woman and a frontal view of a woman. The two overlapping images of the women in reality represent one and the same woman. Picasso wanted to portray multiple perspectives of this woman so that we as the readers/viewers may see a fuller picture of this woman. Thus, in the book of Judges, the success of Judah in 1:8 and the defeat of Benjamin in 1:21 reflects a profound tension in the rest of the book: Judah will be successful; Benjamin will be passed over. In 1 Samuel there is this same tension: David from the tribe of Judah will rule Israel; Saul from the tribe of Benjamin will not. Here in the same chapter are two perspectives of Jerusalem that provide a fuller picture of God’s work in Israel.

Reading, then, should be the radical expansion of the interpreter’s horizon, not the modernist limiting of the horizon. What postmod-

ernism calls for is a new way of thinking about biblical theology, a postmodern biblical theology that emerges from the shift in language that this new turn in language brings. Modernism encourages us to come to the text as a blank slate. Postmodern biblical theology encourages the interpreter to bring his or her life (world) to the text because the interpreter brings a wealth of culture that will aid our understanding of the Bible. Every voice is important as the church reads the Bible. Postmodernism invites us to listen to the voice of the other, the ones we have historically exiled because of our selfish prejudices—women, African-Americans, Asians, the poor. . . . Are we not truly the relativists and the nihilists when we refuse someone else's readings, when we refuse to listen to the voice of the other? Postmodern reading occurs in the community of others not just in the confines of my safe, narrow world. Wittgenstein has warned us that the limits of our language will be the limits of our own worlds.

Secondly, postmodern thinking is a *downturn*, an overturning of the way we see, a radical disruption of the way we think. This is the mission statement of a postmodern biblical theology: "Thus says the LORD, 'My ways are not your ways'." As humans, we are finite in our thinking, and there is no possible way that we can have a "total" view of reality. I will never forget a lecture by one of my favorite professors, Dick Averbeck. He was teaching a class of seminary students and began to list his rules for reading the Bible. "Number one," he began. With pen in hand I was eagerly waiting to hear the first principle of interpretation. "I am wrong," he said. We all sat there in class staring blankly at him. I was thinking to myself, "OK, get on with it, let us hear the first principle." He repeated his statement, "I am wrong." Then he proceeded to remind us of our human limitations and our propensity to sin so, of course, when I come to the Bible, "I am wrong." Dick went on to explain that we are also right because we are redeemed and have the Spirit working within, but I have never quite recovered from Rule #1. He was inviting us to live in the tension of being right and wrong in the same moment. What, though, places us on this path of humility? I would argue partly that tragedy, disruption, and the discovery that I have been blind are the first steps to relationship with God. The postmodern moment can usher in a critique or crisis to the modernist promise that correct doctrine alone will lead to salvation. I would be the first to say that correct doctrine is essential to the Christian life, but I would also remind us that correct doctrine (thinking) begins not with the assurance that *I* am right, but with the humility that I am wrong, or perhaps better put, there are many things in life and faith that remain a mystery to me. The German poet Rilke told the young poet to "love the questions." Time and again, I have seen Christians use logic, or the rule of noncontradiction, or "evidences" in the attempt to prove the truth of Christianity. The postmodernist would say that all these "proofs" are merely subjective projections of the way I believe the world should work. Further, the postmodernist would point out that my supposed "objective" interpretation is, in the end, just

another example of circular reasoning. I see what *I* want to see. I create God in my own image.

Most importantly though, the postmodernist would say that this modernist way of thinking puts an end to mystery by bringing closure to the questions—ending the story. In the end, the extreme of modernism teaches me to hate and take flight from my questions. Once again, our Lord said it best. “If we think we see, then we are blind. If we know that we are blind, then we see.” There is an infinite paradox here in these words. True sight does not begin in sight. True sight, the sighting of truth, begins with the acknowledgment that I am blind.

Therefore, this crisis of vision should not end in nihilism, but instead, lead to the yearning for more, a revelation of the presence of God. Out of the absence of God emerges the yearning for the appearance of God. Disruption should lead to change. Tragedy is a doorway to redemption, and judgment is a prelude to salvation. My questions, rather than resulting in idleness and despair, should lead me to an intense relationship with God and passionate care for others. These words recall Jeremiah’s central purpose of his prophetic calling, “to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant” (Jer. 1:10). The day-to-day work of postmodernism is to overthrow the arrogance and narcissism of the self. This newfound humility will compel me to not only search for truth but also to seek the face of God. Our postmodern generation easily recognizes the tragedy and emptiness of the twentieth century. But if the American evangelical church remains squarely within a modernist theology, essentially turning a blind eye to tragedy because we offer glib answers to deep and disturbing questions, then for the first time in the history of the church we might find ourselves entirely irrelevant.

Thirdly, postmodernism is a *re-turn to the past*. Postmodernist thinking does not throw off the past but returns to the past for the purpose of finding meaning for today. This is what Umberto Eco says in the postscript to his brilliant postmodern novel, *The Name of the Rose*: “But the moment comes when the *avant-garde* (the modern) can go no further. . . . The postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognizing that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently.”

This is one of the great ironies of modernism, that at its most extreme, it ushers us down the exhausting path of subjectivism and nihilism because its critique of the past throws out the past. Simply put, we must abandon the past (tradition) to live well in the present. As we have seen, postmodernism welcomes other viewpoints to approach the interpretive table even when those views and texts hail from the past. The past is not to be thrown off as something

which has no meaning for today, but rather, something that is evoked and reinterpreted for the purpose of discovering meaning in the present. This means, then, that tradition is not to be thrown off, nor is it to be accepted slavishly without careful thought and criticism.

Finally, *a ride in the rumble seat*. Postmodernism is play and the postmodern moment invites us to play with the text and to dance with God. Postmodernism is “irony, metalinguistic play, enunciation squared. Thus, with the modern, anyone who does not understand the game can only reject it, but with the postmodern, it is possible *not to understand the game* and yet take it seriously.” Umberto Eco’s words here are full of insight. In the end, the modernist enterprise is a failure to laugh—the refusal to play. Has the modernist agenda taken away our ability to play with the text and to take great pleasure in our readings? Have we as evangelicals surreptitiously rejected the game because we cannot admit that at the end of the day we, like the moderns, really don’t understand the game? In our obsession for truth we have lost the delightful quest for meaning. Postmodernism recognizes that mystery is not the death of truth but the playground where truth can swing. Again, listen to Eco’s words, “Perhaps the mission of those who love mankind is to make people laugh at the truth, *to make truth laugh*, because the only truth lies in learning to free ourselves from insane passion for the truth.” It was our Lord who said it best: “Truth shall set you free.” Free to read with questions and imagination. Free to reach out to others in love and compassion rather than attempting to prove that we are right. Evangelicals are defending truth more than they are dancing with truth. We already believe in truth. Then let truth compel us to God and then propel us into the world. We cannot comprehend God. Then let us dance with God. We do not understand the other. Then let us dance with the other because our truth has set us free. I think Norman Maclean’s father said it best: “You can love completely without complete understanding. That I have known and preached.”

Truth in Motion

In conclusion, allow me to call us back to the Old Testament. The people of the ancient Near East (including Israel) wanted a king who would banish all the chaos of the world. They wanted a modernist king. But, in the Old Testament, God had a different idea. The godly king will not be one who rules by worldly wisdom or sheer strength, but the king who cares for the widows, orphans, and aliens by the pouring out of his broken, crushed body (a foreshadowing of Christ). In Judges 9 the good king is the vine, the olive, and the fig. The bad king is the thorn bush. The good king will give life by being crushed (grape, olive) or broken open (the fig). The bad king will refuse to be broken and thus rule by terror and bloody violence. In the Old Testament, the “power” of the king or the

queen was not to be used to expand the boundaries of his or her own kingdom, but instead, as a force to guard the boundaries of others.

What if the evangelical church reflected this postmodern king of the Old Testament? It is encouraging to see that a few churches are seeking racial reconciliation and therefore recognizing the value of hearing “other” voices from other cultures such as African-American, Asian, Hispanic, etc. Some in the church are beginning to take women seriously, to let them speak, and the results are quite refreshing. For the first time in the history of the church, because women are gaining a voice, we have a chance to see the full image of God (male and female) work out salvation. Postmodernist thinking critiques the modernist tendency of limiting the voice of God to one voice and instead calls us to listen to the ensemble of many voices. Modernist thinking attempts to remove difference; it uses the thorn to oppress others into obedience. Postmodernist thought emphasizes difference by recognizing that many perspectives give us a better view of God even though this cacophony of voices decreases my power and infuses my community with unruly chaos.

Many of our evangelical churches and seminaries today are experiencing the crisis of irrelevance and at the same time our postmodern culture is forcing us to rethink the educational model of the last century. In the past, seminary has focused on training the mind to think well, and in so doing learn to read the Bible well. The overarching goal in seminaries has been one of intellectual assent and comprehension. In other words, if you can demonstrate the right knowledge (proper doctrine), then you are ready to enter the field of ministry. But there is an alternative. Seminaries that embrace some aspects of postmodern thought encourage both knowledge *and* relationship, for they understand that truth without relationship is irrelevance, and irrelevance is the most insidious error of all. We are beginning to see a few new seminaries that understand the importance of training the mind *and* the soul.

If modernism at its extreme can result in the triumph of reason over ignorance at best, but at worst the triumph of reason over mystery and faith, then postmodernism can be the invitation to mystery *alongside* reason and thus the fresh opportunity for faith. Carl Raschke in his masterful book, *Fire and Roses*, states that postmodernism can literally be the end of the book that is “saying the unsaid, reaching toward the unreachable, naming the unnamed name. . .” In that appalling, haunting moment of God’s absence comes the longing for the presence of God without the illusion that we will ever comprehend the glory of the Lord.

Works Cited