

Toward a Proper Christian Response to Postmodernity

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Preface: The Spectrum of Responses

Before we get started, I wanted to note what seems to be a spectrum of reactions to the postmodern turn. Very helpful in my delineating these was Kevin Vanhoozer's essay, "Pilgrim's Digress" in the book, Christianity and the Postmodern Turn.

Deny- Some Christians simply deny that postmodernity either exists or that it's important. Some may see postmodernity as "just a phase," as Brian McLaren has refuted. We have a tendency, in our humanity, to decide that the way we see the world is *the only possible way* to do so, and we get *emotionally attached* to it as a source of security. That is why we have trouble talking politics or religion with people—each of us are "set in our ways," and to change is paramount to "conversion." Much is the same with this—to say that we are moving out of one era and into another (from the "modern" to the "postmodern") is a bit too much for some to swallow.

Defy- Some Christians (especially evangelicals) define themselves as much by *what they are against* (we are called "protestants," after all!) as *what they are for*. Constantly on the hunt for heresy and those dreaded "liberals," they are ready to demonize the next threat to the canonized way of thinking about their faith. Many Christians have been so thoroughly inculcated with a *Platonic worldview* and/or the "*reasonableness*" of the faith (i.e., the "Evidence that Demands a Verdict" kind of apologetics), that they see any threat to these as a threat to the faith as well. So, postmodernity is seen as the next evil coming down the road that threatens the orthodoxy of our faith—something to resist at all costs. Some Christians simply *presume* that postmodernity and Christianity *are mutually exclusive*—and with that attitude, there is little room for understanding and getting beyond the defiance.

Deify- Some Christians are always looking for the latest fad or trend that will enliven their faith and move the church toward a more missional focus. Postmodernity is new and exciting and offers new ways of thinking about our faith and for doing ecclesiology, so it is often embraced *without enough criticism and discernment*. We see some in the "emerging church" (certainly not the all, but some) either grab hold of superficial postmodern ideas or let a more informed postmodern philosophy set the agenda for their theology. We must not deify any philosophy (be it Derrida or Plato!); we must yield to Deity as we seek to understand our faith.

Debate- Some Christians think that the best route is to stake their ground and do their research in order *to articulate their stand over against the other*. Some who oppose postmodernity read the relevant books and then they speak at lectures and write books refuting the other side. This is the impulse for Christians who are sympathetic to postmodernity as well. The value is that there is information being researched and people are writing interesting stuff; what's missing, however, is *a real dialogue in order to understand*. Reading this stuff makes me feel like I'm attending a college debate—both

sides present their cases and try to find faults in the other's arguments, but we arrive at no real conclusions; we never mover forward. All that matters is, "Who won the debate?"

Discuss- Some Christians (especially those in the "Emergent Conversation") have, because of a predilection toward the postmodern, encouraged a more conversant approach. They create a more open forum in which all views are welcome and given equal voice—especially newer, fresher voices that articulate postmodern ideas. While this has *the virtue of listening* to ideas on their own terms, it does not necessarily always have the apostolic Christian faith *as its starting point*. Sometimes, in our zeal to be in tune with the culture, we can allow the culture to be our starting point rather than the faith. We have a "faith that seeks understanding," not the other way around.

Dialogical Dispute- Vanhoozer calls this just "Dispute," but I think that has the connotation (which he does not mean) of a heated confrontation. What he means, and that I agree with, is that the best possible response to postmodernity is *to listen to and engage postmodernity on its own grounds while at the same time to "contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3)*. He writes, "Christian thinkers cannot go around postmodernity; we have to go through it." This will mean that we will must be willing to agree with postmodern theses while in this dialogical dispute so that we will may arrive at different conclusions due to our distinctly Christian World View. For instance, we can agree with postmodernity that we should have an incredulity toward metanarratives, for we agree that every metanarrative is limited by linguistics and the situatedness of each community from which it springs. However, we can also contend that there is an exception—a metanarrative that came from outside any individual community and has invaded our time and place situatedness in language that had to accommodate to an individual community (the metanarrative of "Creation, Fall, Redemption"—*which will be my next post*).

9/6/2005

Understanding Lyotard on the Metanarrative

Toward a Proper Christian Response to Postmodernity – 1

One of the key issues in responding to postmodernity is to understand what postmodernity means by the "metanarrative." Jean-François Lyotard wrote in 1979, "Simplifying in the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives." Ever since, this concept of the "metanarrative" has leaped front and center in discussions on postmodernity in Christian circles, for it seems to give us a simple definition that we can easily grasp. However, Lyotard's conception of "metanarrative" has taken on a life of its own beyond his original intention. James K.A. Smith explains in an essay (which originally appeared in Faith and Philosophy journal and republished in Christianity and the Postmodern Turn) that what Lyotard meant by "metanarrative" is a distinctly modern phenomenon in which people create grand stories and seek to legitimate them via an appeal to universal reason. Lyotard's point is that, in the view of postmodernity, there is no such thing as an objective, neutral rationality beyond narrative. Therefore, any narrative that appeals to this "phantom Reason" to legitimate itself must be seen with incredulity.

When you think about it, Lyotard is almost Augustinian in his demand that faith always precedes reason—that we believe in order to understand. According to Lyotard, the problem with universal narratives is not their scope (that they are big stories) but that they seek to prove they are valid by way of Reason as the ultimate arbitrator. As I understand Lyotard, he is arguing that the Enlightenment belief in Reason is as much faith as is any other religion, only it denies it the whole time, deceiving everyone that buys into it. James K.A. Smith’s analysis of Lyotard is that he believed that Postmodernity rightly shows us that we play “language games” in order to legitimate what we want to believe—the ultimate language-game is modernity’s appeal to “Reason.” As Smith writes, “Postmodernism is not incredulity toward narrative or myth; on the contrary, it unveils that all knowledge is grounded in such.”

This, I submit, is not antithetical to Christian faith; rather, it is antithetical to modern philosophy (with its grounding in “Reason” as the basis for all knowledge, as if “Reason” existed outside the parameters of any person’s belief system).

What many Christians are reacting against in postmodernity is not Lyotard’s definition of postmodernity, but a Neo-Lyotardism that takes this rather complex understanding of “metanarrative” and simplifies it to just meaning “we must be suspicious of all grand stories.” This neo-Lyotardism is indeed a challenge to the grand story presented in the Bible, for it has crept into the public consciousness and is expressed by some “postmodern critics” of Christianity.

There are a number of possible Christian responses to neo-Lyotardism (I will offer a few posts coming up on this), but the first response is this: Let’s get Lyotard right! Christians can point out that his definition of postmodernism is not against the grand story just because it is big and seeks to explain all of life; rather, he said that postmodernity, ultimately, is skeptical when anybody presents a grand story and then says it is true because Reason proves it to be so. He actually is saying that all of life is explained by narrative and myth, that the only way to understand reality is through story and faith in those stories.

And Christianity is a story—a narrative that needs no appeal to “Reason” for it to explain what is true. It is a grand narrative accepted by faith as you immerse yourself into the story—the story found in the Bible and its continuation found in today’s Body of Christ.

9/12/2005

Mapping the Conversation

Toward a Proper Christian Response to Postmodernity – 2

When many Christian thinkers read Lyotard’s definition of postmodernity (the “incredulity toward metanarratives”), they obviously hear, “incredulity toward *any* grand story, including the biblical story of redemption in Christ” (even though this is *not* what Lyotard meant by his definition—see the [previous post](#)). This broader definition causes trepidation for Christian thinkers, for it is in conflict with the Christian contention that there *is* a grand story that explains reality—often outlined as “Creation-Fall-Redemption.” “Neo-Lyotardism” (as I’m calling this incredulity toward *any* grand story that offers universal meaning), is indeed trickling into the popular culture.

But the presumption of this series is that when we attempt to understand postmodernity on its own terms, it has many positive insights that are actually in line and helpful to the Christian worldview (more so, I believe, than the modern age did!). This is not to say there are not *problems* with postmodernity, and I will attempt to address those as well. But a key to starting our conversation is *not* to assume that we can sum up postmodernity as simply *a radical deconstructive relativism* that necessarily leads to *nihilism*. While some postmodern philosophers go that route, there are plenty who do not. And there are plenty of Christian philosophers and theologians who do not take that route either. I’ve been doing a lot of research on this subject (see [the list of books I’m currently reading](#)), and in the rest of this blogging series, I will address some of the key beliefs of postmodern thinking:

- The belief that all attempts at creating a totalizing, universally true worldview are, in fact, socially constructed by local communities that can only understand the world through their community’s peculiar conceptual language
- The belief that all metanarratives are, in fact, power-grabs used by one group of people to oppress another by forcing their totalizing, untrue worldview onto another, thus marginalizing the other, and often causing conflict and even violence
- The belief that the Enlightenment reliance on the scientific quest for universal knowledge through objective “Reason” or the “certainty of rationality” as the ultimate arbitrator of the truth is invalid
- The belief that epistemological foundationalism must be called into question and therefore, new, non-foundational ways of “knowing” must be sought
- The belief that there is, in fact, no Reality “out there” to know since all conceptions of “Reality” are simply constructions of our senses, situatedness, and conceptual languages

What are the proper Christian responses to these beliefs? Let’s enter into “[dialogical dispute](#)” with each. In this week’s posts, we will explore what I think may be good Christian responses to the above list.

9/13/2005

I'm situated in a local community—and that's okay! **Toward a Proper Christian Response to Postmodernity – 3**

Among ideas that feed into a distrust of metanarratives is the postmodern belief that all attempts at creating universally true worldviews are, in fact, social constructions of local communities that can only understand the world through their community's peculiar conceptual language.

We Christians must affirm this point. Whereas modern thinkers thought they could master language through the science of linguistics, postmodern thinkers offer the helpful insight that no matter how much linguistic work one does, the data is only applicable to a local community. No single community's conceptual language better describes reality than any another's. They each simply give their point-of-view. Just about every postmodernist insists that language situates us, and that no one conceptual language or vocabulary is universal or absolute because every conceptual language is limited by the context of the community's situatedness. For instance, because I was born and raised in suburban Ohio, I have a different construction of reality than, say, those in an Eastern and impoverished community, and vice-versa.

If postmodernity is right that all metanarratives are social constructions, then deconstruction is the only right thing to do to them—in order to understand how those local communities built these concepts in the first place. We need not fear postmodern deconstruction—for it is beneficial because it tears down what Bruce Benson calls the “Graven Ideologies” of modernity. Once our modern idols have been destroyed, we Christians will be capable of living a more pure Christian faith.

My Personal Application:

I will strive to deconstruct the way I understand God and life and my Christian Faith based on my situatedness. The way I conceptualize things is a product of the time, place, and linguistic influences upon me. The way my Christian faith is articulated is through the construction of a western, American, capitalistic, individualistic, jingoistic, suburbanite worldview...and even beyond that, the way my Christian theology has been articulated is, “We've got it right, those other 'Christians' are not orthodox like us.”

Kevin Vanhoozer's words strike a chord with me:

“postmodernity reminds us of something we should have known from Scripture and theology, namely, that we need the many human interpretations to hear the one Word of God. The Word-ministering Spirit has not been given to one person, denomination, or interpretive tradition, but to the whole church. Seen in light of Pentecost, plurality need not be the enemy of meaning and truth, but the enabling condition...Monogamy is not a virtue when Christian thinkers are so wed to one conceptual scheme that they cannot appreciate or appropriate wisdom from other systems of thought.”

"Pilgrim's Digress" in Christianity and the Postmodern Turn, p. 94

9/14/2005

Metanarrative Power-Grabs that Result in Violence Toward a Proper Christian Response to Postmodernity – 4

The problem with metanarratives is not that they are “big stories,” but that they are “little stories” *masquerading* as big stories.

As **Jamie Smith** writes, “Postmodernism is not incredulity toward narrative or myth; on the contrary, it unveils that all knowledge is grounded in such.” A metanarrative, according to **Lyotard**, is a locally-born story that seeks to explain Reality and legitimates its perception of it by way of Reason as the ultimate arbitrator. So what we end up doing is playing “*language games*” in order to “prove” the stories that we want to believe—the language-games of modernity are its appeals to “Reason” and to the scientific method. Christians can affirm, as we did in the previous posts, that human metanarratives are constructed within the situatedness of local communities. Therefore, they are not “universal” *at all*; they are simply social constructs, and it is pretentious to think that any single community’s worldview could possibly be universal enough to rule over all.

“Truth”, according to **Michel Foucault**, “is a thing of this world. It is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power., Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanism and instances which enables one to distinguish true and false statements; the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.” (Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and other Writings, 1972-1977 ed. Colin Gordon [as quoted in Walsh/Keesmaat, Colossians Remixed])

At first, this sounds like a swipe at Christianity. But if we are honest about it, we *do* see that when any people come up with a “Truth,” this often is no more than the “will to power” flowing through the manipulation of language for the sake of making one set of beliefs rule over all others. The evidence of this ugly aspect of human depravity is seen by just looking at Marxism or Nazism or Freudianism or Darwinism or Western Capitalism in the past 100 years. Look at today’s radical Jihadist form of Islam and the retaliatory violence that results when the West fights back with its imperialistic-looking retaliation marked by the metanarratives of capitalism and democracy. All of these are attempts to create universal metanarratives that are professed to be “true” and “good” simply because the ones in power say they are. It has admittedly been evident even in Christianity—for the history of the Church is littered with the corpses of those who would not submit to the Church’s conception of the “true” and the “good” as defined by the people in power. It does not have to issue in bloodshed to be a power-grab, either. I believe that the main problem with the Religious Right's "Christian" agenda is an issue of power--their politics are power-grabs in order to violently thrust their conceptions of the "true" and the "good" upon the rest of the American public.

Postmodernity points out that metanarratives that say they are “True” simply because we either point to “Reason” or some local community’s interpretation of an authoritative text to legitimate it often lead to violence. *And we, with tears in our eyes, have to agree.* “Regimes of Truth” (as Foucault calls them) forged in local communities are not

universal *enough* to rule over anybody, for they are created by fallen people from their myopic viewpoints and within the context of their limited conceptual languages.

- Is there a story that does the opposite?
- Is there a story that, instead of thrusting a worldview onto people through violence, tells us that we are to receive violence unto ourselves as a means to the “true” and “good”?
- Is there a story in which, instead of violently enslaving people to another people’s ideology, actually seeks to set people free?
- Is there a story that, instead of feeding on rules of order that induce guilt, offers a kingdom governed by forgiveness?
- Is there a story in which, instead of creating exclusionary parameters that force people out and marginalizes them, creates a life of inclusion that actually reaches out to the marginalized?
- Is there a story that, instead of privileging a single group’s interests, actually seeks to be for the good of all Creation?
- Is there a story that, instead of being a universalized small story legitimated by way of the “authorities” of Reason or Interpretation, is in fact big enough to be universal, without any appeals to outside authorities?
- Is there a story so big that no single local interpretation of the story could encompass its scope, so that we’d have to include many different voices to rightly scratch its surface?

9/15/2005

Must We Use “Reason” in Order to Know the “Truth?”
Toward a Proper Christian Response to Postmodernity – 5

Another hallmark of postmodernity is the critique of the Enlightenment reliance on “Reason” or “Rationality” as the *objective* and *neutral arbitrator* of the *truth*.

As Christians, I feel that we must affirm that any attempt to “know reality” is futile through the use of Reason or Rationality. Reason and Rationality are constructions of a Western mindset—and it is presumptuous for us to believe that our ideas can be accurate descriptions of Reality if we strictly adhere to some arbitrary “rules of logic” in order for our ideas to directly correspond with reality.

“But,” some Christians counter, “Jesus said, ‘I am the way and the truth and the life.’ You can’t get around that. He is telling us that there is absolute truth—He says, ‘*the truth!*’”

But (with a hat tip to Doug Paggit), here are some other things Jesus said he is in the Gospel of John:

- “I am the bread of life”
- “I am the light of the world.”
- “I am the gate.”
- “I am the good shepherd.”
- “I am the resurrection and the life.”
- “I am the way and the truth and the life.”
- “I am the vine.”

So, it seems to me that Jesus is using language to convey to us ideas about who he is as a person. He is not telling us that there is some ontological “bread” or “gate” or “vine” that I must epistemologically *know* through *objective reason*. He is instead conveying to us words that lead us toward who he is—not perfectly (for language is incapable of creating a one-to-one correspondence to Reality and must always be interpreted within the constraints of my linguistic context), but metaphorically.

When Jesus says that he is the “truth,” it’s a metaphor for something *more complex* and *more relational*—like the metaphors of bread, light, gate, shepherd, resurrection, way, life, and vine. He is “the way, the truth, and the life”—in other words, Jesus is *the revealer* of *how to get to God*, the *author of life*.

Now with that said, what about “objective truth?” Isn’t our modernist desire to believe in “Truth” (as in an objective, rationally arrived at “truth” that is “out there” to be discovered), really idolatry? Where in Jesus’ words do we hear that in order to “know truth,” we must objectively use the rules of reason?

Jesus simply says that he is the truth. And elsewhere Jesus also says that if you are one of his disciples, you “will know the truth, and the truth will set you free?” What kind of “knowledge” was Jesus talking about? Was he saying that the knowledge that comes through Reason will set you free, or something else?

The point is this: Jesus is calling us not into knowledge through a modern epistemology (that seeks a scientific understanding in which we objectively learn “truth” verifiable through the rules of reason and science).

He is calling us into a knowledge that has a postmodern (and premodern) epistemology (that seeks to humbly understand not propositions but a person, and also embraces the problem of really knowing a person because we are limited by our humanity, our language and our perspective). It is *premodern* in that it is a “knowledge” that resembles the Hebrew word *yada*—the intimate kind of knowledge between persons. It is *postmodern* in that it is a knowledge not of propositions legitimated by Reason but a knowledge of a person that speaks and we are to listen. And it is *Christian* in that we place our faith in the truth of the person of Christ, not in the truth of a philosophy of Reason (one is called “faith;” the other is called “idolatry.”)

Jesus knows our limitations to really know—so he pours on the layers of metaphors as to who he is—different perspectives that give clues to his reality (“bread,” “light,” “gate,” “shepherd,” “resurrection,” “way,” “truth,” “life,” “vine,” etc.)

9/20/2005

Is There a “Reality” That Is True? And Can We Know It? Toward a Proper Christian Response to Postmodernity – 6

As I wrestle with the ideas of the postmodern thinkers of our day, one of the biggest issues that they bring to the table is the dismissal of “truth.” So far in this series, you can see how some postmodernists see “Reality” as simply a construction of our senses, situatedness, and conceptual languages. This leads some to believe that there is no Reality “out there” at all that we can truly know. Do you see how this is a problem to Christianity? If everyone’s perspective of Reality is merely a social construction, then no one way of describing Reality is true. If there is no one true way of describing this “phantom Reality,” then Christianity’s exclusivist claim to “the Truth” is simply one of many socially constructed ideologies. And if Christianity’s claims are not true, then those who propagate the Christian faith are actually intolerant and may be harmful. How can we Christians go around claiming we have “the Truth” and pass judgment on others as if we know that their perspectives of Reality are “false?”

Now, what I submit as a Christian response to this is something radical for both postmodernists and Christians (and therefore, those postmodernists and Christians who are firmly entrenched in their ways of thinking may not like it, but those who are open to dialogical dispute will hopefully engage it). It is this: ***Reality and Truth are two different things.***

Reality is what is really “out there”—it really exists. There is a Reality that is not merely a *conceptual* creation, but is an *actual* creation. In fact, biblical Christians have understood Creation as not merely a “figment of the imagination” (even God’s imagination), but that it is actual, it is out there, and it (very important to note) has a voice. Let me explain.

I really exist. And if you sit in Starbucks with me, and we talk, you will hear my voice. You will hear what I have to say about myself and what I think is important. I will listen to you respond, and I will respond in kind. I am here. I am not just a reality that you have created due to your senses, situatedness, and conceptual languages. I really am here! When we communicate, we come to understand that the other is real.

Now, the Creation really exists. And if you listen to it, you will hear it speak—this, after all, is why Science works. We can learn from the material world and harness its potential in new and exciting ways. But science is not all there is to knowing anything. You cannot come to know me personally through a scientific endeavor (by putting me under a microscope and creating some data sheet on me—“*Bob’s 5 foot nine inches tall, married to Linda 12 years, three kids, works for the CCO*”). That is not how you get to “know” me. You must listen to my stories in order to know what makes me tick—what has

formed me, how I have been changed by my experiences, why I do the things I do.

And you do not come to know the Creation merely through scientific observation. Anyone who has hiked in the mountains or been to the ocean or watched a hummingbird fly from flower to flower or looked up at the vast expanse on a dark starry night knows what I mean when I say that Creation speaks. It is real.

But this is not “Truth.” My perception of this reality is always skewed. My perspective, twisted by my senses, situatedness, and conceptual language, limits my ability to truly hear the voice. I can never say I know Reality truly.

I was a communications major at one point in my college career (don’t ask how long ago!). One thing I remember from those studies is that communication is always hindered because the message gets garbled between the speaker and the listener. And the greatest garbler is the listener’s perspective (There’s nothing new about this—this is a modern scientific observation. Postmodernism simply realizes this as well).

So, if you and I are in Starbucks, and I say something to you about myself (say, that I am a huge football fan), you most likely will misunderstand some part of what I am saying to you (and that misunderstanding is exacerbated if we have different cultural backgrounds, and thus different conceptual languages for Reality! If you were from Europe, you might believe that I love Soccer...and let me assure you that is not the case!). So, we talk back and forth, clarifying, rearticulating, seeking understanding. Why? Because I am real, and I want you to hear my Real Voice.

But in the end, do you know the Truth about me? Have we exhausted all that there is to know about me? Did you understand what I was explaining to you perfectly? *No, no and no.* You know in part, but you do not know in whole. You do not know the Truth.

That is the difference between Reality and Truth.

I can affirm that there is Reality *out there* if I hear its voice. I can get closer to understanding that Reality as I *enter into dialogue with it*. But I must realize that I am never going to know that Reality perfectly. Reality and Truth are two different things; and between now and Eternity, that is the way things are.

“Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Cor. 13:12).

9/26/2005

Listening to the Marginalized Voice Toward a Proper Christian Response to Postmodernity – 7

Here is one aspect of postmodernity that we should applaud: In its insistence that there is no single human perspective that provides the ultimate “Truth” about reality, postmodernists desire to listen to the marginalized voice—the voice that has been oppressed in the power-grabbing word games that epitomize modernity.

Christians should actually embrace this, joining with postmodern philosophical criticism of all “isms,” and affirming that we too should be against any oppressive system of thought. This includes our *own* “graven ideologies” (as Bruce Ellis Benson calls them); we need to be critical *of our own* “isms.” This is what gets certain Christian leaders’ feathers ruffled, especially when those in the Emerging Church are critical (because of their postmodern sensibilities) of the traditional systems of thought that have dominated the church for the last 400 years (especially that ultimate “ism of isms,” *Calvinism*).

Derrida and Rorty, in the words of Kevin Vanhoozer, are actually “cleansing the temple...”

They are ‘...playing the role of outraged prophets seeking to cleanse, sometimes playfully and sometimes painfully, the modern philosophical temples of knowledge. Overturning the economies of the knowledge changers in an ethical gesture on behalf of marginalized others whose voices and vocabularies have been systematically suppressed.’ (“Pilgrim’s Digress” in the book, Christianity and the Postmodern Turn)

The postmodern concern for the marginalized voice is something that is very biblical. And, strikingly, when we read the Bible, the voice that most often gets marginalized is the voice of *God*. The Word of the Lord goes out to the people, and more often than not, the people ignore it. Instead of listening to this voice of grace, mercy, hope, and peace, the people instead go after their own particular interests, suppressing anyone who would speak for God. The people know that the Word of God says they are to be a blessing to others, but they instead want to be a nation capable of the same politics of power and wealth. The people know that the Word of God says to care for the oppressed, but they instead manipulate the poor and deny justice to the oppressed.

Just a cursory reading of the prophets reveals this. How many times do we read passages like this?:

**For three sins of Israel,
even for four, I will not turn back my wrath.
They sell the righteous for silver,
and the needy for a pair of sandals.
They trample on the heads of the poor
as upon the dust of the ground
and deny justice to the oppressed.
Father and son use the same girl
and so profane my holy name.
(Amos 2:6-7)**

The ultimate marginalized voice is God's.

Now this is missed by atheist postmodern philosophers, though it springs from what they have been writing. As I wrote in my last post, Reality is what is really "out there"—it really exists. And if it really exists, it has a voice. And God really exists "out there," and God has a voice. God seeks to communicate to us. And so it should not be surprising how much the "Word of the Lord" is at the center of the biblical revelation.

- God spoke—and the Creation was made.
- God continued to speak his Word throughout the Old Testament record in the Law and the Prophets.
- And God ultimately spoke through the "Word become Flesh," Jesus Christ.

God is not silent; he is seeking to communicate to us. But, again, in keeping with postmodern understanding, language is inherently difficult in a fallen world—and therefore, we cannot hear the voice of God perfectly.

Or, in other words, though there is a TRUE REALITY that is God, our perception of that reality is deeply flawed. Postmodernists and Christians alike understand that there is a problem with humanity's ability to listen to the marginalized voice. Christians understand this as a result of our fallenness—that we are mired in sin. Sinners marginalize the voices they do not want to hear, and create stories of their own that places them in power over others (and in the case of Christian history, people have taken the voice of God and marginalized it for the sake of interpretations that place themselves in power over others).

God, all the while, continues to speak (His Word is still living and active and His Spirit is still articulate), pleading with humanity to hear his voice, a voice that knows Reality as it really is—the only voice that is the Truth. Because God speaks from this holy place of Truth ("holy" meaning "other, separate, unique"—as opposed to humans who *say* that they know the "Truth" but are *incapable* of saying this absolutely), God's words carry Truth about Reality that is beyond any human endeavor.

But we must be careful to be chaste in our belief that we can know this Truth totally. God's message comes to us via the scandal of the particular. It is revealed to a particular people. It is revealed through Himself in the incarnation of the Christ at a particular place and time and language. This language can carry Truth insofar as we can rightly understand it. So, we have the capacity to know Truth, though we cannot know this Truth absolutely (as Paul puts it, "Now I know *in part*").

This calls us to humility as we attempt to listen to the voice of God. We must insist that no *one interpretation* can possibly be the end-all, be-all interpretation for all peoples and all times. And, most of all, we must yield to the Spirit of God who is capable of clearing the fog between the Divine voice and our listening ear. The Christian message is one of redemption: That even though we are fallen and cannot hear the voice of God rightly, God supernaturally intercedes that communication gap as we yield to His Spirit within us as believers in Christ. Theology is a never-ending venture that must bring into

consideration the many cultures and traditions that make up the biblical faith, constantly listening for God's Spirit in it all.

For God is there—pleading with us to hear *His* voice: the voice of the marginalized, the voice of the One who was so despised, so hated, so oppressed that he died upon the Cross of the powerful and oppressive.

If postmodernists are consistent, then they must listen to this marginalized voice.

9/30/2005

Descartes is Not De' Christ
Exploring Other Ways of Knowing Beyond Foundationalism
Toward a Proper Christian Response to Postmodernity – 8

The way we think is fascinating. We arrive at certain beliefs, and based on these, we build a structure of thinking. Certain beliefs are more basic, more foundational than other beliefs. Whenever you think about something, it is reliant on some kind of foundational, underlying belief. In modern philosophy, this concept on the way we think has been elevated. While everyone has this sort of general foundationalist way of thinking, Modern Philosophy has determined that the only way to arrive at “Truth” is through arriving at foundational beliefs that are absolutely certain by way of Reason. René Descartes, in rejecting medieval assumptions of authority, submitted that there exist unquestionable beliefs that we can know by way of Reason—he posited that we can overcome uncertainty about what we believe by grounding all other beliefs on the invincible certainty of immutable foundations. This is what has come to be known recently as “Foundationalism”—the philosophical theory that any belief must be “based” on something that is “foundational” and thus immune from criticism. Therefore, the way to criticize any belief is to determine if it is “based” on a good “foundation.” If you cannot justify what you believe by showing how your beliefs relate to more foundational beliefs (you can’t have a “circular argument”), then your beliefs are called into question.

The questions that postmodernists raise to Foundationalism are: “Is such an approach to knowledge possible?” and “Is it desirable?” (as John Franke states in his essay, “Christian Faith and Postmodern Theory” in Christianity and the Postmodern Turn).

Modern Christianity has shown a commitment to Cartesian epistemology that must be called into question. It seems to me that we have placed too much faith in our ability to know foundational beliefs. Descartes is not the Christ. As Brian Walsh and Sylvia Keesmaat put it, “The deep blasphemy of modernity is that it made ‘reason’ the judge. Now if you submit your faith claims to the adjudication of reason and you justify your belief in the sovereignty of God or the authority of the Bible on the basis of reason, take a close look to see what is *really* sovereign and where real authority lies. Reason ends up being the sovereign authority. The Bible has a word for his kind of thing: idolatry. We have taken a good dimension of human life—cognitive reasoning abilities—and made a god out of it, subjecting all else to its authority.” Colossians Remixed, p. 126)

So, while we accept that we all generally think in a foundationalist fashion (basing what we believe on “basic” beliefs), we reject the Cartesian Foundationalism of modernity that says that we can arrive at indubitable beliefs by way of Reason. Reason is not a god to whom we should be bending our knees.

Let’s face it: the only “foundation” upon which *any of us* base our beliefs is that which we *want* to believe. Postmodernists even have a “foundation” in this regard: They base their beliefs on the idea that they cannot know anything absolutely! So, it has been, and always will be, a matter of faith: At that basic level, in what or in whom do you believe?

Now, Christians believe at that basic level that God is really “out there” (as the ultimate “marginalized voice”) seeking to be heard. They base this basic belief on the intriguing and demanding story that this God actually became incarnate and lived here among us. Not only do they base their beliefs on this foundational belief in the *historical Jesus*, but they also base it on their actual *personal and corporate experience* of this Living God invading their souls and their communities by way of the Holy Spirit—an experience that they cannot dispute, even in times of doubt.

Where Christian apologetics in the modern era sought to explain “Evidence that Demands a Verdict” (a form of apologetics that served its purpose in the modern era but would have been foreign in the pre-modern era and is increasingly foreign in the postmodern era), Christianity in a postmodern era must instead invite people into interaction with this Living God.

Now, if a person is absolutely resolute about not interacting with the Living God, then they are operating on a set of basic beliefs that says, “I don’t think there is a God,” or “I doubt that if there is a God that God would want to communicate with me,” or “I don’t think I could possibly *understand* God if he *did* try to interact with me,” or some other base belief on this spectrum. Note that all these are “foundational beliefs;” some are based on “reason,” others are based on something else.

A Christian apologetic, then, must emulate Jesus of Nazareth: It must be *incarnational*. We allow the Christ that lives *within us* (through the Spirit) to transform the way we love God and love others. We allow the Christ that lives *in our local communities* (our churches are “temples” of the Holy Spirit [1 Cor 3:16]) to transform the way we live corporately to transform the world around us. And then we invite people into this *living, vibrant life* that characterizes the Shalom Peace of God.

This gets beyond the Cartesian Foundationalism of “Reason” and openly embraces that we indeed have a “foundation” for all we believe and all we do--our experience with the Living God in our midst.

Toward a Postmodern Metanarrative

Toward a Proper Christian Response to Postmodernity – 9

While a major part of postmodernity is the famous idea popularized from a Lyotard quote, that we must have "an incredulity toward metanarratives," Jamie Smith has shown that what Lyotard was saying was that we must have incredulity of metanarratives that seek to legitimate themselves with rational, objective "Reason."

Therefore, I am going to attempt to present a postmodern Christian metanarrative. How can I do this? Because I contend that the Christian faith is not a matter of "Reason" but a matter of a theological drama. And since it is a theological drama (that is, since the major player in the drama is God), it has to be a "metanarrative." In fact, if it is indeed the theological drama of God, from God, and by God, it is the only metanarrative worth believing.

A Postmodern Christian Metanarrative looks something like this, in outline form:

I. CREATION

- A. Here we find humanity situated the way we were supposed to be—with each other, with the creation, and with God.
- B. Communication was readily understood (until the serpent twisted communication for the first time)—so there were no equivocations, no language barriers, no selfish subtexts for what was said, no word-games.
- C. We were truly known and loved—before God and fellow humans we were “naked and not ashamed.”
- D. We each reflected the image of God in our diversity—thus there was a unity in diversity, with each reflecting the glory of God uniquely yet interdependently with others.

II. FALL

- A. There is a “turn to the subject”—our lives became focused on ourselves.
- B. This turn causes a distrust in what’s “out there” in reality, all that really matters ultimately is how it effects “me.”
- C. There is an attempt to “master” rather than “serve” everyone and everything.
- D. Language is twisted to mean something other than what was intended due to our sense of twisted self-importance.
- E. Language becomes arbitrary and self-serving.
- F. Languages become confounded due to our selfish desire to reach the divine on our personal, selfish terms (this is what the Tower of Babel story teaches us).
- G. In order to describe an ever-increasing complexity of reality, we sense the need for a variety of “vocabularies” (ways of describing reality) in order to grasp all these varying aspects of the complexities.

- H. While in the original Creation humanity was situated the way we were supposed to be, the Fall situates us in a chaotic state of affairs:
- With *each other*—selfishness, the rise of ideologies and “isms,” the ever-increasing “will to power,” the rise of metanarratives that are thrust on foreign cultures and cause strife, discord, and even wars, a disunity of communities (the penchant to “hate the other,” rather than to “embrace diversity.”).
 - With *Creation*—some see themselves above the creation to exploit it; others see themselves under creation as just a ‘rational animal.’ All do not see correctly our ethical place in creation correctly.
 - With *God*—the rise of self as God, our smaller stories replace God’s metanarrative of redemption, we deny the “Fall” and embrace the myth of progress.

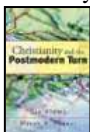
III. REDEMPTION

- A. The Word Became Flesh and Dwelt Among Us (John 1:14)
The eternal has entered our situatedness in a specific time and place in history in the person of Jesus Christ.
- Since we are “fallen,” we need the “Word” to come into our situatedness in a way that makes sense to us—the incarnation is exactly that.
 - The quadrasonic witness of the Gospels provide different voices of the same reality so that we can rightly interpret the Christ Event.
 - The meaning of the Christ Event is presented in a plurality of themes, speaking into our limited ability to understand because of our limited linguistics and fallen situatedness (i.e., Penal Substitutionary Atonement [for a legal language], Christus Victor [for a liberation language], Redemption [for an economic language], etc.)
 - “Truth” is a person, not a concept or an objective proposition. Jesus proclaims himself as “the Truth,” and we approach truth only when we approach Jesus in his personhood.
- B. The Spirit is Bequeathed Upon the People (Pentecost)
- Absolute Truth of God (that is, fully knowing God) cannot be understood on this side of eternity (1 Cor 13:12). However, Christ has inaugurated the age of the Holy Spirit in which a reality outside ourselves is able to increasingly break the bonds of the fall.
 - This “Already-Not Yet” of our current existence makes for an increasing ability to truly understand and know God, others, and the creation, but not yet fully.
- C. The Christian’s Work in the “Already-Not Yet” of Our Present Existence
- To understand truth through both reason and imagination. Reason has had its time in the spotlight; it is time to reinvigorate the imagination through the arts, through new ideas, through opening our eyes to what God can and wants to do today.

- To promote unity in diversity (the “catholicity” of the church) in order to stem parochialism. The way to limit a local community’s attempt at power-grabs over other groups is to nip insular “isms” in the bud by creating dialogical interaction between faith communities.
- To seek clearer understanding of how others articulate their faith through renouncing Babel and embracing Pentecost. The power of the Spirit can give us the ability to understand others even though they speak “other languages.” (That is, people articulate concepts and ideas in different ways. God wants us to hear these with ears wide open to understand them and maybe even embrace them instead of insisting that our faith community’s articulation of the faith is the only legitimate way to do so.) We need to embrace the plurality of languages and interpretations of revelation since they are actually needed to understand the complexity of reality.
- To embrace the theological drama that the apostles have handed down to us as a gift from God given to us from outside our smaller communities yet appropriate for all communities.
- To accept that “truth” will only be ultimately known in Christ at the eschaton. We now know God as if we are looking at him through a heavily tinted window. But there will come a time when we will fully know God, just as he fully knows.

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