

The Emerging Church and Postmodernism

by Matt Slick

Postmodernism is not that simple to define because it is a word used in different areas of study: art, film, architecture, literature, religion, truth, etc. The term "postmodernism" can best be understood by relating it to modernism. Modernism came out of the 1800's of Western Europe with the manifestation of mechanism, industrialism, progress, literature, art, and the ideas that sought to capitalize on what promoted a progressive and prosperous society. It elevated human reason, human progress, and human authority.

Postmodernism, then, is not necessarily a rebellion against modernism (though some postmodernists see it that way), but a movement "after" it, a movement that builds upon it but, more or less, rejects modernism's strict rationalism. In contrast to this, postmodernism upholds a subjectivity regarding morality, social constructions, political movements, art, religion, and truth statements. In other words, to oversimplify perhaps what postmodernism is, it is relativism, the belief that truth is relative, that objective truth may not be knowable.

"Modernism is often pictured as pursuing truth, absolutism, linear thinking, rationalism, certainty, the cerebral as opposed to the effective -- which in turn breeds arrogance, and inflexibility, the lust to be right, the desire to control. Postmodernism, by contrast, recognizes how much of what we 'know' is shaped by the culture in which we live, is controlled by emotions and aesthetics and heritage, and in fact can only be intelligently held as part of a common tradition, without overbearing claims to be true or right."¹

The danger of postmodernism is that it tends to deny the ability to know things for sure. It even undermines the construction of language by stating that words can be interpreted differently, that language is fluid, and that the Bible, written in ancient languages, is open to various interpretations of equal validity. Given this underlying

idea that nothing is truly knowable (a self-contradictory statement that is no problem for postmoderns), the very foundations of truth both moral and spiritual are suspect and open to re-evaluation -- along with the Bible.

- "Spencer Burke of the Ooze (Newport Beach, CA) agrees. 'A move away from intellectual Christianity is essential. We must move to the mystical.'"²
- "This mystical/poetic approach takes special pains to remember that the Bible itself contains precious little expository prose."³

The postmodern mind

The majority of unbelievers today do not have even a basic understanding of biblical principles. Their worldview is often naturalistic; that is, they perceive and interpret the world in light of natural principles (often evolutionary), combined with relativism in the areas of morals and truth. The postmodern person says that truth is understood in the context of one's culture and personal experience and these observations in turn dominate how the world is to be interpreted. Instead of an objective absolute truth, i.e., God's revelation, the individual observes and accepts what he considers to be true and false based upon his experiences. This means that different cultures and different individuals will interpret reality differently. In other words, what is true for one person may not be true for another.

"Concluding from an earlier Barna study in May, David Kinnaman, president of The Barna Group, had noted that most Americans do not have strong and clear beliefs largely because they do not possess a coherent biblical worldview. The study found that fewer Americans were embracing a traditional view of God and the Bible."⁴

The postmodern person rejects the biblical absolutes that there is an immutable God, that God is sovereign, and that the only way to salvation is through the blood sacrifice of Jesus. Therefore, the Christian and the postmodern person often do not have sufficient common ground to allow proper dialogue on spiritual matters.

The postmodern person might ask if there is any such thing as truth

and whether or not truth can be known either experientially or rationally. The modernist would say, "Of course there is absolute truth! Asking if truth can be known is an absolute question!"

Postmodernism and the Emergent Church

Generally speaking, those in the Emerging Church movement are aware of the postmodern mindset and admirably seek to adapt evangelistic efforts to accommodate postmodern thinking. This sometimes means that some Emerging Churches will feature church services and emphasize relationship, community, common traditional values, while using visual methods, storytelling, and more expressive worship instead of absolute truth constructions derived from Scripture and delivered during preaching and teaching.

"Emerging Churches use paintings, slides, drawings, and candles as visual expressions. In addition, they might show videos or television clips. On occasion an art installation or exhibit functions as the entire 'service.'"⁵

We agree that we must reach the culture in a relevant way, a way with which they are familiar, but we must also make sure that we do not compromise the revealed word of God and we must not let the revealed truth of God's Word be subjugated to cultural or personal pressures.

Conclusion

To repeat my oversimplification, postmodernism is relativism. Postmodernism is a reaction against the logical truth structures of modern thought that gave us absolute propositions about nature, time, space, mathematics, knowability, repeatability of experimentation, predictability, etc. As modernism developed the sciences, technology, and medicine, it has helped to produce a comfortable and predictable society -- wherein people tend to become complacent, comfortable, and predictable. But there are always people who ask questions rather than blindly follow the status quo. They look for different ways of expression, different interpretations of truth, teach the idea that truth is not necessarily

absolute, and that reality can be reinterpreted. It is within the postmodern context that the Emerging Churches are seeking to work.

It is a difficult venture to try and reach the hearts and minds of those who are less open to absolutes than previous generations. So, Instead of absolute truth propositions, Emerging Churches tend to focus on relationships, expressiveness, and new ways of trying to reach God. Is it good? Yes and no. It is good only so far as it is consistent with Scripture. It is bad whenever it deviates from it.

1.
Carson, D. A., *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005, p. 27.
2.
Gibbs, Eddie and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005, p. 230.
3.
McLaren, Brian, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004, p. 230.
4.
http://www.christianpost.com/article/20071204/30332_2007_Trends_Analysis:_Americans_Reformulating_Christianity.htm.
5.
Gibbs and Bolger, p. 73-74.