

For Truth Sake [2 John 2]: An Evangelical Response to Postmodernism

**Godfrey Harold, Cape Town Baptist Seminary,
Research Associate, University of Pretoria.**

The Magisterial Reformer, John Calvin, once said to the Queen of Navarre: "A dog barks when his master is attacked. I would be a coward if I saw that God's truth is attacked and yet would remain silent." (April 28, 1545)

1. Introduction

Can there be such a thing as "absolute truth"? When the church declares that Jesus Christ is Lord, is she declaring "absolute truth"? When the church makes a statement that Christ is the way to the truth about God and eternal life, is she making a statement about reality that is true for everyone and everywhere? To make such pronouncements however is anathema to postmodernists who view the Bible and its statements in relative terms. The clarion call of postmodernism is a call for community solitary rather than truth.

The term truth (*aletheia*) in Greek philosophy involved an accurate representation or perspective on reality, the Romans spoke of *veritas* as a factual representation of events. A Koetsenberger (2005:20) states: "For John, truth is first and foremost a theological, perhaps even more a Christological concept. For John, truth has its roots and origin in none other than God himself. Therefore John proclaims that Jesus is the truth, because he is sent from God, and has come to reveal the Father and to carry out his salvation-historical purpose" Thus one can conclude that the only way to know truth is to know God through Jesus Christ.

In articulating a Christian response to postmodernism, I shall start by asking the question: Is the philosophy and approach of postmodernism a threat to the evangelical faith that it demands an investigation so as to prevent postmodern philosophies that have dominated the late 20th century from undermining the very foundations of Evangelical truth? Evangelicals should respond to postmodernism because of the following reasons:

1. Postmodernism espouses that truth is no longer considered to be universal in scope, but rather that truth is subjective and relative. Truth has no global reach or validity.
2. Because truth is subjective and local, no text, not even the Bible, can claim absolute authority or universal acceptance.
3. If there is no absolute truth, there is no firm basis for morality.

In dealing with postmodernism I shall divide this article into three parts. In the first part I shall try to give a general description of postmodernism. In the second part, I shall make some critical remarks about postmodernism and its impact on the evangelical church. In the final part, I shall discuss the impact

that postmodernism has on scripture, theology and the way one interprets truth.

2. Definition of Postmodernism

The suppositions that postmodernists reject include: that there is objective truth, objective moral values, and an intelligible universe. S Grenz (1995:8) states that, postmodernism affirms that whatever we accept as truth and even the way we envision truth are dependent on the community in which we participate . . . There is no absolute truth: rather truth is relative to the community in which we participate. According to Chan (2007: 307) postmodernism seems to be best “described” rather than “defined”. It is more a movement, with its impact felt not only in academia but also in popular culture at large. Thus postmodernism denies the existence of a source of truth, morality, and intelligibility distinct from humanity and thus denies any existence of a Christian or Judaic God.

There is also a more general reason for Christians to be wary of postmodernism. Evangelical Christian tradition has, despite some noteworthy exceptions, expressed confidence that the universe, under the guidance of a divine being, is intelligible. However, since Modernism, that confidence in the world’s intelligibility has gradually eroded. Postmodernism, and its denial of absolute truth or of any ultimate intelligible structure to reality, continues that erosion.

The key pillar of postmodernism is the rejection of all overarching stories that explain and give meaning to life. Thus postmodernists insist that there is no “skyhook” which takes us out of our subjective conditions to reveal a reality existing independently of our own minds or of other human minds. For the postmodernist that means there is no “God’s eye standpoint” that reveals reality in itself. Each person interprets reality in accordance with his own subjective condition. Thus, for postmodernists there is no simple reality only representation of it, there is no singular truth only multiple truths. There is no grand truth only socially-defined truth. A postmodernist understanding of truth is based upon the social influence and the beliefs of the individual, thus “truth”, which is an inter-subjective agreement among the members of a community. This inter-subjective agreement permits the members of the community to speak a common language and establish a commonly-accepted reality. Thus, in postmodernism it is not the discovery of absolute truth but the developments of beliefs that further the solidarity of the community, or “to reduce objectivity to solidarity”. The solidarity of such a community would lie in what the community generally holds as common; that is the factor that determines truth.

3. Impact of Postmodernism on the Evangelical Church

Richard Rorty (1935-2007) argued that solidarity demands a breaking down of all attitudes and beliefs that lead us to treat one person as intrinsically more valuable than another. It has instigated a movement away from objective truth to opinions and emotion. Cupitt (1989:61) coined the word anti-theology to define this development. Veith (1994:193) recognises that: "Today religion is not a set of beliefs about what is real or not. Rather, religion is seen as preference, a choice. We believe what we like. We believe what we want to believe."

The area of objective truth which is most affected is the doctrine of God. Traditionally, theology stressed such attributes as God's sovereignty and immutability; now there are significant changes. Veith (1994:214) identifies a new approach to thinking about God: "The new model reflects a number of postmodernist tenets: downplay of absolutes; distrust of transcendence; preference for 'dynamic change' over 'static truth'... [and] the downplay of God's authority over us." Wells (1993:119) calls it the "sundering of God's transcendence from his immanence." Postmodernism does not just pressure the Church to deviate from its lofty conception of God; it also encourages the adoption of a kinder, gentler theology. Some, for instance, consider the doctrine of sin too harsh. Wells (1993:197) senses the embarrassment of the Church over the doctrine of sin by stating the following:

The biblical revelation with which the Church has been entrusted is clear and insistent on the nature of sin, its consequences, and, of course, its cure. Since this is a matter which is inextricably bound up with the nature of the gospel and, behind that, with the work of Christ on the Cross, it might be supposed that on this, at least, the Church should be clear and insistent as Scripture is. Many people today are embarrassed. Undoubtedly, one reason for this is the pressure people feel to be civil in this secularized society, but it is also clear that the Church's moral fabric has been worn bare and that its own sin in failing to grasp what sin is all about is apparently lost on it.

Other doctrines like divine wrath, eternal punishment, and repentance no longer court favour; the suggestion is to replace these with the kinder doctrines of divine love and forgiveness for the sake of solidarity. Today, believers do not want to be labelled as narrow-minded, or intolerant, the consequence being that there is more room than ever before in the Church for different views and interpretations to develop and prosper together. It is in the 'spirit' of this age not to be dogmatic.

Lutzer (1993:96) rightfully argues:

The differences between the sixteenth-century Reformation and this new reformation are obvious. Gone is the idea that knowledge of God is one's highest goal; knowledge of ourselves and of our need for self-respect is now the first item on the theological agenda. God is not so much a judge who has been offended as He is a servant who is waiting to affirm our dignity.

This argument for a belief becomes especially troublesome when one considers the many different communities and its different belief systems in this divergent and complex society we live in. This substitution of solidarity for truth can lead to strange results especially as is seen under the next heading.

4. Postmodernism and its Impact on Scripture and Theology

A characteristic of postmodernism is what has come to be known as the process of “deconstruction”. Deconstruction is exactly what the meaning of the word implies; it is the taking apart of texts somewhat like the process of peeling away the layers of an onion. It is an intentional process. Deconstruction, is not neutral, it intervenes. It is a way of de-legitimatising the standard, accepted meaning of texts, a method, which goes straight to the heart of traditional understandings of authority.

Deconstruction seeks to examine a text from all possible perspectives so that individual bits of information are extracted and separated from each other. What this means is that every text at any given period of time is conditioned by a network or web of relations that in turn affects the meaning of that text. Therefore a tenet has no “once and for all time” meaning. Thus Levy (1988:18) concludes, “Deconstruction categorically asserts the absolute impossibility of attributing to any text one single ultimate meaning.” Obviously, deconstruction has profound implications for theology, since *objective* truth is to be replaced by *hermeneutical* truth. This means that sacred texts, such as the Bible, do not have a single ultimate meaning nor are such texts necessarily authoritative. Indeed, the network or web of relations outside the text may determine both the meaning of the text and the nature of its authority... A traditional reading of the text and a postmodern deconstruction of the text will result in vastly different interpretations. It can be said however, that postmodernism arises out of the disillusionment with and consequently, the replacement of received revelation with private opinion and this is one of postmodernism’s most serious blows to theology. Another way postmodernism affects theology is by shifting the accent from God-centeredness to man-centeredness. The new taste in the Church for self-gratification and self-expression leads Wells (1993:107) to conclude that the church is “deeply committed to the gospel of self-fulfillment.” This practice lends credence to the view that postmodern self-interest has upstaged and eclipsed theology in the life of the Church.

Finally, the postmodern effect on theology seems evident from the increasing drift to moral laxity in Christian circles. Postmodern ethics, which is self-referential, provides an attractive alternative to Christian ethics rooted in revelation. McGrath (1996:41) convinced of postmodernism’s seduction to moral laxity, charges evangelicals with reducing God’s standards of living to the minimum level acceptable to culture.

Theology, in this framework, arises out of the needs of the community within the ever-changing contexts of culture and history. Scripture, creeds and confessions, and ecclesiastical tradition are part of the ever-changing contexts of culture and history and cannot, therefore, serve as the foundations

for theological life and work. Ethics rather than doctrine becomes central to the task of theological construction; hence doctrine emerges from ethics rather than ethics from doctrine as in traditional theology.

This brings us to the conclusion that postmodern thought in evangelicalism has led to a movement in contemporary theology known as nonfoundationalism, which seeks to disassociate theology from objective foundations such as Scripture, creeds and confessions, and ecclesiastical tradition. Nonfoundationalism in theology would seek to minimise the importance of Scripture, creeds and confessions, and church tradition. Theology, at least as we understand it in the Christian sense, does have its parameters. Balasuriya (1984:15-16), a Sri Lankan theologian, has pleaded:

We have to take a fresh look at the central core of the Christian message. This requires a direct return to the sources of revelation, the Scriptures, especially to the person of Jesus Christ as we see him in the gospels.

4. Conclusion

Mohler (1995:84) states that, “Evangelicals will do well to measure this emerging worldview inch by inch.” Because of its hermeneutical principle of deconstruction and solidarity at the expense of absolute truth and morals, the challenge that postmodernism poses to gospel proclamation has to do with the question of revealed truth. McGrath (1996:366) defines postmodernism’s challenge as “an endemic aversion to the question of truth.” If, as postmodernists are fond of reminding us, there is no metanarrative or objective standard demanding universal truth, then proclamation of the gospel faces stiff opposition. The postmodern break with foundationalism creates uneasiness, and not simply because it questions truth. More disturbing than that, as Cobb (1990:151) states “it undercuts every quest for certainty.” Thus the challenge before the evangelical church is to preach doctrinal truths rooted in the biblical metanarrative that Jesus is the Truth.

5. Bibliography

- | | | |
|----------------------|------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Balasuriya T | 1984 | <i>Planetary Theology</i> Maryknoll: Orbis Books. |
| Cobb J B | 1990 | “Two Types of Postmodernism: Deconstruction and Process” <i>Theology Today</i> . Vol. 47.2 Pgs. 149-164. |
| Grenz S J | 1995 | <i>A Primer on Postmodernism</i> . Grand Rapids: Cambridge University Press. |
| Cuppit D | 1980 | <i>Taking Leave of God</i> . London: SCM |
| Koetsenberger A (ed) | 2005 | <i>Whatever Happened to Truth</i> . Illinois: Crossway Books |

