



Published by Worldview Publications

Prequel 2001.6

Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us . . . fix our eyes on Jesus, . . . who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. — Hebrews 12:1, 2, NIV.

The Postmodern Crisis

Digest

Jim Liffel, “Understanding Today’s Postmodern University,” at www.xenos.org/essays/understanding-todays-postmodern-university.

Editorial Note: The historic actions of the self-limiting, self-emptying, self-giving God, in Creation and in his covenantal relationships with human personhood, should be understood in light of the monumental postmodern crisis.

“The postmodern era can best be understood in terms of four major characteristics: the decline of the West, the legitimation crisis, the intellectual marketplace, and the process of deconstruction. . . .

1. Decline of the West. “The first of these characteristics of postmodernity is the decline of the West. . . . Western science is suffocating on its own pollution. Western democratic political theory is being challenged by both Neo-Confucianism and Islam, communism has all but collapsed into chaos, and Western religion is caught between the horns of a dilemma with secularism on the left and personal piety on the right. . . .

“Fragmentation has paralyzed the political process, destroyed the idea of the common good, and given rise to intense competition for increasingly smaller pieces of the political and economic pie.”

2. Legitimation Crisis. “The second characteristic of postmodernity is what has come to be known as the legitimation crisis. [This crisis involves the loss of universal human values.] In Western culture this has resulted in a fragmentation of society into

special interest groups based on ethnicity, religion, and economic issues. This fragmentation has paralyzed the political process, destroyed the idea of the common good, and given rise to intense competition for increasingly smaller pieces of the political and economic pie. Significantly, this same fragmentation is taking place in the mainline denominations and in contemporary theology. . . .

3. Intellectual Marketplace. “The third characteristic of postmodernity [involves the loss of authoritative control over cultural and religious knowledge and values] . . . [N]o longer can cultural and religious knowledge and value be effectively controlled by the intellectual and political elite. Satellite television networks, computers, and fax machines have made both censorship and control obsolete. . . . [Who then] is to control religious knowledge and values? . . .

4. Process of Deconstruction. “A fourth characteristic of postmodernity 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. [Under deconstruction, words and language lose any consensual meaning.] . . . [D]econstruction categorically asserts the absolute impossibility of attributing to any text one single ultimate meaning. . . .”¹

But postmodernism has even further alarming implications. These are addressed in an essay entitled “Understanding Today’s Postmodern University,” by Jim Leffel.² Leffel is Director of the Crossroads Project and Education Director for Xenos Christian Fellowship in Columbus, Ohio.

“Understanding the Postmodern Shift”

“We’re witnessing a broad-based backlash against reason in our culture. The argument is that every time somebody claims to be in possession of *the* truth (especially religious truth), it ends up repressing people. So it’s more ‘informed’ not to make truth claims at all. How has this surprising outlook gained such wide acceptance especially in the humanities and social sciences? That requires us to understand the emerging ideology of our day: Postmodernism.

“Postmodernism abandons *modernism*, the humanist philosophy of the European Enlightenment. Enlightenment thinking is based on [the] French philosopher René Descartes’ [1596-1650] concept of the autonomous man — the one who starts from his own thought (‘I think, therefore I am’) and builds his worldview systematically from reason alone. Naively, postmodernists charge, modernists assumed that the mind is a ‘mirror of nature,’ meaning that our perceptions of reality actually correspond to the way the world is. From this presumption, modernists built a culture that exalts technological achievement and mastery over nature. As postmodernists see it,

“As postmodernists see it, expansion-minded capitalism and liberal democracy, outgrowths of modernist autonomous individualism, subjugated the earth to the eurocentric, male-dominated paradigm.”

expansion-minded capitalism and liberal democracy, outgrowths of modernist autonomous individualism, subjugated the earth to the eurocentric, male-dominated paradigm.

“But modernism planted the seeds of its own undoing. As modernists conquered the globe in the name of progress, oppressed and marginalized people have responded ‘Progress toward what?’ . . . Postmodernists say that the idols of humanistic rationalism and technological proliferation have brought the modern age to the brink of disaster. The myth of ‘modern progress’ ends up in a nightmare of violence, both for the people it marginalizes and for the earth. That’s why today there is such interest in primal cultures and for a worldview that promotes the unity of humanity *with* nature, rather than man standing *over* nature.

“Postmodern critiques of humanism, progress, and efficacy of autonomous reason are warranted. Grandiose claims of Enlightenment rationalists, who believed that human reason was sufficient to arrive at ultimate truths independent of divine revelation, are unfounded. Blind optimism that technological advancement and essential human goodness will solve all social problems is equally naive. . . .

“ . . . [However,] postmodernism’s critique of modernism . . . rests on equally dubious assumptions and leads to disastrous conclusions. The rhetorical power of postmodern terms like ‘tolerance,’ ‘openness,’ and ‘inclusion’ effectively disguise a more destructive objective — the end of all absolutes. Postmodern openness to spirituality may *seem* like a positive step away from modernist naturalism. But the reality is that postmodern spirituality is inherently anti-Christian, because it considers the Christian message (like all worldviews) true only for those who accept it.

“Postmodern critiques of humanism, progress, and efficacy of autonomous reason are warranted. . . . [However,] postmodernism’s critique of modernism . . . rests on equally dubious assumptions.”

“Postmodern Constructivism”

“Rather than seeing humanity as an ocean of individual rational selves, as modernists held, postmodernists think of humans as products of culture and deny the individual self altogether. Humans are considered ‘social constructs’ . . . The self stands under ‘erasure’ for postmodernists, meaning that all transcendent categories, including essential human personhood and human value, are lost. . . .

“Rather than conceiving the mind as a mirror of nature, postmodernists argue that we perceive reality through the lens of culture and language. This leads postmodernists to reject the possibility of discovering objective truth since each culture approaches reality differently, depending on its particular needs and historical conditions. To claim knowledge of objective truth presumes the possibility of transcending the social construction of knowledge, which is, on postmodern assumptions, impossible. . . .

“Postmodernists hold that the pretense of objective truth always does violence by excluding other voices (regarding other worldviews to be invalid), and marginalizing

“Postmodernists . . . reject the possibility of discovering objective truth.”

the vulnerable by scripting them out of the story. Truth claims, we are told, are merely tools to legitimate power. Michel Foucault writes, 'We cannot exercise power except through the production of truth.' For postmodernists, truth claims reduce to mere propaganda, the pernicious 'will to power.' That's why, in postmodern culture, the person to be feared is the one who believes that we can actually discover ultimate truth. The *dogmatist*, the *totalizer*, the *absolutist* is both naive and dangerous.

"In postmodern culture, the person to be feared is the one who believes that we can actually discover ultimate truth."

"Consequently, rather than dominating others with our 'version of reality,' we should accept all beliefs as equally valid. Openness without the restraint of reason, and tolerance without moral appraisal, are the new postmodern mandates.

"Personal Beliefs Define Truth"

"In postmodern culture, it's not possible to separate what people believe from who they are since the act of believing makes it true (for the person who believes). So rejecting the *content* of faith means rejecting the person holding it, because truth now means *personal preference and personal empowerment*. It's no more appropriate to question the validity of people's belief than to critique their choice from the dinner menu. Simply believing is justification enough. Striving together to discover truth through debate and spirited discussion is out, because no real difference exists between what people choose to believe and what's 'true for them' . . .

"Ironically, in an age of anti-dogmatism, radical subjectivity leads to the dangerously arrogant inference that no one can ever be *wrong* about what he or she believes. If we are free from the constraints of rationality, nothing separates truth from self-delusion."³

"If we are free from the constraints of rationality, nothing separates truth from self-delusion."

Conclusion

We have entered a postmodern era that rejects the existence of universal, transcendent truth — including the relational concept of human personhood in time and space. Furthermore, those who still believe in such truths are regarded as naive and dangerous. In this painful context we shall now move forward.

Endnotes

1. Daniel J. Adams, "Toward a Theological Understanding of Postmodernism," at www.jstor.org/stable/24460605?seq=1, in *Cross Currents* 47, no. 4 (Winter 1997/1998). Further attention could have been given to the ongoing collapse of

modern science, in which such fundamental concepts as time, space and motion are either being radically redefined or wholly denied. So-called reputable scientists reject the very existence of time and space. They claim that there are only immortal “snapshots” of the “NOW.” Amusingly, toward the end of an interview, one scientist contending for the eternal “NOW” looked at his watch and said that it was “time” to go to lunch. See Tim Folger and his discussion with the English theoretical physicist, Julian Barbour, in “From Here to Eternity,” *Discover* 21, no. 12 (December 2000): 54-61.

2. Jim Liffel, “Understanding Today’s Postmodern University,” at www.xenos.org/essays/understanding-todays-postmodern-university.
3. Liffel, “Understanding Today’s Postmodern University.”

Copyright © 2001 Worldview Publications