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Leadership Journal, Winter 1997

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The Riddle of Our Postmodern Culture

What is postmodernism? Should we even care?

-by David L. Goetz

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Books trendmeisters, speakers on the pastoral circuit-all proclaim, prophetlike, "The culture we minister in has changed. We live in a postmodern world."

Uh, what's a postmodern world? Is that where people read *Wired*, drink double cappuccinos, and buy alternative rocker Alanis Morissette's hot-selling CD?

Heart & Soul

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From the Editor

Postmodernism is a throw-away word that means everything and nothing. J. I. Packer, theologian at Regent College says, "*Postmodernism* is a word that has never secured a dictionary definition. Different people use it in different ways."

Postmodernism is, in short, a hackneyed word ill need of definition.

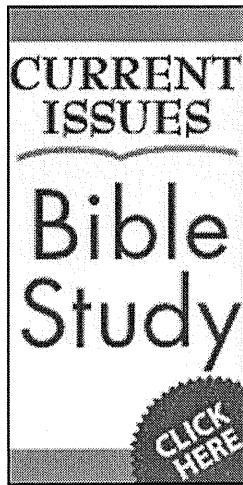
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Mother of all negation

I fondly recall a silver-haired woman in a church I served. She never met a new idea she liked. She criticized everything, was never *for* anything. Her contribution (if that's what you call it) was negation.

She shares much in common with postmodernism, which is a reaction *against* something. It's the mother of all negation. Postmodernism, a phenomenon of Western culture, is defined best by what it's not. "The only agreed-upon element," says Packer, "is that postmodernism is a negation of modernism."



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Modernism, which began roughly in the 1700s and allegedly ended in the 1950s, is the cultural outlook that put its faith in optimism, progress, the pursuit of objective knowledge, and science. Packer says, "Modernism ... assumed that it was in the power of reason to solve all the world's problems and to determine what anybody needed to know."

Most "isms" have a bad reputation, and so does postmodernism. Packer says unflatteringly, "The heart of postmodernism is parasitic; it has no life of its own, [it has a life] only by a denial of what other people believe."

Modernity spurned

In addition to being known for what it's not, postmodernism has a few distinctives. Here are just two:

First, postmodernism doesn't put much stock in the progress of humankind, that things will be getting better anytime soon. Modernity believed science would save the world. Today, science by no means is dead; it still rules in the universities. But the postmodern outlook has nicked it.

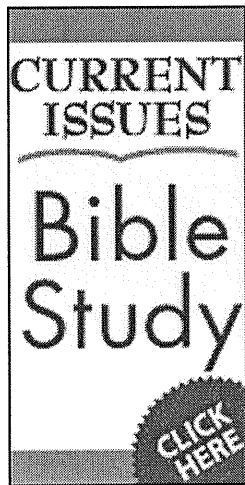
"Postmodernity is suspicious of science to a certain extent," says Roger Olson, professor of theology at Bethel College. "It's saying, 'Science is good as long as it stays where it belongs-investigating the empirical realm.'"

Another distinctive that gets a lot of press is the postmodern notion that all truth, even to some extent scientific knowledge, is biased and socially constructed. That is, truths are relative and depend on what one's culture regards as truth. The forefather of this view is Friedrich Nietzsche, the German philosopher who lived in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Nietzsche said humans have no access to reality, that everything is a matter of perspectives. "In fact, [Nietzsche] claims there is no 'true world,'" writes Stanley J. Grenz in *A Primer on Postmodernism*. (Was anyone really surprised to learn that Nietzsche went insane?)

Other contemporary academicians, such as French philosopher Jacques Derrida, watered Nietzsche's ideas and devised a method of sorts—deconstruction—to show how all truth is like Play-Doh; you can make anything you want with it. One purpose of deconstruction is to show there are multiple meanings; there is no one right interpretation of any text.

Several years ago, I picked up one of Derrida's books, *The Ear of the Other*, which deconstructed a passage from Nietzsche. I couldn't get past the first couple of chapters. Derrida's prose is a series of non sequiturs. He'll say one thing and then say its opposite in the same sentence—the alleged postmodern writing style. He plays with the reader, as if to say, "See, Stupid, language is malleable and can be construed in any number of ways."



Postmodernism has gloomed on to many disciplines of the academy—history, art, English, philosophy. Take history, for example.

Deconstruction flaunts the meaninglessness of trying to uncover the "truth" of some past event. What happened at the Battle of Bunker Hill? The question is considered fruitless; one can understand only a little about why the eyewitnesses chose to record what they did.

Niagara's flow

Postmodernism isn't just chatter by university professors in a smoke-filled faculty lounge. In the last two decades, this outlook, or intellectual mood, has become as diffuse in popular culture as smog in Los Angeles.

One expression of postmodern culture is the way in which most Americans equivocate on the issue of truth. "People are sitting loose to the idea that truth might be important," says Packer. Most tend to sidestep the issue: "Live and let live." Relativism is usually implicit; it's explicitly revealed by people's broken lives. Olson says, "Pastors see this concretely lived out in the complicated lives of their parishioners."

Packer says, "The flow of postmodernist, Western culture is like a kind of Niagara Falls beating on top of your head, telling you, 'What I feel is all that counts because what I feel is all there is.' "

Another concrete expression is syncretism. It's fashionable to add, for example, a dash of Zen Buddhism and a dash of Native American religion to one's nominal Christian or Jewish beliefs. People tend to downplay theological differences—"Who can really know the truth anyway?" they say.

Still another expression is a pervasive cultural pessimism, a darkness felt in alternative rock music and seen in popular art, including movies such as the recent "Leaving Las Vegas,,," the "real life" love story of a prostitute and an alcoholic. Much of the darkness is couched in apocalyptic, ecological language: "The Planet is in trouble." The pessimism is also detected in a crippling cynicism of politicians and the political process, revealed in the voter apathy in the recent presidential election.

Objective opportunities

Pastors rightly bristle at postmodernism's cavalier dismissal of absolute truth, given that Christianity rises or falls on the historicity of Jesus Christ. There's not much to cheer about in the claim that everything is relative, that nothing is secure. It seems a short step from there to nihilism. And it certainly doesn't seem like much of an improvement on modernity.

In *Can Man Live without God?* Ravi Zacharias, a Christian apologist, recounts his tour of the Ohio State University campus. His tour guide began singing the glories of the Werner Center for Performing Arts, which *Newsweek* called "the first deconstructionist building."

In the building are staircases that lead nowhere, into empty space. Pillars hang suspended from the ceiling. The architectural theme seems to be a

series of geometrical non sequiturs. Zacharias writes, "The architect, we are duly informed, designed this building to reflect life itself—senseless and incoherent—and the 'capriciousness of the rules that reflect life itself.'

"When the rationale was explained to me, I had just one question, 'Did he [the architect] do the same with the foundation?' "

Uh, probably not. This is just another example of postmodernism's parasitic nature; without the life of modernism, there could be no postmodernism. Much of postmodernism and the culture it is creating should be mocked for the silliness it represents.

Yet there may be some things we can learn from it. Postmodernism has rightly shown us that all ideas, beliefs, and convictions about life—even science—do arise in a context. Postmodernism has stuck a needle in the ballooned arrogance of the Enlightenment. Science and technology, we're learning, are not God.

That's not to say, though, that all *truth* is socially derived, a matter of one's perspective. Theologian Roger Olson distinguishes between objective knowledge and objective truth. There is no such thing, he says, as objective knowledge; no one can speak or write without a perspective. Everyone has a point-of-view. "We don't arrive at knowledge of God in a purely rational path," says Olson. "The Enlightenment project tended to ignore perspectives; it turns out, there's no escaping perspectives."

However, there is objective truth, says Olson, which exists in the person of Jesus Christ and in the Word of God. And that is what Christian preachers, says J. I. Packer, should focus on: "Who and what is Jesus Christ? Is he a reality with a saving status?"

No doubt postmodernism will only elevate the importance of Christian preaching. The church may be the only venue left where truth is proclaimed confidently. And it's certainly the only place where those seeking something more than the cold, rational world of modernism can explore the deep mysteries of God.


William Willimon, professor of Christian ministry at Duke University, has said, "The good news is, we are entering a period in which the old, modern world view is losing its grip. People are wandering and exploring. We ought to be there to say to them, 'The world too flat for you? Okay, we can help you with that. Your life an impenetrable mystery to you? We love to talk about that.'


"Secularity, our old enemy, is in big trouble."

Postmodernism, for all its confusion, seems just one more opportunity for the church to do what it does best—be the church.

David Goetz is senior associate editor of Leadership.

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