



Living with Postmodernity: The Challenge and Opportunity

By Kameel Majdali



See if you can explain the following situations:

- Imagine an industry that convinces people to pay big money for a product with no benefits whatsoever but is proven to ruin their health and threaten their life?
- A country ejects an individual from high office for lying, rejects another for sexual morality, yet within a few years grants a third individual with a well-known propensity to both lie and commit immorality re-election and high approval ratings.
- rights to life and property was used to create a “constitutional right” to deliberately terminate an unwanted pregnancy;
- A female church goer commits adultery with the town mayor; she is excommunicated for violating the ten commandments and successfully sues her church for emotional abuse and “unloving” actions.
- An ethno-linguistic group in a wealthy western country says it disagrees with the laws of its adopted country and is willing to defy those laws on the basis of religion or political preference;
- Anywhere from one-third to one-half of the twenty-five million American baby boomers who say they are “born again” Christians believe in astrology and reincarnation; they also think that other religions are equally valid.

Welcome to the wildcard world of Postmodernism, the successor and antagonist to Modernism. Easier described than defined, defying boundaries but detailing society, postmodernism provides a plausible explanation for the puzzling situations we face today. It also presents an incredible challenge to Christian life and mission. The purpose of this essay is to outline the challenge of postmodernism and how it can also present an opportunity in Christian service.

What is Postmodernism?

Dennis McCallum in his book The Death of Truth describes it as a methodology—a new way to analyze life; a movement that attacks the notion of absolute truth; a metamorphosis that has spread through the media and educational system to affect all society; and a mood which deeply distrusts reason.

For our purposes, postmodernism can be defined as a cultural, intellectual, and spiritual movement which partially replaces the grand narrative of ideology/religion (e.g. Marxism, Christianity) and the certainties of scientific rationalism with a subjective, intuitive, wholistic viewpoint that leads to a plurality of worldviews—all which are considered valid. It represents a radical form of relativism.

For the Church, which represented temporal power in the Middle Ages, restructured in the Reformation, and sidelined in The Enlightenment, it is not even on the playing field today. Instead of calling western civilization as “Christian, we are returning full circle to the time when the Church was born in the first century: the tolerant, testy, multicultural, and pagan Roman Empire, where the world was not the Church’s domain but its mission field.

Pillars of Postmodernism

Major pillars of postmodernism include the “death of truth.” The Bible says that Jesus Christ is the truth (John 14:6)—the absolute truth and only way to the Father—and we learn this by revelation. Modernism, with its emphasis on science and reason, rejects revelation as a means of identifying absolute truth. Postmodernism, on the other hand, says that truth as a universal, fixed, absolute, and objective entity does not exist. Instead, there are many “truths” and all are equally valid. This repudiation of absolute truth means that Biblical moral standards against lying, stealing, and sex outside of marriage, are challenged as the only standard of living. Richard Rorty says that truth is made, not found. All various societal groups construct their own “truth” to help lift up profile and bolster power. In the absence of universal and public truth, everyone becomes entitled to their own “private truth,” no matter how preposterous it is.

A result of this repudiation of absolute truth is the rejection of the meta-narrative, the grand story that defines why the world is. Marxism is a meta-narrative which interprets history in economic and material terms of the struggle of the proletariat. Philosophical systems can offer a meta-narrative. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is also a meta-narrative, applicable to all people at all times. Postmodernism finds this notion as offensive, arrogant, and Christian evangelism as a non-militaristic form of imperialism.

Following this is postmodern “deconstruction,” or death of the text. Plain, literal, meaning of great texts are cast aside in a milieu that believes that meanings can be determined by each group, just like truth. It is a hermeneutic of elasticity, inclusivity, and suspicion. Even the Bible is subject to deconstruction, where liberation theologians, feminists, and homosexual, all offer a specialized interpretation of the sacred text. Texts that affirm male headship or marriage and heterosexuality are called patriarchal, oppressive, homophobic, and chauvinistic. New interpretations by the special interest groups are considered liberating, enlightening, and life affirming, no matter how remote the interpretation is from the text. Authority and Biblical morality are greatly undermined in the process (for example, in one survey 56% of single fundamentalist Christians engage in sexual relations while 66% of Romans Catholics do).

Deconstruction has given rise to the political correctness movement. Since language is the means of “constructing” truth and reality—like mankind and handicapped—new words are carefully chosen to construct a more tolerant and inclusive reality. So we now say “human kind” and “physically challenged.” While some of the modifications of language are reasonable and desirable, others are excessive. Terms that are used pejoratively are “euro-centric,” “white, male, Christian,” “homophobic,” etc. Failure to conform to political correctness can create a firestorm of abuse and exclusivity, as witness against the political careers of Pauline Hanson of the One Nation Party and Joerg Haider of the Austrian Freedom Party.

With truth and text rendered “dead,” we have the rise of the therapeutic. The goal of education, theology, and doctrine is to build self-esteem. Convicting, Bible-based preaching which speaks about sin and repentance is substituted for “feel good” messages.

Discipleship programs, which teach people Christian devotion, sacrifice, and service, are replaced with fun activities that are meant to affirm a person's identity.

Postmodernism embraces such concepts as multiculturalism, nihilism, nostalgia (have you noticed how Elvis, Marilyn Monroe, the Beatles, the Monkees, and Brady Bunch are back in circulation. The movie Grease was re-issued in 1998, twenty years after it was first launched as dreamtime of the 1950's. Hence we have nostalgia of nostalgia), opinion polls, paganism, social construct, spin doctors, tribalism, and urbanization. The one-stop shopping mall is a quintessential postmodern experience, with much variety, colour, and space, all under one roof. Nor does postmodernism necessarily represent the radical and left-wing: Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, and Pope John Paul II are all considered postmodern leaders even though they were right-wing conservatives.

How Now Shall We Live?

While Postmodernism presents a challenge to the Church, it is not insurmountable. After all, during the period of modernism, when science and reason usurped the throne of theology and the church, Christian things were represented as anti-intellectual, mythology, legend, and anti-reason. Evolution and Marxism assaulted the Church continuously and laughed at issues of spirituality and faith. Postmodernism, however, is not anti-spiritual or anti-faith; it is honest enough to recognize the need for the transcendent. There are positive aspects of Postmodernism that the Church can utilize for the sake of the Gospel.

NARRATIVE: While rejecting meta-narrative, postmodernism heartily embraces narrative. Communicating truth through stories is a popular and effective method; indeed, it was the method Jesus used. An abstract, point-by-point dissertation will certainly lose the attention of most postmoderns, but a heartfelt, real-life story on the same message will have them at the edge of their seats. Don't just tell about Christ and Church, tell His story.

AUTHENTICITY: With reality considered as a social construct and a global Kentucky Fried Culture based on a manufactured image and slick marketing, postmoderns crave substance; something that is genuine and will stand the test of time. A Christian life lived with integrity and sincerity, without compromise, can and is attractive to this generation.

EXPERIENCE: People don't want to hear about something, they want to feel and experience it. The Gospel of Jesus Christ offers people the opportunity to have a relationship with the living God. One reason Pentecostal, Charismatic, and Third Wave Christian churches are thriving worldwide is because they believe in the Bible, pray a lot, maintain a connection with culture, and offer an experience in the Holy Spirit. You will find people are far more receptive to hearing about your testimony or experience in Christ than a recitation of the Four Spiritual Laws, effective as they have been in the past. People may argue with your doctrine but in postmodernism they will not contradict your personal experience in God.

DIVERSITY: In a world where you can live in an Tudor home, eat at a Mexican restaurant, drive a Japanese car and wear an Italian suit, color, variety, and diversity are the order of the day. Multicultural Melbourne has a plethora of international eating houses than have transformed plain palates into gourmet delights. When you consider it, the Christian Church is the most diverse organism in the world, embracing people from every nation, all major language groups, all walks of life. Combine this with an informed and inclusive global or missions vision, and you have an attractive and compelling portrait of the diverse Church Christ died for.

COMMUNITY: Modernism celebrated individualism and autonomy, where freedom and personal rights are everything. One of the results, however, has been alienation and loneliness. Postmoderns desire to be part of a caring, colourful community and, again, this is an area where the Church can excel. The *ecclesia* or “called out” ones are formed into a spiritual community on earth to reflect the love of Christ to the world. Relationship is also important to postmoderns and fostering warm relationship in a community context can help meet the needs of many. One of the reasons for the phenomenal success of the Alpha program is their recognition that evangelism is a process, not an event, and built on relationship and community.

Practical points include embracing the Scriptures in all their integrity, celebrating the Lord’s supper in all its richness, being open to classic Christian traditions, publicly living a lifestyle of faith, and joyful praise and worship, are all means of using Postmodernism as a springboard to convey the good news of Christ.