

God's Word is the Answer to the Postmodern Problem of Language

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"The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." (2 Corinthians 4:4)

Language... Words... Meaning. When a student of the Bible approaches God's Word those three things are at the forefront of his mind. Since God chose to reveal his will for all mankind through human language in the pages of Holy Scripture, it is the task of every Christian to read, learn, and take God's Word to heart. But what if that was impossible? What if there was no proper way to interpret language? What if we could do nothing more than construct meaning based on our own subjective rules for interpretation?

Postmodernism has raised these "what ifs" and seeks to show that language is not an adequate vehicle for conveying meaning. This paper will show how this attack on language leads to complete uncertainty, and then demonstrate how God's powerful Word gives meaning to human language and brings certainty to lost souls.

Postmodernism Formed in the Womb of Modernism

Some say that a concise and accurate definition of postmodernism is impossible. Others complain that the word has been so overused that it has almost become meaningless. In view of such warnings, perhaps the best way to define "postmodernism" is by taking it in its most literal sense. In that case postmodernism is simply "that which comes after (post) modernism." But it not only came after modernism, it formed as a reaction against modernism.

Scholars disagree on exactly when the modern movement began. Plato, Augustine, Luther, Descartes, and Kant have all been named likely fathers. However, even though it is not clear exactly who started it, it is clear that the modern mindset has dominated Western thinking for at least the last 200 years. The Enlightenment philosopher, Rene Descartes repeated an idea that had

already distilled in the mind of Augustine with his famous statement, “I think, therefore I am.” This concept directed attention to man, the thinking-self, who soon became the center and gauge of truth. As a direct result knowledge was steered away from the eternal truth of the Almighty “I am,” and instead pointed to the “I am” of human reason. Immanuel Kant sheds light on this view in his famous quote: “Tutelage is man’s inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another... ‘Have courage to use your own reason’ – that is the motto of the enlightenment.”¹ It was no longer necessary to look to divine revelation or the tradition of the church to find out what was true. Man was encouraged to look to himself and his own capacity to reason for direction.

Modernism viewed truth as attainable, and believed that all things could be accomplished if the world would only rid itself of superstition and irrational thought. There was an incredible sense of optimism as man looked forward to a brighter future where reason would reign supreme. This spirit of optimism continued to possess our nation’s consciousness into the 1960’s. In his paper *Not Ashamed of the Gospel in a Postmodern Age* Steven Degner describes, “I grew up in the 1950’s and 60’s. We lived on the tower of modernism and watched it being built around us. We stood in awe of science and technology. The bright minds that gave us aluminum, TV dinners, and rockets heading for the moon were the wonder kids who we hoped would engineer a new world of peace and prosperity.”² It seemed as though there was no end to the progress that would come from mother reason.

However, modernism did not deliver on its promises of a utopia for the here and now. The freedom, peace, and love that were dreamed of never came to pass. Instead many began to see modernism and all of its high ideals only as masks for exercising power over others. “After colonialism, slavery, two world wars, communism, Nazism, and nuclear bombs, it is no longer clear that reason, technology, and science hold the key to building the ideal world.”³ The economic and technological salvation that modernism proclaimed brought nothing but more pain and suffering.

As the spell of modernism wore off, a vacuum was created, and like all vacuums this one would be filled with new ideas. The ideas that would fill this vacuum had already distilled in the minds of men like Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), Martin Heidegger (1884-1976), Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), and Ferdinand Saussure (1857-1913). Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Richard Rorty, the triumvirate of postmodern philosophers, built on these ideas to destroy modernism and lay the foundation for postmodernism.

This paper will continue by giving a snapshot of the ideas of Nietzsche and Derrida because of the indelible impression that they left on the postmodern understanding of human language. We will focus on the areas of their philosophy that had the most direct influence on postmodern language theory.

The Birth of Postmodernism

The attack on modernism began with the nihilist philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche in the 1880's. He so thoroughly rejected modernity that he is often referred to as the "patron saint of postmodernism."⁴ At the heart and core of his attack was a rejection of the modern understanding of knowledge. A simple analogy may best describe the way that Nietzsche viewed knowledge.

Modernism saw the mind as a tape recorder that could accurately record and interpret reality through the use of reason. Nietzsche, on the other hand, believed that the mind, as a tape recorder, was inadequate when it came to recording. Since the reality of experience was so rich and full, the mind could only record bits and pieces here and there. He also rejected the idea that the mind was neutral. Rather, he believed that it takes the bits and pieces that it records and organizes them according to what has already been written on the tape. The mind was not an unbiased passive observer of reality, but rather an active participant that fills in the gaps and organizes information.

He uses the example of a leaf. When someone says the word "leaf," our minds formulate a picture of a leaf. The picture that our minds formulate is based on our past experiences of a leaf.

However, not all leaves are the same. When I say “leaf,” one person could be picturing an oak leaf, and another could be picturing a maple leaf. Our mind leaves out all of the different characteristics of every leaf, in order to conjure up the picture of a leaf. Since the picture that our mind formulates ignores all of the characteristics of different leaves, we rob reality of its richness. We overlook differences and focus on sameness in order to create structure. Therefore, Nietzsche went so far as to say that the concept of “leaf” that we hold in our minds is actually a falsification of the reality of all leaves. He claimed that it was impossible to really know anything fully.

Nietzsche’s next step was to show that everything that had been considered knowledge in the past was nothing more than a human creation. He makes this argument on the grounds that our process of constructing reality is arbitrary and individual. Instead of interpreting reality, our minds construct it. He rejected the Kantian idea that there was a universal way to knowledge, and instead claimed that we can only interpret reality through our own self-contained set of illusions. This makes Nietzsche a nihilist, that is, he believed that the human mind had no sure access to reality. If Nietzsche lived in our age, maybe he would have said that the reality that we know is really virtual reality. We can never escape the “virtualness” of this reality because we can never escape our own social and linguistic context.

The Postmodern Problem of Language

In the 1970’s philosophers used Nietzsche’s ideas as a launching pad to examine the nature of language. They focused especially on his idea that “truth” exists only within specific linguistic contexts, and that language did not correspond to “truth,” but rather created it. In the realm of language, where Nietzsche left off, Derrida began.

Jacques Derrida has been called Nietzsche’s postmodern reinterpreter. He realized that at the heart and core of all knowledge lays the mystery of human language, so instead of examining the nature of human reason like Kant, Derrida began his exploration of knowledge with a rigorous examination of language.

This examination led Derrida to conclude that all of Western thought has been tied up in “logocentrism.”⁵ “Logocentrism” is his assessment of Western philosophy’s false presumption that words or language are capable of carrying meaning. Like Nietzsche, who believed that all reality was an illusion, Derrida suggested that the idea that words correspond to some objective reality is also an illusion. He claimed that it was impossible to know the meaning of the written word apart from its immediate context and that words themselves don’t carry any inherent meaning, rather words are only “signs.”

Since words are only signs they always point to something else. For example, if someone wanted to know what the word “dog” meant they could look it up in a dictionary. A dictionary may give a definition, such as, “a four-legged, furry creature that barks.” However, notice that this definition does not tie the word “dog” (the sign) to a thing in reality. Rather the sign “dog” just points to other signs, that is, “four-legged,” “furry,” “creature,” and “barks.” The word “dog” is not something that relates directly to reality, rather it relates to other words. To Derrida, this proves the point that words do not correspond to reality. Words only point to other words, and when one interprets a text he only encounters signs that point to other signs that point to other signs, etc.

Because Derrida claimed that words don’t carry any inherent meaning, he encourages the reader to bring meaning to words. This meaning is never static. It is always different and changing because a reader’s place in time and his own individual context is always changing. It is also impossible to base meaning on an author’s intent, because the reader can never know for sure what the author intended. The reader is separated from the author by a different time and context.

For Derrida interpretation becomes completely arbitrary. The text is like an obscure modern painting. When a person looks at the painting maybe he sees a horse, when another person looks at it maybe she sees an ice cream truck. In the same way a text has different meanings to each reader. Since the meaning behind the text is only a social construct mirroring the interpreter’s personal perspective, Derrida claimed that the only honest thing that a reader can do is “deconstruct” a text.

“Deconstruction” is the attitude of the interpreter that looks to disassemble or undo a text of all of its objective meaning. A deconstructive reader must look in the text for masks of cultural power. Or in other words, a reader must ask the question “How has this text been used to rationalize oppression – the male domination of women, the subjection of minorities by majorities, homosexuals by heterosexuals, industrialists over environmentalists, and so on. Instead of reading a text the reader is instructed to read with the thought, “How was the author trying to exercise power over another with his words?”

This downward spiral of meaningless seemed inevitable after Nietzsche made the bold declaration, “God is dead.” In *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* Kevin J. Vanhoozer claims that this breakdown in philosophy and interpretation is really theological in nature. He says, “Like Kant, he [Derrida] correctly perceives, as a philosopher, the implications for knowledge and interpretation of the death of God; henceforth we have “only human” (e.g. fallible) knowledge, “only human” (e.g. relative) truth.” If language does not correspond to something outside of itself (which Derrida calls *the transcendental signified*), then it could not have any fixed meaning. He comments on this problem, “The absence of a transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of significations infinitely.”⁶ In other words, when philosophers removed God, they removed the possibility of meaning.

As much as one may despise Derrida’s conclusions, they were very logical in nature. If there were no center – if there were no truth that transcends all truth – if there were no such thing as a God who chose to communicate with humanity through his Son, meaning would be impossible. Unfortunately, it seems as though Derrida never looked to the God of Scripture to find true meaning.

The Influence of Postmodernism on Society

Do the abstract ideas really matter? Does anyone really care what these men think? Will these ideas affect the ministry of God’s Word? These are all good questions, and they can all be

answered with a resounding “Yes!” Granted, there are probably not too many people who read Jacque Derrida in their spare time, or who claim to be one his disciples; but these ideas do have a way of filtering down into society. Just as many people who have never read Aristotle use his way of thinking each day when they organize information in a database or spreadsheet, so also there are many people who have come to view all interpretation as meaningless, and who see truth as nothing more than the opinion of the day.

The bumper sticker that reads, “My Karma ran over your Dogma,” may seem humorous at first glance, but really it is a reflection of a culture that believes that propositional truth should be thrown out the window. “Whatever,” “As if,” and “Deal with it” are slogans recited hourly by teenagers reflecting multiple interpretations. Some of the most popular movies of the last 5 years, such as *The Truman Show*, *The Matrix*, and *Vanilla Sky*, play games with reality and raise the question, “Do we really know what reality is, or is all just interpretation?” No wonder one often hears the question, “Isn’t that just your interpretation?” in Bible information class.

God’s answer – The Power of the Gospel

If postmodernists believe that words don’t have any fixed meaning – if they believe that language is only a matter of different interpretations, and that it is impossible to speak truthfully, then how will we communicate the Word of God to them? If someone believes that every text is just an attempt to exercise power over another, then how will they respond to Scripture’s declaration that faith in Jesus Christ, as Savior, is the only way to salvation? Thanks be to God that he has already answered this question for us!

In Romans 1:16 God speaks to us through the Apostle Paul saying, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.” The Gospel is the *power* of God. The Lord filled His Word with power by the Holy Spirit to bring unbelievers to Him. In fact it is so powerful that it can save those who formerly believed that it was foolishness. First Corinthians 1:21 says, “For since in the wisdom of

God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.” The German dogmatician Huelsemann says it beautifully, “(The Word of God) has a power of its own which goes beyond the most persuasive words of men because it persuades the hearers [to believe] that those things which do not agree with the senses of man, nor with the intellect, which gets its knowledge through the senses, nor with the will, which measures what is desirable or undesirable by agreement with the senses.”⁷ The Word of God has the power to convince those who hear it. It has the power to turn even the most hardened postmodernist to Christ.

This power works through its pronouncement of forgiveness. We do well to keep Professor Meyer’s words in mind, “We must ever bear in mind that the Gospel does not begin with the doctrine of inspiration. The Gospel begins with the announcement of forgiveness to a sin-lost world.”⁸ It may seem that the most important thing for postmodernists to understand is the doctrine of inspiration, but that is not what will bring them to faith. Christ sent his disciples into the world with the clear command to “preach repentance and forgiveness of sins.” This command remains for modern day evangelists as they take the Gospel to a postmodern world.

After God leads a believer to trust in him for the forgiveness of sins, he then leads him to see that His Word as recorded in Holy Scripture is truly the Word of God. Once again Professor Meyer explains, “Being freed by the Word of God he will also feel bound by it. His freedom depends altogether on it. The moment he leaves the Word of God he loses his freedom, and sinks back into serfdom.”⁹ The Holy Spirit causes believers to rely on God and His Word for all truth. Even if a postmodern convert still had doubts about the possibility of meaning in secular texts, the Holy Spirit will make him certain that the Word of God conveys meaning, because that Word originated in the heart of the loving God who has forgiven his sins.

God's Answer – Language has its Origin in Him

As students of language perhaps we can understand some of Nietzsche and Derrida's questions about the nature of language. But as Christians may we never come to the conclusion that it is irrational for God to speak to humans through human language. May we never see language as a filthy rag that cannot be used to carry divine meaning. For God's Word itself presents a high view of human language.

Remember when Moses tried to excuse himself from being God's servant by pointing to his inability to speak? God sternly reminded him that it was He who gave him the ability to speak, "Who gave man his mouth?...Is it not I, the LORD?"(Exodus 4:11). When God created man on the sixth day he gave him the ability to speak. He created mankind's vocal cords, tongue, and mouth - the very organs that would be used to speak.

But God not only created the organs for speech, he also created language itself. Think of the first chapter of Genesis and how many times it says, "God said...and God called." God called things into being and then he gave them names and used words to describe them. In the very next chapter God allows Adam to participate in naming the animals. Language is something created by God and shared with man.¹⁰ Siegbert Becker comments, "It is difficult to escape the conclusion that God from the very beginning intended to reveal himself as a God who speaks to men and a God who endowed men with the power of speech so that they might communicate with him."¹¹ Language originated in the mind of God. He is the *transcendental signified* that Derrida was looking for. He is the center that gives all meaning its meaning, and since he created language we can be certain that it carries meaning.

God's Answer – The Incarnation

Logically, it may still seem impossible for God to place his divine truth in human words. However, the incarnation of Christ dispels all doubts. In the first two centuries of Christianity, docetists claimed that it was impossible for God to take on human flesh in Christ, because they

believed that everything from the material world was evil. In their minds, if Christ had taken on human flesh, he would have become sinful. In a similar way, postmodernists claim that it would be impossible for an eternal God to communicate to man through the worn out vehicle of human language.

From a human standpoint, it does seem impossible for God to become man in Christ. It also seems impossible for God to communicate his divine truth to us through human language. But the Holy Spirit has reached out to us and convinced us that God has done the impossible to save us. “The Word became flesh,” and the Word walked to the cross to offer himself as a fragrant sacrifice for the sins of the world. The greatest act of all history – the fact that God sent Christ into our world is proof that it has always been God’s intent to communicate with us. He communicated with us in Christ by sending him into our world as a human being, like us in every way, except without sin. Knowing that God has done the impossible in Christ to communicate his love for us, we can be assured that he has also done the impossible by communicating with us through human language.

After all, this has been God’s will from the beginning of time. He communicated with mankind in the third chapter of Genesis by promising a Savior to Adam and Eve. He continued to communicate with man by repeating that promise time and time again to our forefathers in the Old Testament. Today God communicates with us through his Word, here he assures us that it is his will that all people be saved through Christ. In this we see God’s great love for all.

Our Response

Our faith in Christ gives us absolute certainty in a postmodern world. That faith points us to God’s Word and reminds us that the purpose of God’s Word is to give us eternal life. The resurrected Christ assures us of this when he says, “But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31).

This certainty is not something that we can keep to ourselves. It is a beacon of light in a world of darkness. As we share God's Word with others we bring the message that overturns all doubt and despair. By proclaiming the powerful Word of God's forgiveness in Christ, we will see how God brings lost souls to himself. What a joy and privilege we have in this age!

¹ Stanley Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1996) p.69.

² Steven Degner, "Not Ashamed of the Gospel in a Postmodern Age" p.3. Unpublished essay.

³ Stephen P. Vallesky, "The Impact of Postmodernism on Our Ministry and Its Antidote," p.10. Unpublished essay.

⁴ Grenz, p.88.

⁵ "Logocentrism" is a term that Derrida invented.

⁶ Grenz, p.146.

⁷ qtd. in John P. Meyer's Dogmatics class notes used in instruction at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, p. 51. Translation provided as an accessory to class notes.

⁸ John P. Meyer, "Inspiration." *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* vol. 48 no. 4, (October 1951) p. 247.

⁹ Meyer, "Inspiration", p. 253.

¹⁰ Becker, "The Scriptures, Inspired by God" *Our Great Heritage*, vol. 1 (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1991), p.132-133.

¹¹ Becker, p.133.