

The Importance of the Biblical Picture of Reconciliation in a Postmodern World

“How do you know Christianity is the only right religion?” she asked me. “Don’t they all lead to pretty much the same thing—heaven, nirvana, or whatever you call it?”

I often have discussions about religion with people from my army unit when I go home once a month for drills. What amazes, even shocks, me is how spiritually disoriented and far from the truth some of these people are. But maybe I shouldn’t be so shocked. After all, we are living in a postmodern world, where absolute truth is for the close-minded. Everyone is entitled to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” because these have become the ultimate purposes and goals of this existence. Beyond the present time and immediate surroundings, any other reality and truth are obsolete and a waste of time.

The postmodernist would grant, “Sure, Christians should be allowed to have their opinions and beliefs, because maybe for them that is truth—just as long as they don’t force it on anyone else.” The challenge may seem overwhelming to Christians, to communicate the gospel message to people who refuse to submit their freedoms of choice, speech, and action to anyone or anything, especially if it restricts or convicts their conscience. “It is hard to proclaim the forgiveness of sins to people who believe that, since morality is relative, they have no sins to forgive.”¹ As we realize how morally degraded our society has become, spreading the gospel remains just as important as always, if not more so now. In a world filled with lost, lonely, and confused souls, the picture of the cross is not only a valuable antidote—it is the only one.

In years gone by, “Biblical Christianity has been bludgeoned by the forces of modernism, with its scientific rationalism, humanism, and bias against the past.”² Not so long ago, Darwin’s theory of evolution was at its height, when man’s reason and logical deduction was outweighing the Creation account with ‘the Big Bang.’ “The modern explorer describes the world by appeal to universal ‘laws’ or principles that govern action, assuming that the compilation of these laws constitutes knowledge of the world.”³ Modernists believed they could see the world as it really is, and that they could form a new society free from wars and conflicts. The potential of the human mind was at a forefront.

Today’s society has taken a complete ‘one-eighty turnaround. “Rejecting the notion of the evolutionary progress of humanity toward a utopian outcome, postmoderns affirm a more realistic understanding of the human propensity toward evil.”⁴ Like Christianity, postmodernism denies that the rational, scientific method is the only measure of truth; it asserts that certain aspects of truth lie beyond reason and cannot be grasped by reason.

Contrary to modernism, the postmodernist also rejects the assumption that knowledge is inherently good. “Despite its benefits, the knowledge explosion is not going to produce a utopia. Technological advances bring not only the possibility of good but also the possibility of evil.”⁵ We cannot deny the blessings that technology has been

¹ Veith, 16.

² Veith, 19.

³ Grenz, 44.

⁴ Webber, 133.

⁵ Grenz, 166.

for us, yet we as Christians must also realize the danger of letting human reason and curiosity dictate over godly prudence and self-control.

One of the most influential technological advancements in the last century is the television. Today we have hundreds of channels to surf, all from the comfort of our Lazy-boy recliners. With remote control in hand, anyone can sit back and inflict on himself a barrage of ‘picture tube shrapnel.’ No commitment required! Just flip the channel and sample an interesting image or two, then go on to the next. “Television undercuts any sense of coherence, consistency, and unity for its viewers.”⁶ Television has numbed its viewers’ sense of what’s true and what’s fiction. It has decreased the attention span, and unless ‘entertainment’ is an immediate prospect, time would be well-spent elsewhere. Consider the popular trend in choosing a place of worship, or the reason many people are dissatisfied with a church. “It was boring...all that preaching and stuff...they need more variety.”

We see other examples of postmodern trends in the way we speak and our *koine* expressions. ‘How are you doing?’ is a common greeting, and although it is a question, people do not expect more than a quick reply such as, “Fine,” maybe even with a “thanks” tagged on the end for elaboration. Not that this consistently suggests a lack of patience or concern within our society, but one could logically assume (well, not any more) how such an expression came into common usage.

In the 90’s film “Clueless,” teenagers spoke a dialect of English native to southern California ‘valley girls.’ They regularly used words like, “Whatever,” “as if,” or “deal with it.” Such phrases have become part of the *koine* vocabulary of not just teens but also of young adults and ‘hip’ middle-aged people. The use of such language may demonstrate how ‘in-tune’ and ‘with-it’ someone is, but these phrases “express a disinterest in resolving conflicting viewpoints because there is an underlying disbelief in objective and absolute truth coupled with a denial that life has any ultimate or unifying meaning.”⁷

Other examples of postmodernism’s influence on our society can be seen in the different activist groups who “exalt nature at the expense of human beings.”⁸ The former Sierra Club leader, David Brown, “sees the destruction of human life no more tragic than the destruction of the wilderness.” Some of these environmental extremists have argued that “human beings are an evolutionary mistake, a cancer of the earth.” One such extremist says “that he has more sympathy for threatened insect species than for children dying of hunger in Africa.”⁹

As warped as these viewpoints seem to Christians, postmodernism’s omission of absolute truth and the de-emphasis of the worth of the human being easily allow for such claims. Postmodernism rejects the possibility of having a single, correct worldview; there is no objective truth, only “a multiplicity of views and worlds” where postmodernism “has in effect replaced knowledge with interpretation.”¹⁰ “Emotion and intuition are valid paths to knowledge, not just reason. Knowledge is always incomplete.”¹¹

⁶ Veith, 81.

⁷ Kelm, 112.

⁸ Veith, 74.

⁹ Veith, 74.

¹⁰ Grenz, 40.

¹¹ Kelm, 113.

Truth is subjective and determined by one's environment. Just as my army buddy believed, many Americans think that "all paths lead to the same destination, that truth—like beauty—is in the eye of the beholder, that sincerity is the measure of religious truth, and that it is inappropriate and impossible to pass judgment on the beliefs of others."¹²

In summary, five basic themes define postmodernism. **Pluralism** says that "there are many truths, culturally conditioned and subjectively interpreted...and that truth, right, and reality are determined by the situation, the society, or the self."¹³ Related key phrases include "open-mindedness" and "tolerance."

Non-objectivism denies that reason is the only path to knowledge. Man cannot assert absolute truths or objective reality. All explanations of reality are "constructions that are useful but not objectively true," and that we cannot "step outside our constructions of reality."¹⁴

Thirdly, **deconstruction** maintains that "there is no inherent objectivity, only continuous interpretation of the world," and that "the interpretation of a text depends on the relative viewpoint and the particular values of the interpreter...not on the external text or its author."¹⁵ Therefore the reader must deconstruct a text to 'make it work' for himself.

Cynicism and **pessimism** inevitably results when postmodern thought says there is no absolute truth, no central and unifying purpose to life," and that "life isn't going anywhere but in circles."¹⁶

Lastly, the **community** is the only place where the individual can find meaning in life. Each community creates its own rules and beliefs for understanding life. "Postmodernism shrinks a too incomprehensible world down to a manageable size and a meaningful context. Life is relational and experiential, not rational..."¹⁷

Without a doubt, such influences of postmodernism can and do cause spiritual repercussions. To go through life without any absolute truth is like floating in an ocean with no land in sight and nowhere to weigh anchor. And all you could do to find happiness and pleasure would be to imagine you were drinking that cool, iced tea; or that you were with your family and friends in a place where you belonged and felt secure, not lost at sea! The feelings of frustration, helplessness, and insecurity result without a certain, solid foundation to hold onto. There is only one true and lasting foundation in a sea of confusion and cynicism.

Postmodernism debases the worth of the individual, because the individual has no real meaning or purpose in life. To the postmodern the "free-floating lack of fixed identity is the ultimate liberation."¹⁸ There is no stability for the postmodern, even in group identity. No matter what group or relationship they belong to, they can and must expect everything to change. Fashions go out of style, friends split apart, even families fall apart. They must learn to deal with abandonment as a necessary course of life. The postmodern society is filled with such people who are 'trying to find themselves.' The so-called freedom of having no identity finally crumbles into a prison of loneliness, spite, and despair in life.

¹² Kelm, 114.

¹³ Kelm, 114-15.

¹⁴ Kelm, 115.

¹⁵ Kelm, 115-16.

¹⁶ Kelm, 116.

¹⁷ Kelm, 116.

¹⁸ Veith, 72.

The phrase, “Deal with it,” is the postmodern solution to our problems. To those who suffer with feelings of guilt or shame the postmodern would say, “Hey, we create our own reality and its meaning; no one else can fix the problem that YOU allowed to have meaning. You created it, so you deal with it.”

The truth is, we don’t *allow* ourselves to feel guilt and shame, because we don’t have control over it. The conscience is not an optional feature or accessory that only comes with the top-of-the-line brand of people. It’s an automatic alarm that comes with every ‘make and model’ of the human being. All human beings are instilled with the natural knowledge of God’s law. “...they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them” (Romans 2:15). Needless to say, this truth overrides the denials of postmodernism, that man is the sole creator of his subjective right and wrong. The conscience nevertheless bears witness and accuses, and for this reason, the postmodern must struggle with the guilt over the wrongs he has committed.

To add insult to injury, “Postmodernism has a pessimistic focus on human misery. It is the inevitable conclusion of existentialism, the denial of meaning, end, or reason to life.”¹⁹ People under the dark shadow of postmodernism ultimately have no real sense of self-worth. They feel unwanted and unneeded. Without the certainty that they belong to Someone, that they have been freed from their guilty conscience, and that they are loved, postmodern victims must suffer with the endless cycle of loneliness, insecurity, and despair.

The biblical picture of reconciliation gives that solid foundation on which to anchor. One comforting aspect of this picture is that it is by God’s own initiative. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son...” Why did God so love the world? Is there a logical explanation for what he did for the world? “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves; it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8,9). Words such as “grace,” “gift,” and “not by works” all demonstrate that God’s plan and work of salvation in no way depend on man’s worthiness or inherent goodness.

Certainly man has no inherent goodness or worthiness. By nature man is “sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me” (Psalm 51:5). Postmodernism cynically concedes that man is worthless and evil, but also that he is without any solution or hope for salvation. In Genesis 1:26 God announces his crowning work, “Let us make man in our image...” The creation of man in God’s image demonstrates how much God valued him right from the beginning. Even more important and evident of man’s value is the fact that God planned for a Savior from sin, showing his love for fallen sinners. God’s love is unexplainable; it surpasses all understanding. By his own initiative, God chose to love us.

He showed this love by sending his Son to be our Savior from sin, even though we did not deserve it. “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). The fact that Christ lived a perfect and holy life in our place, and then had to die as an innocent man, does not satisfy our logic either. Yet this is the way God wanted to demonstrate his love to all men. 2 Peter 2:1 speaks of false prophets who blaspheme and deny the Lord, yet the passage states that God ‘bought’ them as well.

¹⁹ Kelm, 113.

This idea of ‘buying back’ and ‘redeeming’ is also a key picture in reconciliation. Christ redeemed mankind from sin and eternal death, and because of this there is reconciliation between the almighty, holy God and sinful mankind. This work of redemption is described in 1 Peter 2:24, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.”

What an amazing truth to be able to hold on to! No longer must the world suffer the mortal wound inflicted by the Fall. Through faith in Christ, we can take hold of a solid foundation of truth. That truth is revealed in Romans 5:10, “For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!” Indeed, by Christ’s resurrection from the dead, which we celebrate at Easter, we are made certain of our new status and our new relationship with God.

Colossians 1:20 also affirms that Christ made “peace through his blood, shed on the cross.” Before Christ saved us, we were enemies of God, opposed to his will and held captive by our sins. Verse 22 continues to describe our new status, “holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.”

Because we are holy in God’s sight, no longer his enemies, we have a different relationship with God. When God created Adam and Eve, he created them perfect and holy, able to live according to his will completely. Not only were they able to obey God perfectly, but they even spent time with God on a personal level. They walked and talked with him in the garden, and they knew what his footsteps sounded like when he came to them. They were actual friends of God, able to spend time with him and be in his presence. Because of Christ, this relationship is restored to mankind once again. Not only do we have peace and communion with the Lord, but we have been made his own sons and daughters through faith. We are children of God, and he most certainly loves us.

This is the good news of comfort for lonely and insecure people in our postmodern society. Regardless of who you are or what you have done, in Christ you have identity. You are a beloved child of God, one for whom Christ has sacrificed his perfect and innocent blood. That’s how much you mean to God, as John 3:16 proclaims. In Christ, you have a sense of belonging, for we are all members of one body. We are brothers and sisters, joined by our common Christian faith. Contrary to the postmodern belief that diversity and separateness is essential to our existence, you do belong to the family of God. “...neither height nor depth, nor anything in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39).

The picture of reconciliation makes clear that all guilt and shame is lifted from the shoulders of man and is taken up by Christ, our Substitute. The denial of absolute truth by the postmodern is a feeble attempt to avoid facing up to their own wrongfulness and failure. The only solution to this sense of guilt and shame is in Christ. Through faith in Christ’s saving work, we receive the comfort and forgiveness of all our wrongs, past, present, and future.

To the postmodern, absolute truth is the very thing which convicts and condemns them, and so they quickly cast it aside. To the Christian, there is only one absolute truth, God’s Word, which is also the only thing that forgives, comforts, and saves.

We believe that God's Word "makes sense for *us* but is also good news for *all*. It provides the fulfillment of the longings and aspirations of all peoples. It embodies *the* truth—the truth of and for all humankind."²⁰ This is the absolute and objective nature of the truth of God's Word.

As we go out and communicate this message of comfort to a postmodern world, we must accept the fact that it will be a gradual process. Spiritual growth is a life-long response to the Gospel, guided by the Law. This means continued nurturing and attention through the Word and sacraments, Bible classes and home visits, church picnics and softball games. "Let us not give up meeting together...but let us encourage one another" (Hebrews 10:25). Especially with adults who have been swamped by the sea of postmodern confusion, we must take care to be patient, to speak the truth in love. Expect to be shot down, but do not underestimate the power of God's law and gospel.

We have been taught to introduce the gospel message in a format known as "God's Great Exchange," which begins with illustrations and passages based on God's law and man's sinful condition. However, "if we don't agree on the problem Jesus addressed, the solution won't be comprehensible."²¹ Instead, it is helpful to start with 'the basics,' beginning with the creation, man's fall into sin and the resulting condemnation, and then Jesus' self-sacrificing work of reconciliation. This leads people to see that there are only two ways to view life: either man believes the illusion that he is in control of his life, or the truth that Christ is the King who shares his crown of glory with man.

Showing, not just telling, is fundamental to our evangelism in a postmodern world. This means there is a "need to demonstrate the claims of Christ by genuine love and moral integrity, in small enough settings that people can 'experience' the truth of Christianity before they must confront its truth claims cognitively...Love is the apologetic that is not merely argued, but felt, not merely heard, but also seen."²²

The postmodern world is a fertile ground for the gospel. People are seeking spirituality, albeit in the wrong place. They think that spirituality is something within them that happens because of what they do to be spiritual, as if it is a matter of works. We must begin by telling our postmodern audience that "spirituality begins with simple yet profound trust in Jesus."²³

The gospel message brings peace and forgiveness to the sin-sick heart. We pray that we may wisely and faithfully carry that gospel message into our postmodern society. It is filled with people searching for a sense of belonging and security; to know that their life does have a meaning and hope beyond the crashing waves of this world; to know that they are loved. What other message could fill this void and bring comfort to a dying world? We have that message. Let us go forward in Christ.

²⁰ Grenz, 165.

²¹ Kelm, 119.

²² Kelm, 120.

²³ Webber, 132.