



Christian Nurture in the Postmodern World¹

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We are entering a time in which fewer people will be persuaded by rational arguments. The way we once thought about things is steadily being replaced by new, postmodern, and more existential uses of the mind. As if logic and systematic reasoning are no longer useful, the emerging ways of thinking are almost impervious to approaches based on presuppositions about *truth* as a pre-existing set of facts and thoughts. All that's left of the very idea, *truth*, is one's own experience and the capability of communicating with others about one's experiences in ways that are faithful to one's own life story and respectful of the intersections and non-intersections of the story with the stories of others.

The condition that exists today and promises to dominate human philosophy and human interaction, at least in the Western world, in the years just ahead has been emerging for many years—since the beginnings of the disillusionments with science. People who have trusted reason and logic as the controlling processes of human understanding are bewildered by the realization that hardly anyone is listening to arguments, appeals, and invitations based upon the former foundations. Advertisers understand this situation, politicians understand it, and even journalists have learned to use it to their own competitive advantage.

Today—and likely more so tomorrow—there is very little persuasive leverage to be had in the assertions of superior truth. As if *truth* no longer matters, interpersonal influence and effective communication must now be based upon descriptions of personal experiences.

Pushing beyond Rationalism

No wonder that Don Carson has described the change as “The Gagging of God.”² The human understanding of God through *words*—from the Bible, social claims supposedly representing God, theological statements about God as self-evident assertions or as reasoned propositions, and God's *truth* as dogma—is rapidly becoming disconnected from the consciousness and attention of human beings. The metaphor of “gagging” is perhaps acceptable as a misplacement of the more obvious idea—the *deafening of humankind*.

Carson's conclusion about this present age is not the only way to assess postmodernism. There is at least one more eminently Christian way to look at it: faith in God that is based upon a stronger foundation than a list of *truth statements* is still here. What has changed is human confidence in rationalism and “facts” that are based in objective data. There are other ways to know, other epistemologies, grounds for truth other than verbal assertions and propositions. Classical Christian apologists are understandably disturbed by the very idea of subordinating *truth statements* to any “lesser” basis of knowing. Nevertheless, evidence is mounting that people are coming to Christ in substantial numbers on the basis of experiential and story-based interactions, discovering later the value of Scripture and doctrine. Is this sequence really new? Has it not always been this way?

More to the point, has the evident erosion of human faith in enlightenment, science, and rationalistic philosophy finally come to such a point that it is clear to most Christians, even the evangelizers, that people are *rarely argued* into Christian faith? The postmodern mind sees more in the encounters with the person of Christ, the experience of a walk with Christ, and the awareness of the

¹ Prepared for a presentation: China Graduate School of Theology, Hong Kong, June 3, 1998.

² Donald Carson. *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997)

Holy Spirit in one's life than in a textbook of systematic theology. What may yet be too hot to handle is the closely related conclusion that propositional and argumentative preaching itself relates more effectively to older believers than to the younger, growing Christians and to those who are only searching around the edges of experience with Christ.

The personalization of God's reconciling work is evident in Christ. He is not an argument, an assertion, a dogma, or a creed. He is the living God. This eternal truth is experiential. Yes, we know it as information from the statements in a book, but if that book and those statements were not attested through living experiences and in the on-going stories of the saints, present and past, the Gospel would have little vitality and relevancy—or appeal—to today's humanity.

The simple phrases of an almost forgotten Gospel song seem strangely experiential:

*He walks with me and he talks with me, and he tells me I am his own,
And the joy we share as we tarry there, none other has ever known.*³

The reflection of the incarnate Word of God anticipates the fulfillment of Christian philosophy's return to experience, life-walk, and embrace of knowing through doing and being, accompanied by a highly personal involvement with the person of Christ. Was this song ahead of its time? Its soft romanticism makes it unlikely to regain popularity amidst today's harsh encounters, but the idea is there. The reality of the Gospel is known experientially through the walk of faith.

The postmodern controversy and re-thinking of theology may lead toward a house-cleaning of dusty corners of the house of Christian presuppositions and assumptions. Following is a list of assumptions that the postmodern perspective challenges Christians to revise or replace:

1. God is best represented by *statements* about the character and actions of God.
2. God is more or less important in a person's life depending on the extent of information (propositional truth) about God that the person possesses.
3. Experience is an unreliable source of truth; experience must always be tempered or interpreted by theological presuppositions, systematically derived.
4. Truth about God exists apart from the truth-bearer; its veracity and worth are attested to by Scriptural statements rather than by any living witness.



Each of these assumptions contributes to a very weak and untimely grasp of God. Any god that can be "gagged," or as in an earlier fallacy, a god who is *dead*, is hardly any god at all.

Something is very surely wrong with this specter of postmodern thought as being a fundamental threat to God:

I am the way and the truth and the life.

No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:6)

Jesus' claim of uniqueness is not blunted by the increased emphasis on experience over against dogma and creed. The one does not cancel the other, but the priorities are shifting.

How did all this Change Happen?

To understand the modern-to-postmodern transition which is affecting much of today's world, it is useful to understand how these words "*modern*" and "*postmodern*" are being used. First, theological readers must be reminded that the distinction is not the same as in the older and once popular distinction between theological and ecclesiastical *modernism* and *liberalism* in which the root word *modern* was the contrast to conservative, Biblical, and fundamentalist. In philosophical categories, the word *modern* denotes the influences of philosophical determinism, and especially of empirical science, on human reasoning. At the heart of the idea is the assertion that anything *real* can

³ C. Austin Miles. "I Come to the Garden Alone." (1912)

be empirically discerned, seen, touched, heard, smelled or tasted. And most especially, things that are the most real, the most valuable in human experience and control of one's life and environment can be counted and classified!

Following are four of the foundational assumptions of modernism:

1. The universe is mechanistic

Mathematics and science explain and predict. One *knows* in order to control. If knowledge is the accumulated lore of an objective universe, then science is the process of becoming ultimately knowledgeable. Facts, codified information, are the building blocks of education and of the well-ordered mind. "Well-ordered" thinking requires acceptance of the presuppositions that the universe is complete within itself and requires no explanations of origins, purpose, shaping, or external authority.

2. Objective, dispassionate, and separated (distances and aloof) observation is the best way to discover, learn, and know.

This presumption is grounded in scientific methodology. The scientist knows through observations which are subsequently tested in controlled experiments. Until the experiments have tested hypotheses, there can be little, if any, confidence in what one thinks that experience has taught.

3. Truth is propositional.

Truth comes about, as a grand consensus develops, from shared observations. The consensus is not based upon eternal values or transmitted virtues. Instead, it is built through reason and deliberation, always holding to the rules of logic, rationality, objectivity, and science.

4. Knowing is by reason.

The cornerstone of human understanding is the human mind, capable of great achievements through disciplines of thought and reason. The basis of reason has commonalities that come from the psycho-genetic foundations of human consciousness. "I think, therefore I am," as Descartes proclaimed.

Yes, these are the foundations of the *modern* era which postmodernism is pushing aside. It seems odd that Christians are not rushing to join in the pushing efforts! These four foundations above claim no consensus with Christian thought.

The Foundations of Postmodernism

Postmodernism is not a return to God after this infatuation with science and self-sufficient human reason. Human history is made of darker stuff. The foundations of postmodern thinking are, indeed, a reaction against modern philosophy, but the reaction is on rather special grounds:

1. Relativity undermines positivism and challenges all mechanistic axioms. Ironically, twentieth century advancements in science provided one of the key pieces of the loss of confidence in the mechanistic universe. Albert Einstein's physics and astronomy could not be confined to the narrow modern notions of deterministic mathematics and science; he found enough to overthrow the previously firm, clear, and safe predictions about the "mechanistic universe." Thus, from within the heart of science, science was displaced. If time and space are relative matters, as Einstein demonstrated, what is *not* relative? From then, on, "It depends," became an accepted answer to almost everything, and the modern era began to crumble.
2. Learning is best understood as "incarnational inquiry" in which the learner enters into an active transformational process. Intimacy, personhood, and subjectivity, far from being denied or avoided, are brought fully into the process. The idea of learning, then, is an interaction of one's own flow of life (one's *story*) and the flow of life which is any other experience or perspective, whether history, nature, arts, or theology. Nothing is learned

in isolation. Everything one knows is known in some sorts of combinations with all other matters of one's consciousness.

Patrick Slattery sums up the key ideas about learning in this way:

“[Postmodern theologians’ and educators’ ideas about education] flow out of the tradition of ‘problem-posing’ pedagogy established in Latin America by the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, who viewed the problems of education as inseparable from political, social, and economic problems.”⁴

Note: *In matters of learning, as in many other facets of human experience, the postmodernist is busy breaking down walls of artificial and unnecessary separation.*

3. Truth is relational. Nothing is true in isolation from other truth. Things must be seen and appreciated in their ecology—their total relationship to other facets of life and experience. Nothing is true as a self-standing, self-defined statement. Indeed, axioms in science and dogma in theology are weak and non-generative when the pieces of alleged truth stand as isolated statements, depending on assertive credibility and the predispositions of the hearer as their basis for believability.
4. Knowing is by experience. John Dewey’s summative definition of learning as “re-organizing experience” captures the postmodern view of knowledge. The experience is foundational, and expanding Meanings and reflections turn the experience into knowledge. One does not get knowledge as one would get a sack of flour. It is not a commodity. It is a synthesis of what one brings to a situation from past and current involvement in the action, doing, reflecting, judging, and valuing of life—a passage.

Education starts with the learner’s story and then weaves that story into larger perspectives through encounters with others. Here is the conclusion of all of this for the postmodern educator:

Implications for Christian Evangelization and Nurture

Christian nurture, especially the procedures and techniques that are used to facilitate the development of the Christian’s spiritual essence, is also changing. Just as evangelization through apologetics and dogma is becoming less effective, Christian nurture and education in the ways of the faith are in need of different presuppositions. Again, we hear the words of Christ offering his story as the interweaving with our story as the access to God. Not so much claiming a creed as walking in a willingly shared experience: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

The need is less for a new strategy or a conceptual reformation than it is for taking more seriously the keys to the Christian mission that we have known all along. Consider the following statements about bringing people into the two facets of Christian development described in the “Great Commission” (Matthew 28: 19-20). From the full meaning of each of these, baptizing, and teaching people to obey the teachings of Christ, there are rich implications for experiences that will fulfill to purposes of evangelization, Christian education, and lifelong learning all across the Church:

1. Coming to Christ is a two-way process of building a relationship. This relationship, seen in the Biblical examples and in the experiences of one’s own walk with Christ, provides a substantial foundation for Christian evangelization and nurture.
2. Christ put himself in places where encounters were natural and tended to encourage sharing one’s story. A classical illustration is at the edge of the well of Sychar (John 4).
3. Jesus was careful not to change the subject of conversation. When people came to him, he stayed with their initiatives in the interaction.

⁴ Patrick Slattery. *Curriculum Development in the Postmodern Era*. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995) p. 70

4. Jesus interacted with personal warmth, gently, often firmly, encouraging rather than discouraging whenever possible, and committing himself to the long-term implications of the relationship.
5. Jesus brought Scripture to bear when appropriate and edifying, but always in expanding, broadening applications, avoiding legalistic emphases and continuously illustrating his claim that he came to “*fulfill* the law and the prophets” (Matthew 5:17) which he did by helping people think deeper than the “letter of the law,” to get down to the underlying principles. Even in large-group situations, he did this by encouraging new thinking.

Will Postmodernism Hurt the Cause of Christ?

The answer to this question depends largely on how carefully we handle human relationships while attempting to share our stories. The Apostle Paul provided some examples which are more parallel with our own stories. The Apostle Paul, especially in his remarkable competencies in handling cultural variability, provided us an example of the mindset needed to make the change into a postmodern era.

The answer to postmodernism is not a soft and hushed orthodoxy through which Christians would presume to remain unchanged themselves while tolerating postmodern dialogues in order to await the right point-of-entry for the Gospel. Nor will a boisterous and peevish “battle for *pre*-postmodernism” restore the presumed ascendancy of argumentative evangelism.

The problem is to avoid confrontation and offensive outreach while asserting the place of Jesus as a fundamental reality in one’s own life story. Postmodern dialogue may provide occasions for a more open hearing of one’s own encounter with Christ than we are accustomed to. Postmodern thinking generally takes a more open and accepting posture toward even religious propositions. Never forget, it has been *modern* thinking which has postured itself in deliberate defiance of the Bible. We may find ourselves being given more opportunities to give account of our stories of encounters with Christ, just as Paul was with the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17:16-23).

Christians today need Paul’s more laid-back flexibility in order to cope effectively within a postmodern society. Paul did not appeal to his “rights” as a habit of confrontation (1 Corinthians 9: 1-13), nor did he stay within a narrow definition of his persona. He was adaptable and accepting:

To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law . . . to those not having the law I became like one not having the law . . . so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak, I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel that I may share in its blessings. (1 Corinthians 9: 20-23)

No matter what else may happen, there are some hard issues remaining. Paul’s emphasis on the singularity of the revealed Gospel stands as a reminder that postmodern thinking must ultimately be brought to ground in effective, faithful dialogue with God himself, through his people, and through his Word. Here is the major distinctive of Christian nurture: to develop in relationship to Christ.

We are the people of the Word.

We are the people of the Book.

We are the people of God.

Our task is to invite, encourage, nurture, and exalt godliness.