

Apologetics in a Postmodern World

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Intro

*“Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it.
The river was cut by the world's great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time.
On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops.
Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs.
I am haunted by waters.”*

– Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It*

Language ... Words ... Meaning. At the dawn of time—before the rocks—when the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters, the Lord *spoke* into the void and called everything into existence. Then he *spoke* to his Triune-self to verbalize his gracious intent to create the crown of his creation: “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness ...”¹ In the very next *words* uttered by the Creator, he blessed the man and the woman and commanded them to “fill the earth and subdue it.” After the first couple disobeyed God’s *word* and brought sin and death upon the world, the Lord God immediately *promised* to send the Offspring of the women to crush the serpent’s head.

Millenia later the Offspring was born and spoke *words* that were from God himself and imparted eternal life to those who accepted them.² In some of the very last *words* recorded by the Apostle John, the one who crushed Satan’s head and rose from the dead, promises, “Yes, I am coming soon.”³ From the first chapter of Holy Scripture to the very last, God’s *Word* proclaims his will for mankind and reveals his loving heart for humanity. There is a river running through it all. The *words* of God are the critical link, the crucial connection, the basis for a relationship between the holy and transcendent God and his earthly and sinful creatures. They create faith, forgive sins, and comfort the dying.

For this reason, it shouldn’t surprise us that the Word has always been under attack in one way or another. The philosophy of postmodernism challenges the very idea that words and language are able to convey meaning and calls into question the fundamental assumptions of reason and logic. This essay will begin by 1) offering a few definitions of **postmodernism** and tracing how it sprouted from modernism in America; 2) providing a brief overview of its **philosophical genealogy**; 3) looking at ways that this philosophy has affected our world and **influenced our culture**; and finally, 4) suggesting a few possible **approaches to apologetics** in a postmodern world.

¹ Genesis 1:26a (NIV)

² John 14:49

³ Revelation 22:20b

Postmodernism

A Definition

For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief (Ecclesiastes 1:18).

*The system only dreams in total darkness... Why are you hiding from me?*⁴

What is postmodernism? You've probably heard the term thrown around so often that it's hard not to roll your eyes when you hear it. In its literal sense, "postmodern" is simply that which comes "after modernism." However, the word has been applied in so many different areas that it has become almost impossible to define.⁵ The French philosopher, Jean-Francois Lyotard, provided what has become a classic definition of postmodernism. He writes, "Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives."⁶ In other words, postmodernism is a distrust or suspicion toward any overarching explanatory story, such as science, political ideologies, religion, philosophy, and even language and reason itself. Some postmodernists would even go so far as to say that reason is just rhetoric in disguise. It is a disenchantment with the idea that there is one grand narrative that ties everything together and can be used to help us make sense of the world.⁷ The following Wikipedia entry does an excellent job of expanding this definition (using a definition from Wikipedia also serves as an example of the postmodern confidence in communal and collaborative truth):⁸ "Postmodernism is an intellectual stance or a mode of discourse that rejects the possibility of reliable knowledge, denies the existence of a universal, stable reality, and frames aesthetics and beauty as arbitrary and subjective."⁹ This definition shows that postmodernism is concerned primarily with how we know what we know.¹⁰

Postmodernism is not a set of systematic principles and beliefs that its adherents subscribe to. Instead it is more of a philosophical *movement, mood, or ethos*. Myron Penner explains, "Postmodernity is a condition, or a set of attitudes, dispositions, and practices, that is aware of itself as modern and aware that

⁴ "The System only Dreams in Total Darkness," by Aaron Dessner, Matt Berninger, and Bryce Dessner on The National, *Sleep Well Beast*, 4AD, May 11, 2017.

⁵ Ironically, the difficulty in defining "postmodernism" is itself an example of one the philosophy's main emphases: the indeterminacy of meaning

⁶ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, quotation from the English translation by Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1984)

⁷ Another French philosopher named Jean, Jean Baudrillard, describes how this plays out in society: Postmodernity "is said to be a culture of fragmentary sensations, eclectic nostalgia, disposable simulacra⁷, and promiscuous superficiality, in which the traditionally valued qualities of depth, coherence, meaning, originality, and authenticity are evacuated or dissolved amid the random swirl of empty signals." Quoted in the Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms, (Oxford University Press, 2015), 288.

⁸ Many modernists despise Wikipedia because it actually provides good and reliable information. In their minds, definitions are supposed to come from a stuffy lexicographer working in a basement in Oxford, not from common people (hoi polio) coming together on a wiki stored on the world wide web.

⁹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postmodernism>

¹⁰ Epistemological concerns

modernity's claims to rational superiority are deeply problematic."¹¹ For example, I am quite aware that it is a very modern approach to begin a paper on postmodernism by trying to describe it with formal definitions. At the same time, it is very postmodern to recognize that any definition I provide will fall short of describing exactly what postmodernism is. It is also very postmodern to comment about this in a self-conscious way in an essay.¹²

While some would argue that the persuasive power of postmodernism began to wane in the nineties and died when two airplanes crashed into the twin towers on September 11, 2001, rumors of its death seem greatly exaggerated. Even if postmodernism itself is on its way out, we are still living with its effects. The Oxford English Dictionaries chose "post-truth" as their 2016 word of the year reflecting the current political climate with its "fake-news," "alternative facts," and the never-ending debate over topics like immigration policy, climate change, and gender labels. Whether postmodernism is simply a late form of modernism, or an entirely new movement is yet to be seen. In either case, it is helpful to look at how postmodernism formed out of, or as a reaction to, modernism.

A Reaction to Modernism

The spirit of modernism was conceived in the belly of the Enlightenment and nurtured on the optimism of scientific advancement. The motto of the Enlightenment was "Have courage to use your own reason." Reason unfettered from tradition, religion, and economic pressures promised to solve many of the age-old problems of humanity. Throughout the modern era there was this belief that the mind had unfiltered access to the material world, and that the world was rationally intelligible, and that humans could use reason and science to predict, control, and even manipulate the natural world. The British historian, Arnold Toynbee (1889-1975), famously commented, "We expected that life would become more rational, humane...we expected that progress of science and technology would make mankind rich...the course was set for an earthly paradise."¹³ While this might sound like little more than Pollyannaish naivete, when Toynbee wrote these words, people really believed that "nothing's gonna stop us now."¹⁴ After all, medical technology and vaccines treated and eliminated many terrible diseases (at least for those in the industrialized world), people were living more comfortable lives, and at the dawn of the 19th Century there had been no major wars between world powers for almost a hundred years.

Until...there was. By 1914 the Great War had taken the lives of millions of people in the most gruesome ways imaginable. It's been said that the age of hope died in the trenches of Europe. Less than 20 years later, another war engulfed the world, and it introduced an unthinkable type of hatred fueled by an ideology rooted in modernist principles. The racism that drove this hatred killed over 6 million in the

¹¹ Myron Bradley Penner, *The End of Apologetics: Christian Witness in a Postmodern Context*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), Kindle Loc 290.

¹² Postmodernism loves the "meta," which is a postmodern term for the playground where the author is self-referential, self-conscious, and self-parodying. It draws attention to the fact there is always a layer of commentary and analysis going on.

¹³ Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History, Volume 5*, (Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 43.

¹⁴ Starship, "Nothing's Going to Stop Us Now," *No Protection, RCA Records 1987*. Music video contains scenes from the movie "Mannequin" in a which a young artist makes a plastic model so beautiful that he falls in love with it. Not sure if this was intentionally postmodern, but its an example of simulacra. See also the movie, *Her*.

Holocaust. This war was capped off by the introduction of the atomic bomb (an invention of modern science) which annihilated millions of people with the push of a button.

It took a while for all of this to sink in, and it didn't immediately extinguish the optimism in America. After all, the West had come together to defeat a clear and definable evil. It is understandable that there was a reason to celebrate. Furthermore, technology continued to make life more comfortable. Computers less powerful than the one in your pocket may have taken up entire rooms, but they promised a future where mathematical exactness could be applied to real life problems. Advances in science and medicine along with the spread of democracy led many to envision a society where peace would be widespread and life expectancy would continue to push the limits of what had previously been considered possible. In a paper delivered to a pastor's conference, Steven Degner gave a personal perspective: "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."¹⁵ It seemed that things were good and only going to get better.

Then another war in Vietnam divided our nation. A new generation grew tired of the capitalistic dream to work hard and consume more. Instead they "tuned in and dropped out." The nuclear threat once again came to the surface as tensions rose between the US and the Soviet Union. Beneath the veneer of progress and hope, there was a growing sentiment of fear and pessimism.

It's one of the few recurring dreams I had as a child. A little boy, maybe 4 or 5, is riding his red Radio Flyer tricycle across the wooden floor of a huge gymnasium. It's empty. There is the distinctive sound of his wheels rotating on a hollow wooden floor and echoing off the walls along with the soft jingle of his handlebar bell. He is singing with a soft and high-pitched whisper, "*Hush, little baby, don't say a word...*" The boy is so small, so tender, so content. Then there is a loud noise. The gym implodes and explodes at the same time. Everything is white hot and burning – a nuclear bomb.

Even though I had a peaceful and happy childhood, this dream reveals a disturbing undercurrent I had picked up in the world around me. This was the time of the "Second Cold War" (1975-1985). At school during the day, children were taught how to neatly tuck their heads under their desks in case of a nuclear attack (as if the Formica top and aluminum shell would somehow protect) and at night families sat down with a bowl of popcorn and watched the apocalyptic made-for-TV-movie, *The Day After*¹⁶, which portrayed a nuclear holocaust in Kansas and Missouri. Beneath the surface of the modernist dream, there was a suspicion that all of mankind's greatest achievements might lead to total annihilation.

In the scientific world the revolution that had taken place in physics in the early 20th century with special relativity, general relativity, and quantum mechanics rocked the foundations of science itself. Many began to wonder whether the universe could still be viewed as a complicated machine whose workings were uniform and predictable. The age-old question of the relationship between the mind and the world (matter) once again rose to the surface. Philosophy turned its focus almost entirely to epistemological questions.¹⁷ How do we know what we know? What role does our mind play in interpreting the sensory

¹⁵ Steven Degner, "Not Ashamed of the Gospel in a Postmodern Age," WLS essay file: <http://wlsessays.net/handle/123456789/1157>

¹⁶ *The Day After*, (ABC television network, 1983)

¹⁷ In philosophy, epistemology is the study of how we know what we know and what we can really know.

data in the world around us? What are the limits to our knowing? Is it possible to stand in a neutral place of unbiased surveillance with the “doors of perception cleansed”¹⁸ and see the world as it really is? The stage was set for postmodern theory to make inroads into popular American culture/consciousness. However, before we go any further, it may be helpful to back up and look at the origins of this philosophy.

Philosophical Genealogy

Conceived in Nihilism

When I applied my mind to know wisdom and to observe the labor that is done on earth—people getting no sleep day or night – then I saw all that God has done. No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all their efforts to search it out, no one can discover its meaning. Even if the wise claim they know, they cannot really comprehend it (Ecclesiastes 8:16-17).

The seeds of postmodern philosophy had already been planted in the world of academia about a hundred years before Americans were watching movies about nuclear annihilation in middle America. The brilliant German philosopher and son of a Lutheran pastor, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), is famously remembered for announcing that “God is dead!” This announcement seems to have been more of an acknowledgement of the way the post-Enlightenment world had been operating and less of a triumphant proclamation. Nietzsche was like the passenger on an airplane who announced to the rest of the passengers that the pilot had been pushed out of the cockpit - this thing is going down! In a famous passage from *The Gay Science*, his fictional madman lights a lantern in the morning and walks into the marketplace. After being laughed at for asking where God was, the madman announces,

God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, murderers of all murderers, console ourselves? That which was the holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet possessed has bled to death under our knives. Who will wipe this blood off us? With what water could we purify ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we need to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we not ourselves become gods simply to be worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed; and whosoever shall be born after us — for the sake of this deed he shall be part of a higher history than all history hitherto.”¹⁹

Sadly, even though Nietzsche himself was an atheist, he understood that the consequences of trying to get rid of God (The Transcendent Center) had changed the Western world and created an absence that would be nearly impossible to fill. “Must we not ourselves become gods simply to be worthy of it?” If God had been removed from the picture, something, or someone, had to replace him. Later, in his writings Nietzsche would propose that humans themselves (*Übermensch*) fill the void. Whether they were influenced by the German philosopher or not,²⁰ in the years following his death, totalitarian regimes and

¹⁸ This phrase has an interesting history. First used by William Blake in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, then borrowed as a title by Aldous Huxley for this 1954 book on his psychedelic experience while taking peyote. This is where Jim Morrison got the name for his band, “The Doors.”

¹⁹ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (Section 125, The Madman):

²⁰ This is a topic of much scholarly debate.

ideological replacements for religion like communism and fascism put millions under their power. “Who will wipe this blood off us? With what water could we purify ourselves?”

Nietzsche realized that once the center and force of all unity is removed, things spin out of control. More recently, in his book *Atheist Delusions*, which is a brilliant response to some of the anti-Christian charges of the New Atheists,²¹ David Bentley Hart drives home the stark reality of what getting rid of Christ means for the world:

When, therefore, Christianity departs, what is left behind? It may be that Christianity is the midwife of nihilism precisely because, in rejecting it, a people necessarily rejects everything except the bare horizon of the undetermined will. No other god can now be found. The story of the crucified God took everything to itself, and so—in departing—takes everything with it: habits of reverence and restraint, awe, the command of the Good within us. Only the will persists, set before the abyss of limitless possibility, seeking its way—or forging its way—in the dark. What, though, arises from such a condition?²²

What arises from such a condition? In the first chapter of his letter to the Romans the Apostle Paul answers this question: people exchange the truth of God for a lie and worship created things instead of the Creator. Whether that created thing is reason or a house on the lake, it really doesn’t matter. When people reject God and ignore his natural law, he gives them over to their own depraved minds, which become the source of their own destruction.

After Nietzsche, and perhaps as a result of his searing criticism of previous philosophical systems, philosophy took what has been called the “linguistic turn.” Instead of focusing on big questions about existence, essence, and ethics, attention turned to the relationship between philosophy and *language*. The central question became, what role does language have in our perception of reality? Analytical philosophy²³ with logical positivists like Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein (his early work) sought to create a logically pure language to help in the task of logic and science, while continental philosophy²⁴ turned toward structuralism. Both movements had the effect of ripping language away from the speaker/author and placing it on the laboratory table. Instead of being viewed as a communicative

²¹ A group of outspoken atheists represented by the “Four Horsemen” (Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett). Hitchens died in December of 2011.

²² David Bentley Hart, *Atheistic Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2009), 230.

²³ “Analytic” philosophy describes a style of doing philosophy, not a philosophical program or a set of substantive views. Analytic philosophers, crudely speaking, aim for argumentative clarity and precision; draw freely on the tools of logic; and often identify, professionally and intellectually, more closely with the sciences and mathematics, than with the humanities.
<https://web.archive.org/web/20061115002425/https://www.philosophicalgourmet.com/analytic.asp>

²⁴ “Continental” philosophy, by contrast, demarcates a group of French and German philosophers of the 19th and 20th centuries. Continental philosophy is sometimes distinguished by its style (more literary, less analytical, less reliance on formal logic), its concerns (more interested in actual political and cultural issues and, loosely speaking, the human situation and its “meaning”), and some of its substantive commitments (more self-conscious about the relation of philosophy to its historical situation).
<https://web.archive.org/web/20061115002425/https://www.philosophicalgourmet.com/analytic.asp>

action tied up with the speaker/author, language was now viewed as more of a mathematical formula to be pulled apart by scientists, logicians, and philosophers.

Born Out of Structuralism

Structuralists, as the name implies, began by looking at the underlying structure beneath language. Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), believed that language was simply a complex system of signs and symbols.²⁵ Words consisted of a “signified” (the concept behind a sign) and the “signifier” (the letters d-o-g, for example) which point to the signified (concept). Saussure went on to argue that there is nothing inherently special about the word “dog” (signifier) that connects it with the concept of a dog (signified). The relationship is completely arbitrary. The conceptual dog could just as easily be signified by the letters c-a-t (except then, people would prefer cats over dogs!).

For the structuralist, meaning is not found in the connection between signs and what they represent, but in the relationship between signs within a system of language.²⁶ In other words, language does not directly correspond to something “out there” but to other signs within the system. Furthermore, structuralists taught that language does not have its origin in the author, rather authors merely inhabit pre-existing structures (language systems). They operate in a web of language and culture. As an illustration, one could think of a structuralist like a scientist observing a baby born into a room full of Legos® (language). As the baby grows older, he simply organizes and rearranges the blocks to express his creativity. The structuralist watches through one-sided glass to analyze and compare the different objects (structures) built by the child. He then compares them with those of other children he has observed to determine an underlying meaning in the different structures. While structuralism began by analyzing language, its principles were applied across a broad range of subjects (primarily in areas studying culture, human behavior, and psychology) in the first half of the 20th century.

Two Influential Postmodern Fathers

Derrida - Deconstructionism

In 1966 the controversial and complicated philosopher, Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) was invited to present a paper on structuralism at John Hopkin’s University. However, instead of reinforcing the accepted notion that there were underlying structures that reveal meaning, he challenged the basic assumptions of structuralism by showing that its conclusions too were based on an underlying structure—an imaginary fixed center of meaning. To go back to the Lego® analogy, Derrida would have argued that the scientists who were observing and interpreting the child’s Lego® creations were themselves using a structure to observe and determine what the child’s Lego® buildings meant. They were basing their method on the assumption that there was an abstract, fixed, *universal* structure that lies beneath language systems.

Like the structuralists, Derrida believed that language was simply a system of signs and that there was no necessary connection between our words and the world out there. A text is just a series of signs that point to other signs that point to other signs *ad infinitum*. At the risk of oversimplifying, here’s an example: If

²⁵ The study of this sign process is called “semiotics.”

²⁶ Richard Rorty further explains, “Words have meaning only because of contrast-effects with other words...no word can acquire meaning in the way in which philosophers from Aristotle to Bertrand Russell have hoped it might—by being the unmediated expression of something non-linguistic (e.g., an emotion, a sense-datum, a physical object, an idea, a Platonic Form)”. From “Deconstructionist Theory,” Stanford Presidential Lectures and Symposia in the Humanities and Arts. 1995. Retrieved 8 September 2017.

you were to look up the the meaning of the word “dog” in a dictionary you would find other signs like “domesticated,” “carnivorous,” and “mammal” used to define it. You could look those words (signs) up in the dictionary, and they would just point to other signs. Signs just generate more signs. The meaning is never “there.” For Derrida, we live and move and have our being in (con)text. What a reader finds in a text depends on what aims, categories, perspectives one brings to it. “A writer does not wield language; he is subsumed in it. Language speaks us; writing writes [us]; etc.”²⁷ Every reader, writer, and speaker is caught in a web of inescapable (con)text spun by language, culture, history, and the social world. There is no meaning in the text. Meaning is just a mirage that continually disappears into the distance.

Derrida proclaimed that it was necessary to deconstruct texts to expose hidden assumptions and show how unstable a text’s purported significance is. This wasn’t just a way to distract himself before HGTV and Netflix. He saw deconstruction as a justice project. The goal of deconstructing a text was to reveal the language games and undermine the consolidation of power by those who produced it. For an obvious example, consider the current discussion on illegal immigration. A deconstructionist may reveal how the very language a person uses to speak about this issue, whether intentional or not, influences how we think about it. Were those arrested in Mississippi “illegal immigrants” or “asylum seekers?” What about the language used to describe the “other side?”²⁸ Did the US immigration officials “arrest” 680 illegal immigrants, or did they “raid” the workplace of hundreds of asylum seekers? For Derrida and other postmodern justice warriors, the way to overcome repression is to unmask the hidden power plays in language, social structures, education, art, and really every hierarchy.

Foucault - Unmasking Power

Michel Foucault (1926-1984), has been called the high priest of political postmodernism²⁹ and his thought has had an enduring effect on our culture. For Derrida everything was text. For Foucault everything was power. Foucault was a critic of the human sciences (especially, psychology and penology) and how these disciplines constructed a system in which they defined what it meant to be “abnormal” (deviant) and then put people into this category to construct a “normalizing” picture of what it means to be human.³⁰ According to Foucault, this can be seen in the way that society labels ‘madmen’ and ‘criminals’ and then segregates them to mental hospitals and prisons. Applied to society this can be seen throughout history as one class projects their “undesirable characteristics” on another (the marginalized) in order to segregate, manipulate, and control. What are the “undesirable characteristics?” Foucault would argue that they are simply the characteristics those who control the narrative convince us are undesirable.

Power is not simply in the hands of a king who issues authoritative decrees from his throne. Instead, Foucault sees power as capillary, as an unstable network flowing out from all directions at once. We are all exerting power over everyone else around us every single day. In a recent episode of *Philosophize This!* Stephen West explained,

²⁷ “David Foster Wallace Describes Poststructuralism”. Biblioklept. Retrieved 2017-05-25.

²⁸ Notice how even the use of the words “other side” here paints this as a hostile situation between opposing parties.

²⁹ Lawrence Cahoon, “Lecture 31: The Challenge of Postmodernism,” in Great Courses: The Modern Intellectual Tradition: From Descartes to Derrida, Audible books (The Thinking Company, 2010), 13:45 min.

³⁰ Cahoon, “The Modern Intellectual Tradition: From Descartes to Derrida,” Lecture 31: 10:40 min.

Power is everywhere, to Foucault...but to most people power is invisible. The ability for this power system to change your behavior has become so subtle, the micro tactics of power have become so normalized in your world that most people don't even notice themselves gradually being shaped into a mold of normalcy like a soldier in boot camp...or like a prisoner in a cell... Through constant surveillance, cultural norms, advertisements, persuasion, suggestion, encouragement and discouragement of certain behaviors we approve or disapprove of, even down to the things you like and share on Facebook, you are constantly defining, redefining and reinforcing the standard of what is normal and what is abnormal. Who should be accepted and listened to and who should be silenced or considered not worthy of being taken seriously. Power, in this way, is incredibly diffuse.³¹

Foucault goes so far as to say that labeling and categorizing is itself an “act of violence” used to suppress and marginalize. He was also an outspoken critic of “science” and believed that its pronouncements and prescriptions were just a subtle way of controlling people. In fact, Foucault always referred to “knowledge” as “power-knowledge” to show that power is based on knowledge and makes use of knowledge (“truth”) for its own purposes. This strain of postmodernism has inspired university professors and social justice warriors who influence public and political life in America and can be seen in the political correctness movement, identity politics, gender theory, transgenderism, radical feminism, the war against patriarchy, and ultimately, the elevation of diversity as the highest moral good.

So, philosophy ends up deconstructing itself. “The revolution eats its children. Or maybe to put it in a better way, the children eat the revolution.”³² The end run of unfettered reason is confusion. It is reason turned back on itself to reveal its inadequacy. Derrida applied reason unabashedly and relentlessly to structuralism and its understanding of language and opined that without a transcendent ground for meaning (an Author), we are left with nothing but fragmentation, meaninglessness, absence, and ultimately isolation (death?). Foucault began where Derrida left off and revealed that after meaning is destabilized, all that's left is power. In the end neither modernism with its presuppositions of objective, universal, and neutral reason, nor postmodernism with its hidden claim of a God's eye view of things can provide a foundation for philosophies first principles. As Nietzsche announced so long ago, once God (Transcendent) is removed from the center, everything comes crashing to the ground.

Enter Soft Postmodernism

Some have labeled the deconstructive postmodernism of Derrida and Foucault as “cognitive nihilism.” They claim that its sole motive and objective is to destabilize and relativize truth. This extreme version of postmodernism, which some have labeled “hard postmodernism,” is what most people are familiar with; however, there are very few who hold to such an extreme form of postmodernism. The majority hold to a moderate position. In his book *Reformed and Always Reforming*, Roger Olson explains that this form of postmodernism found in the work of philosophers like Alastair MacIntyre

[He] does not deny ontological reality or objective truth but seeks to show that even reason always operates within a narrative context. In other words, knowledge may be relative even if truth is not...This is not relativism but recognition of the relativity of perspective inherent in all human thinking. All reasoning and judging takes place from within some local context shaped by

³¹ Stephen West, “Episode 123 – Michel Foucault pt. 3 – Power,” September 24, 2018, in *Philosophize This!*, podcast, <http://philosophizethis.org/category/episode/page/2/>

³² Paul Wendland, personal email to essayist, 3/29/19.

a narrative about reality and carried forward within a community of tradition created by that narrative.³³

The truth is out there, we just have difficulty apprehending it, because of our own situatedness. We are all influenced by our own specific backgrounds, communities, and traditions. We are familiar with Lutherans who interpret Scripture through the lens of the Lutheran Confessions. A soft postmodernist would say that we interpret everything through the lens of our “local context shaped by a narrative about reality.” So even within the postmodern movement there is a spectrum of belief regarding truth. On one side there are those who reject the idea of universal objective truth completely, and on the other you have those who simply believe that culture and context shade our view of the truth.

Influence on Culture

The Internet and Postmodernism

Information overload

It would be hard to overestimate how much the rapid expansion of the internet and proliferation of the smart phone has helped facilitate the acceptance of postmodern thought. I recently had a conversation with a young woman in her late 20’s about the topic of this paper. She believed that one of the reasons a postmodern view of truth is so easily accepted by people her age is simply because there is too much information readily available—it’s just too hard to get to the truth about anything. Even someone who hasn’t studied Derrida or Foucault, knows that there is a multiplicity of opinions about everything from vaccines to self-driving cars. How could anyone possibly sort through all the information on a topic like climate change and come to “the truth” about anything? This feeling is intensified when it comes to big questions like “God” and “religious belief.” Who should I listen to? Which websites, blogs, or YouTubers should I trust? For many, postmodernism is appealing because it’s just easier to let a plurality of truths stand than to endlessly search through all the information.³⁴

Encountering different worldviews

The internet has helped promote the spread of postmodernism in other ways as well. Just 30 years ago, many Americans rarely encountered someone with a different worldview. Now, daily, with a couple of clicks on their computers or a swipe of their phones, they are brought into contact with people from a plurality of cultures, religions, and belief systems (narratives). Most children have been exposed to objections to their faith before the 4th Grade.³⁵ A Christian kid in Kansas might be playing a video game and chatting with a Muslim boy in Indonesia. Even the kid looking for Christian videos or resources will come across vitriolic comments left by atheists. YouTube and other video services are replete with vloggers who have made it their life’s ambition to expose the “ridiculousness” of the Christian faith. We can be sure that if parents, pastors, and teachers are not addressing the questions, others will be. This is

³³ Roger Olson, *Reformed and Always Reforming*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007) Kindle location 2123.

³⁴ In addition, when it comes to postmodernism’s disparaging of meaning, people who spend more time texting than talking are acutely aware of how easily words can be taken out of context and misunderstood.

³⁵ This is somewhat anecdotal and based on a small sample (my family and friends).

just one of the reasons we need to incorporate apologetic training into our Elementary School and Sunday School curriculums. At the most basic level every confirmand should be able to think through and formulate a response to this question: with all of the other religions in the world, why do you follow Jesus and hold to his teachings above all else?³⁶

A Few Examples of Influence

Power hides behind “Truth”

High school history classes and those who study the humanities in college are taught that those who hold to capital “T” truth (a metanarrative) have been guilty of slavery, genocide, cultic brain washing, the oppression of women, and flying airplanes into tall buildings. These aren’t simply portrayed as “abuses” of truth, but as the natural result of holding to capital “T” truth. The message is implicit, and often explicit, in mainstream media: If you believe that you are right and everyone else is wrong, it’s only a matter of time before you use your truth to exert power to manipulate and oppress others.

Postmodernism teaches that the answer to the abuse of power is fragmentation. If power is divided, if multiple truth claims are allowed, if diversity is the norm, then no single group or individual will be able to consolidate power and use it to harm others. If we divide our government into three branches, then why not divide our truths? If there is no single metanarrative, there can be no single unstoppable abuse of power. So, people put “coexist” and “celebrate diversity” bumper stickers on their cars. This sentiment also lies behind the broad-based support of homosexuality and transgenderism. Again, postmodernists believe that if we allow more truths to coexist, there will be less chance that the majority will use power to oppress the marginalized. As misinformed as it may be, perhaps the new American motto has become: “more diversity = more peace!”

Tribalization, personal truth, and loneliness

Postmodernism teaches that truth is personal, subjective, and individual. The internet has not only connected people from diverse cultures around the world, it also allows people with likeminded interests or truths to congregate into their own virtual tribes online. The effect on society has been huge. People can immerse themselves in a virtual world that masks the real world, but also has a way of protecting them from the social consequences of their actions and numbing them to real-life relationships. Within these tribes people can exist in their own little echo chambers where they only hear what they want to hear and have discussions with people who already agree with them. In addition to this, search engines and social media platforms use complicated algorithms to make sure that we receive advertisements and friend suggestions that specifically fit our interests. It’s very easy for people to live in their own little bubble and then claim to be “triggered” when they encounter opposing viewpoints. This may also be why people seem to have great difficulty politely discussing issues with people outside their tribe.

Sadly, with this new “social” reorganization, people also have difficulty making connections and building relationships outside of their own group. It’s like they are driving down the interstate in their own little self-contained vehicles not really knowing where they are going. Occasionally, they might roll down their window and give a shout out to someone who is driving the same brand of car (shared interest group) but that’s about it. A recent headline on the satirical webzine, Babylon Bee, sits above a photo of a 20-something male smiling as he looks at his laptop reads, “Triumph: This Man Whittled His Friends List

³⁶ A simple answer is that Jesus claimed to be God and that he would die and rise again to forgive the sins of the world. The resurrection is proof that he did just that! No other religious leader can make such a claim.

Down To Only People He Agrees With And Now He's The Only One Left.”³⁷ This is the social consequence of making truth individual and personal. People have no way of connecting with others because they believe there is no deeper common denominator (transcendent) that ties them together.

How can anyone be happy or secure while believing personal love—love worthy of me—and personal existence itself are, objectively, illusions? Once you take away a loving God who graciously cares for his world and even gives his own Son to restore it to himself, you are left with emptiness. In *Atheist Delusions* David Bentley Hart brilliantly argues that when you remove God from the picture, you also remove self-worth, human value, freedom, and even a person’s significance in the world. How can I convince myself that I matter if I am just the product of a long line of evolutionary processes and unable to share meaning with those around me? Without shared meaning relationships become impossible. We need something more. We were created for something more, and without it, humans are ultimately empty and alone in the world.

A case study

One of the greatest American novelists of our generation, David Foster Wallace (DFW)³⁸ provides insight into the postmodern condition. Wallace became popular in mainstream culture on account of his commencement speech, *This is Water*, delivered to the 2005 class of Kenyon College, a powerful and candid speech about what it truly means to have a “Liberal Arts” education. His magnum opus, *Infinite Jest*,³⁹ while painstakingly tedious and graphic at times, is a sprawling novel that chronicles the search for meaning in a postmodern world. Quebecois radicals (known as the “Wheelchair Assassins”), various residents at a drug and alcohol recovery program, students at an elite tennis academy, and a dysfunctional family are all connected by a film called “Infinite Jest.” This film is so entertaining that its viewers cannot stop watching it and eventually die vegged out in front of the film. Amazingly, the novel was written in 1996 before this became a reality in the form of smartphones. In a *Christianity Today* article Alissa Wilkinson observes, “To Wallace, it [addiction] was the default mode of contemporary life: addiction to substances, to fame, to sex, to being liked, to mindless entertainment, to the sound of your own voice—

³⁷ <https://babylonbee.com/news/triumph-this-man-whittled-his-friends-list-down-to-only-people-he-agrees-with-and-now-hes-the-only-one-left>

³⁸ People have strong feelings about DFW. In a 2015 *Christianity Today* article entitled “Everybody Worships,” Alissa Wilkinson expresses her preconceived notions about the author: “For years I assumed he was an ironic, self-absorbed writer of novels too heavy to carry in one’s purse, an egocentric precocious brainiac entranced by his own awesomeness, beloved only of overeducated young men. After he hung himself in 2008, the Internet eulogized him as the voice of his generation, a prophet of postmodernity. He was all but canonized. He sounded awful.” Later Wilkinson came to appreciate DFW’s work and insight into the human condition. In the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* Steven Moore writes, “Wallace offers huge entertainment...So brilliant you need sunglasses to read it, but it has heart as well as a brain. *Infinite Jest* is both a vast, comic epic and a profound study of the postmodern condition.” – book jacket of *Infinite Jest*.

³⁹ *Infinite Jest* has been called the book that every pretentious white male owns but has never read, which is funny considering that we had a little underground *Infinite Jest* club in college (MLC). In 1997 in New Ulm, MN one could actually observe a handful of seniors walking around campus carrying large tattered books with duct-taped spines. Some of us even took a little road trip to get our books signed by Wallace at the *Hungry Mind* bookstore in Minneapolis. I remember asking him my pretentious question about how he knew so many foreign languages to be able to include them in his novel (I think I was secretly hoping DFW would ask me if I knew any foreign languages and then I could triumphantly respond, “Yes indeed!”) Instead my bandana clad literary hero answered, “I have a lot of friends,” and then motioned for the next person to step up and have their book signed.

most everything can be an addiction, something to fill the emptiness or at least punch up the boredom.”⁴⁰ Nietzsche wondered what would fill the void. The Canadian-American philosopher, James K. A. Smith, explains how Wallace saw people filling the void:

Granted, his [David Foster Wallace’s] writing—both fiction and nonfiction—documents a world of almost suffocating immanence, a flattened human universe where the escapes are boredom and distraction, not ecstasy and rapture. Hell is self-consciousness, and our late modern, TV-ized (now Twitter-ized) world only ramps up our self-awareness to an almost paralyzing degree. God is dead, but he’s replaced by everybody else. Everything is permitted, but everybody is watching. So most of the time the best “salvation” we can hope for is found in behaviors that numb us to this reality: drugs, sex, entertainments of various sorts.⁴¹

DFW, like Nietzsche before him, was willing to look the consequences of life without God in the face and speak honestly about it. He observed and experienced that replacements for “salvation” always disappoint and leave people feeling lonelier than before.⁴² Didn’t a wise king once say that without God “everything is just vapor?”⁴³

While Wallace had much in common with other postmodern authors (e.g. Pynchon, DeLillo, Franzen), there is something that makes him different—something that may be informative for Christian apologists in the 21st Century. Glimmers of hope, transcendence, and even love surface in his work. Wallace strongly believed that literature, and life in general, needed less irony and sarcasm and more sincerity and authenticity.⁴⁴ Postmodern literature tends to reject a cohesive plot structure and especially a moral to the story. However, in a recent *First Things* article, Smith noted, “Wallace’s tragic, frustrated pilgrimage brought him to the conviction that there should be a moral to the story. If there is a moral to his own story...it might be that transcendence continues to exert its pressure on contemporary fiction, piercing the confident boundaries of secularism. Sensing the paucity of postmodern irony might be the beginning of faith.”⁴⁵ Neither the promise of modernism, nor the reaction of postmodernism can provide enough meaning for life. Why is it that there should be a moral to the story? Is this recognition perhaps a remnant of the natural knowledge of God? Could it be possible that we need a cohesive narrative? People are searching, even longing, for something more—something deeper—something loving—a moral behind the story.

⁴⁰ Alissa Wilkinson, “Everybody Worships,” *Christianity Today: Books and Culture*, 2015. <https://www.booksandculture.com/articles/2015/mayjun/everybody-worships.html?paging=off>.

⁴¹ James K. A. Smith, “David Foster Wallace to the Rescue,” *First Things*, March 2003 <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2013/03/david-foster-wallace-to-the-rescue>.

⁴² Sadly, on a Fall day in 2008, after dealing with severe depression his entire life, David Foster Wallace hung himself while his wife was out on a walk.

⁴³ Ecclesiastes 1:2 (EHV).

⁴⁴ DFW was searching and even went through several rounds of Adult Instruction at Catholic Church.

⁴⁵ Smith, “David Foster Wallace to the Rescue,” final paragraph.

Apologetic Approaches

For Christians Struggling with Postmodernism

From the Creation of Man

Christians too are constantly bombarded by postmodern thought. To a certain degree, it becomes part of the water we drink. Christians, even Christian pastors, may be challenged by some of its conclusions. If “charity begins at home,” then perhaps apologetics should begin there as well. The following brief overview of Scripture’s teaching on the origin of meaning is intended for Christians who are struggling with questions about language.

In a sense the postmodernists are right: it all depends on a person’s situatedness. Saint Anselm, building on Saint Augustine’s maxim, wrote, “For I do not seek to understand in order that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this also I believe—that unless I believe I shall not understand.”⁴⁶ The logic is a bit circular, but it has to be.⁴⁷ God the Holy Spirit creates faith in a person’s heart by communicating to them that the Father is gracious and compassionate and forgives their sins in Jesus Christ. However, the Spirit doesn’t give us ground rules for interpretation or a hermeneutics textbook before he communicates with us. Again, it’s circular, but a Christian believes that God’s Word *is able to* convey meaning, because God’s Word through the work of the Spirit *has* conveyed meaning and changed a person’s heart. This is a mystery of faith.

That Spirit-born faith leads us to trust God’s Word in other matters as well, like the truth that he created us. If there is a God who created us, it only makes sense that language is able to convey meaning.

Professor Paul Wendland explains,

If he [God] exists, then he made us, and gave us language, and he gave us our common origin, and what we say has meaning, and refers to a world God made. But even more, it’s about whether you believe that God loves us, and means to do something about our obvious state of separation from him. Does he mean to communicate with us, using our words, our tongue? The answer Scripture gives is: one world, one God, one revelation: Jesus Christ the Righteous, to whom all the ancient Scriptures of his people point to and are fulfilled by.⁴⁸

If we believe that God exists, and that he created the world, and gave us the ability to listen and to speak, then he gave us a common origin (human) and language. A brief look at what Scripture shows us about language affirms this truth.

The very first chapter of the Bible tells us that at the beginning of time, God called all things into existence by his Word: “*God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.*”⁴⁹ This passage (along with v. 8, 10) shows that at the beginning there was a correspondence between words and reality. God said the word “light” (word\concept) and there was “light.” The different sounds and syllables that he spoke to call forth “light,” and “sky,” and “land” corresponded directly to something out there in the physical

⁴⁶ Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion*, 1.

⁴⁷ Every foundational system of belief ends in being circular in its most basic principles. Even Yahweh reveals himself as “I am who I am.”

⁴⁸ Paul Wendland, *Postmodernism, Culture, and Biblical Truth*, 1.

⁴⁹ Genesis 1:3

world that would forever take that name. Then on the sixth day, God brought the animals he had created “to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name.”⁵⁰ As “God named things, so humanity in Adam was given the gift and ability to name things after him with a language that somehow corresponded to the reality of what was being named (Genesis 2:19-24).”⁵¹ While God had been the original “namer,” he passed on and shared this privilege with man. When Adam is given his wife, he calls her “woman,” for she was taken out of man.”⁵² Just as God’s words corresponded to reality, so do the words of the man who had been formed and fashioned in his image. While we may not fully understand or be able to explain how words connect to reality, Scripture demonstrates that they do.

Further proof that language was able to convey meaning can be seen in the fact that God held Adam and Eve accountable for disobeying his words. If language were unclear and words were unfit vehicles for meaning, it would have been unjust for God to bring the consequences of sin down upon the first man and woman. What father would punish his child for disobeying a command the child was not able to understand? No one in their right mind would punish a baby for crying in a library, because the sign said, “Quiet Please.” The command of the Lord God communicated meaning and referred to a real tree in a real garden and warned against a real eating. Thus, God could justly hold the first man and woman accountable for their disobedience. The first sin was a real sin against God’s intention (will) as it had been expressed in his command. These words expressed an idea or a concept and conformed to God’s intention and will.

From the Logos

When the time had fully come, the Promised Savior was born into the world. John says this about him: “In the beginning was the Word (Logos), and the Word (Logos) was with God, and the Word (Logos) was God.”⁵³ The Logos shows us who God is and what he is like. The Apostle Paul writing to the Colossians says, “For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him [Christ], and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”⁵⁴ Later when Philip asked Jesus if he could see the Father, Jesus answered, “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’?”⁵⁵ God not only gave us words to communicate to us, but he gave us the Word. Jesus was saying, “Philip, you want to see God, I’m standing right in front of you.”

⁵⁰ Genesis 2:19b

⁵¹ Wendland, *Postmodernism, Culture, and Biblical Truth*, 1.

⁵² Genesis 1:23. In a clear rebellion against this inherent relationship some feminists have started using the spelling “womyn.”

⁵³ John 1:1

⁵⁴ Colossians 1:19

⁵⁵ John 14:9

While we want to be careful not to push the analogy too far,⁵⁶ there seems to be something illustrative about the way in which God revealed himself in flesh to save us. Wendland writes, “[Jesus] came into our world from far above it. He embedded himself in the texture of our daily life. Though God, he was fully human and spoke human words that were fully capable – as are all God’s words through human mouths – not only of adequately communicating God’s meaning, but of shaping our world as he utters them.”⁵⁷ The Logos is proof that God can and does embody human things (matter) with divine meaning (spirit). “The Christian account of incarnation insists that ultimate meaning has become mysteriously but deeply integrated with all the material stuff of life.”⁵⁸ If God took on human flesh with all of its weakness and frailty, which he did, is it really so implausible that he would take on human words with all their imperfections and ambiguity? In his magisterial book on biblical hermeneutics in a postmodern world, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, Kevin Vanhoozer explains how this is really a matter of faith, “The question ‘Is there a meaning in this text’ is, in the final analysis, linked to another: ‘What think ye of Christ?’”⁵⁹ Later Vanhoozer also argues, “For if Jesus (the Word become flesh) ‘exegetes’ the Father (John 1:18), then ultimate reality has determinate meaning.”⁶⁰ In other words, if God incarnated Christ in a real person to show us Himself, then reality means something.

The name “Logos” may also be informative. While there are dangers in pressing the etymology of “Logos” too far, it seems to at least imply an essential logic or structure that underlies everything.⁶¹ Christ is the foundation of all truth, meaning, and order in our world. When God spoke at the very beginning, the Logos was right there giving structure, order, and logic to the universe. We can comprehend things because God has made a comprehensible universe.⁶² In fact, God’s speaking is not only the foundation for our world, but the basis for our understanding of it. As a young theologian, Joseph Ratzinger argued that “the only finally satisfying explanation for this universal objective intelligibility is a great Intelligence who has thought the universe into being. Our language provides an intriguing clue in this regard, for we speak of our acts of knowledge as moments of “recognition,” literally a re-cognition, a thinking again what has already been thought.”⁶³ Not only that, but the human mind has been created by God to understand the world. “The purpose of the heart is to pump blood; that of our cognitive faculties (overall) is to supply us with reliable information.”⁶⁴ God has endowed us with perception, memory,

⁵⁶ Into Barthian Neo-orthodoxy or Orthodox *theosis*.

⁵⁷ Wendland, *Postmodern, Culture, and Biblical Truth*, 1.

⁵⁸ Qtd by Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 126.

⁵⁹ Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 126.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 304.

⁶¹ Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, entry “Logos.”

⁶² Not that we can comprehend all things, but we can comprehend some things. The sad irony is that atheistic scientists who base their entire system on an orderly, consistent, and predictable universe, rarely try to explain why the universe is orderly, consistent, predictable, and comprehensible.

⁶³ Robert Barron, *Catholicism: A Journey to the Heart of the Faith* (New York: Random House, 2011), 67-68.

⁶⁴ Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, 14, quoted in Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 288.

reason, and intuition that allow us to understand and interpret when used properly.⁶⁵ Our Creator built us for meaning.⁶⁶

God descended to humanity in the Logos. The history of Western philosophy shows that it has been a continuous struggle to understand and articulate how the transcendent relates to the immanent (e.g., Plato's forms, Descartes thinking self, Kant's transcendental signified, body and spirit, mind and matter, concept and meaning, the one and the many, etc.). If God (transcendent) had not revealed himself to us in a person (immanent), all that would be left for us to do is speculate and postulate about universal forms and laws like pre-telescopic stargazers trying to understand the universe by gazing up at the balls of light in the night sky. However, in the Logos the Transcendent becomes immanent. In Christ God reveals "the transcendent yet immanent God of the Hebrews and Luther's God, *Wholly Other* yet always stooping down."⁶⁷ The incarnation teaches us what Luther knew so well and expressed in his theology of the cross and the hiddenness of God:⁶⁸ God must descend to make himself known to us. John D. Caputo says,

If we heed the Apostle instead of Aristotle, theology is not a presumptuous human ascent to God but a divine descent to the humility of the human condition: instead of theology from above, theology from below; instead of visible things as a springboard to glory, God mingling amid their misery; instead of divinizing humanity, a humanized God; instead of God who slays his enemies, a suffering and defeated God, arrested, tortured, and executed. Truly, this God has been hidden from human wisdom (Is 45:15).⁶⁹

If theology must be from below, so must philosophy when pondering the eternal, transcendent and immutable things of God. Since we could not climb into heaven to find God, he came down to find us.⁷⁰

Apologetic Approaches for the Non-Believer

Preliminary Thoughts

As a new pastor, fresh out of the seminary, called to do outreach in a college town in the Pacific Northwest, I learned how to respond to postmodern objections by failing...a lot. To a certain degree we were taught how to address the intellectual objections (modernist) to the Christian faith or at least knew how to go home and study up. I found it much more challenging to respond to the young woman who believed that the story of the crucified and risen Savior was just something that worked for me. She

⁶⁵ Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 288.

⁶⁶ This is rather speculative, but could it be that the "Logos" is also, in a sense, paradigmatic for how concepts become words? Concepts take on flesh in words. The concept doesn't become the word and the word doesn't become the concept. The two remain distinct yet come together as one to provide meaning. Those who believe in the incarnation should also be able to believe in meaning.

⁶⁷ Mark Paustian, "The Beauty with the Veil: Validating the Strategies of Kierkegaardian Indirect Communication Through a Close Christological Reading of the Hebrew Old Testament" (Dissertation Presented to the Faculty Regent University School of Communication and the Arts, May 2016), loc 1202 Kindle.

⁶⁸ Luke Thompson, "Disclosing the Hidden God: Confessional Lutheran Doctrine and Christian Apologetics," (WLS 2019 Symposium on Christian Apologetics).

⁶⁹ John D. Caputo, *Cross and the Cosmos*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2019), 2.

⁷⁰ The principle sets the tone for the Christian use of reason and has been expressed by Lutherans in the distinction between ministerial and magisterial use.

explained that I had my truth, she had her truth, and what worked for me, didn't work for her. I also found it challenging to know what to say to the retired University professor who believed that religion was a mask for power and a cause of many of the wars and violence in the world. In a moment I became keenly aware of the fact that there was more at work here than mere unbelief. There was a failure to communicate. From these interactions and many like them, I learned that it was important to listen carefully before talking and that if you want to understand and engage with someone, you should be able to present their position back to them in such a way that they would agree with you. It is easy to caricature, oversimplify, and distort the views of others. Sadly, this can even happen to Christians as they discuss doctrinal matters with each other. Christian love compels us to truly listen and understand others, as we want others to understand us.

It's also important to listen, so that we can respond appropriately. While this essay is about postmodernism, no one is entirely postmodern or modern or anything else. Postmodernism promotes diversity and pluralism and that is exactly what we find in our world. Professor Sam Degner observes, "Even if postmodernism is seen as a distinct next step, a rejection of modernism, it is clear that modernism is still hanging on in certain circles and in certain areas of our everyday life, even cohabitating with its progeny/progression within the same people, and this has profound implications for life in this Western world."⁷¹ Careful listening will help us formulate a response that is in line with the truth of God's Word and communicates to an individual in his or her specific context.

Listening also helps us understand the other person and legitimize their concerns. A critique of the current approach to apologetics in American Christianity is that it is focused primarily at literate middle-class thinkers with a college education, when many of the people we interact with do not have a college degree or care much about detailed evidential proofs and abstract philosophical arguments. In a recent article on the 1517 blog, Bruce Hillman asks, "Are the ways we are preaching and doing apologetics commensurate with the way people experience and earn trust today? Are apologists better trained by learning the ins and outs of the ontological argument or by studying the oppression of minority groups? Will postmoderns be more apt to care about the existence of God or the fact that those who claim to love God don't appear to care about minorities?"⁷² Again, listening will help us understand what is valued most highly by people in our community and respond accordingly as we strive to speak the truth in love.

Finally, as we consider some of the approaches below, please remember that they must always be used with gentleness and respect. As the cliché says, "you can win the argument but lose the person." There are no magic bullets. An apologist's goal is to simply expose contradictions and irrationality in someone's worldview in order to "put a rock in someone's shoe."⁷³ The hope is that eventually it will lead them to see that their way of thinking without Christ is deficient, and that they will give the gospel a fair hearing. We will begin by looking at ways an apologist can expose some of the problems with postmodernism.

⁷¹ Samuel Degner, "Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Christian," (unpublished paper, 2019), 10.

⁷² Bruce Hillman, "Five Ways Apologetics Can Respond to Postmodernity," 1517 blog, <https://www.1517.org/articles/five-ways-apologetics-can-respond-to-postmodernity>.

⁷³ This is an expression I first heard used by Greg Koukl in his book *Tactics*.

Exposing Problems with Postmodernism

Common Sense

On one level postmodernism is a helpful corrective to modernism with its absolute trust in human reason. It acknowledges our fallen condition. Throughout history theologians have referred to the *noetic* effects of sin⁷⁴, and how the consequences of the fall not only changed our bodies, but our brains, and even our speaking and thinking. We are finite human beings and our own situatedness affects the way we view the world and send and receive information. We struggle to clearly express the concepts in our minds, and whether we are conscious of it or not, fail to accurately represent the true nature of things. This is especially true when it comes to the “things above.” The Apostle Paul says it beautifully in 1 Corinthians 13: “For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.”⁷⁵ Words will always fail until we are face to face with God. In a much less poetic way of speaking, one could say that there are epistemological bugs on our windshields. An apologist can find common ground in admitting that interpretation is often difficult and communication can be fraught with misunderstanding.

However, postmodernism is an exaggeration. Just because interpretation is *often* difficult, doesn’t mean that it *always* or *usually* is. And just because we can’t communicate perfectly, doesn’t mean that we can’t communicate at all. When having a discussion with someone who claims the difficulty of interpretation, it can be helpful to point out that you are having a conversation with them, and even though you may not agree with each other, you both know what the other person is saying. If you didn’t, it wouldn’t even be possible to have a disagreement. So, really the argument is not about “interpretation,” but about different “opinions.”

To say that language doesn’t work is kind of like saying roads don’t work, because sometimes they are narrow and hard to follow in the dark. Many Christian apologists⁷⁶ and other critics of postmodernism have pointed out that it’s a philosophy that doesn’t work in real day to day life – it’s a belief system that is impossible to live by. Even those who hold to the most extreme form of postmodernism stop their cars when they come to an intersection with a big red octagonal sign and the letters “S-T-O-P,” and if they don’t, there are real world consequences like getting t-boned by an oncoming truck.

An apologist could also point out the hypocrisy of a postmodern philosopher like Derrida who spent his life writing books and giving lectures using words, even though he claimed that words were incapable of conveying meaning. The fact is that common sense speaks against postmodernism. What we find in the real world is that people communicate and interact with others all the time, and for the most part, it works! As Ken Cherney said at a Symposium a couple of years ago, “Sound hermeneutics mostly consists of things that all users of language do automatically hundreds of times a day. Most of these everyday hermeneuticians do not seem handicapped in any way by never having been to a symposium on hermeneutics, or even by not knowing what the word means.”⁷⁷ People rarely, if ever, question whether there is meaning in words or speech. They simply know that there is. They use language and it works for

⁷⁴ Senior theses idea? How has this term been used throughout the history of theology and what is the biblical support? One could also look at how it relates to the Kantian notion of “pure reason.”

⁷⁵ 1 Corinthians 13:12

⁷⁶ John Warwick Montgomery may be the most well-known among Lutherans.

⁷⁷ Ken Cherney, “The Value of Hermeneutics: A Reaction,” (presented at the 2017 WLS Symposium), 1.

them. Even when there are misunderstandings, they use language to clarify and sort it out. Common sense is on the side of the apologist.

The Metanarrative of Being Suspicious of All Metanarratives (It's Self-refuting!)

Earlier, postmodernism was defined as the “incredulity toward all metanarratives.” However, notice that this position itself a metanarrative. It’s a metanarrative that preemptively calls into question “metanarratives.” This is very similar to how those who say there is no such thing as universal objective truth are proclaiming a universal objective truth. They believe that this truth—that there is no universal truth—applies to all people of all time, and they want others to believe it as well. I’ve heard about a pastor who told one of his members going off to college that if she walks into a classroom and the professor tells her that all truth is subjective, she should listen to him and walk out to prove that if all truth is subjective then there is nothing to learn from him.

Sneaking the transcendent in

Postmodernism dismisses the transcendent beforehand by saying that there is “nothing outside the text” (in postmodern speak “the text” is not just the words on a page, but an individual’s context and situatedness in the world) but then in essence sneaks the transcendent back in as it claims a position of objective omniscient observation. In other words, postmodernism claims that there is nothing outside the text except that claim is made from “outside the text.” For example, how does the postmodernist know that there is no metanarrative? Or that every narrative is an attempt by the privileged to exert power over the marginalized? Wouldn’t they have to be in a position of omniscient unbiased surveillance and have investigated every narrative to know that they are all power plays?

To risk oversimplification in the form of illustration, imagine several different groups playing games on a large field. One group seems to be tossing a round leather ball through an elevated hoop with a white net hanging from it. Another group is kicking a white ball into a large rectangular net, and another group is handing an oblong pigskin to one person and then jumping on that person until he falls to the ground. The games are being played so closely together that they are intermingled. In fact, those on ground level can’t even tell them apart—there are just a bunch of sweaty dusty people running around playing games. These games are like the narratives that postmodernism claims we are all involved in. However, the only way someone could distinguish between the different games is if they were sitting high above the field in a booth observing the games from a point of objective surveillance. Postmodernism claims that such a position does not exist, that there is no transcendent or outside perspective. Except with this claim, it is claiming a transcendent-outside-perspective for itself.

Unity is Necessary

Postmodernism is in many ways is a return to premodernism. As Paul strolled through the streets of Athens, he observed that there were idols to many different gods. A plurality of “truths” was allowed to peacefully coexist as people were taught to tolerate those who preferred to worship whichever god they preferred. But postmodernism is an attack on something that may even be deeper – the very way we perceive reality. As its already been mentioned, in order for a pluralistic society to function and have any sense of peace and order, diversity and tolerance must be held up as the highest moral good. An apologist could ask why is this the “highest moral good?” If it is only because it works, how does one know it works? The history of civilization shows that when a society is unable to come together on fundamental truths, it is only a matter of time before it crumbles.

Affirming the Reality of Natural Law

When outsiders who have never heard of God's law follow it more or less by instinct, they confirm its truth by their obedience. They show that God's law is not something alien, imposed on us from without, but woven into the very fabric of our creation. There is something deep within them that echoes God's yes and no, right and wrong (Romans 2:14-15, The Message).

*Naturam expellas furca, tamen usque recurret: you may drive nature out with a pitchfork, but she will keep coming back.*⁷⁸

*Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away.*⁷⁹

“That’s just your interpretation!” “That might be true for you, but it’s not true for me.” “Don’t try to force your beliefs on me.” These are some of the most common objections an evangelist will hear when sharing God’s plan of salvation in a postmodern world. Whether the person saying these things knows anything about postmodernism, they have picked up some of its undercurrents. “What’s true for you is not true for me!” The implication is that there is no such thing as a universal truth. There is nothing that transcends, that goes behind individual experience. This is very similar to how some in Corinth ruled out Christ’s resurrection from the dead, because of an *apriori* philosophical belief that “there is no resurrection of the dead.”⁸⁰ The postmodernist rules out Truth, because of the *apriori* belief that there is no such thing as universal truth. We would have nothing to say to this if it weren’t for God’s natural law. Every human shares in a common ancestry (“from one man...every nation of men” (Ac 17:26) and has God’s law written on their heart (Ro 2:14-15). This is the basic sense of right and wrong and knowing that we are accountable for our actions. Wendland calls this truth “transcendent truth” since it transcends the boundaries of tribe and tongue. It’s the spiritual echo of the image lost at Paradise. It’s part of our human hardwiring.⁸¹ It is the common ground.

God’s natural law can be seen in the uniformity of moral standards and laws across cultures. For example, just about every “tribe” on earth would condemn a man who walks across the street, hits his neighbor over the head with a club and takes his neighbor’s wife. Also, even those who do not believe in God hold themselves responsible for their actions. They still wake up at night feeling guilty for the hurtful things they said to a friend at work and ashamed about the way they have neglected their elderly parents. Amazingly, basic moral principles are found almost universally across cultures. Oliver Curry, a researcher at Oxford’s Institute for Cognitive and Evolutionary Anthropology, recently wrote a paper about the similarity of moral rules across cultures. For the study, Curry’s group studied seven rules of morality: 1. Help your family, 2. Help your group, 3. Return favors, 4. Be brave, 5. Defer to superiors, 6. Divide resources fairly, and 7. Respect others property. The Christian can’t help but hear echoes of the Ten Commandments in these statements. The team found that these seven rules were considered good

⁷⁸ Horace, *Epistles I.X.24* http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14020/14020-h/14020-h.htm#THE_FIRST_BOOK_OF_THE_EPISTLES_OF_HORACE.

⁷⁹ Philip K. Dick (1928-1982) was a popular American writer known for his science fiction work.

⁸⁰ 1 Corinthians 15:12

⁸¹ Paul Wendland, “A Basic Cultural Primer.”

standards in 99.9% of cases across cultures.⁸² Both postmodern relativists and scientific materialists find it very difficult to explain this universal consistency.

Natural law also came to the surface when addressing some of the world's greatest evils. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn regarded the Nuremberg trials as "one of the special achievements of the twentieth century" because it forced humanity to confront evil.⁸³ The outcome of these trials shows that even though there are many who *claim* they don't believe in transcendent truth, they do believe in evil (as a transcendent truth). A common defense of the Nazi defendants was that they were ordered to carry out their atrocities by a superior, so they shouldn't be held accountable for their actions (superior-order defense). However, ultimately the court decided that there was such a thing as "'crimes against humanity' that 'constituted violations of international conventions...the general principles of criminal law as derived from the criminal law of all civilized nations.'"⁸⁴ The court recognized and acknowledged a universal standard of right and wrong, good and evil. Jordan Peterson,⁸⁵ a Professor of Psychology at the University of Toronto and also popular lecturer and author, who is not a professing Christian, recently commented on these trials saying, "Some things are so self-evidently not virtuous that you are guilty existentially outside the bounds of your culture—a transnational transethnic morality. We don't know what it is, but we know what it isn't."⁸⁶ Whether people acknowledge it or not, natural law is still a real and powerful thing. It keeps societies in order and prevents us from plummeting further into chaos. The apologist should remember that even if people seem to deny it, it's there. They know.

Natural law also tells people that they should love their neighbors. This can be seen in the fact that just about every religion on earth teaches people how they should treat their fellow human. Even apart from religious instruction, people know that it is not only wrong to hit their neighbor over the head with a club, it is also *good* to be kind to one's neighbor and help them out. It's not *just* Christians who volunteer at homeless shelters, give money to charitable organizations, or sit with hospice patients. The natural law is alive and well. It's what makes people feel guilty when they skip in line, cut someone off on the interstate, or blow up in anger at their kids. The eighth commandment is also part of natural law. People know that it's wrong to gossip, lie, and distort what others have said. Proof can be seen in the fact that no one wants others to do this to them. Further proof can be seen in the concern that people have for their online image.

⁸² Jenny Anderson, "An Oxford researcher says there are seven moral rules that unite humanity," March 6, 2019, <https://qz.com/1562585/the-seven-moral-rules-that-supposedly-unite-humanity/>.

⁸³ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *A Gulag Archipelago: 1918-1956: A Literary Investigation, Vol. 2* (London: Harper and Row Publishers, 616).

⁸⁴ *Nuremberg Military Tribunals*, Office of the Military Government For Germany (US) (Nuremberg 1946) Indictment, count 2, paragraph 15.

⁸⁵ Peterson says this about his faith in God: "I have been asked many times by many people if I believe in God. I don't like this question. I generally respond by stating that I act as if God exists, but that's not sufficiently true. Who could do that? Who could conduct themselves with the moral exactitude and care necessary of someone who would dare to make that claim?" See Jordan Peterson, "S2 E15: Who Dares Say He Believes in God," *Jordan Peterson Podcast* (podcast), June 30, 2019, Audio.

⁸⁶ Jordan Peterson, "#3 – The Necessity of Virtue," *Jordan Peterson Podcast* (podcast), December 22, 2016, Audio, 13:35. <https://www.jordanbpeterson.com/podcast/s2-e14-bishop-barron-catholicism-and-the-modern-age/>.

In its most extreme form postmodern deconstructionism goes against natural law because it breaks the eighth commandment. Speech act theorists regard language as a communicative act. When a person speaks, they are doing something with words. They are in a sense acting. Sometimes this is obvious like when words actually change reality in promises, apologies, contracts, etc. For example, when a man stands before an altar and *promises* to be faithful to his wife for as long as he lives, he is not just talking about something. His words are doing something. They are creating a new relationship.

The eighth commandment calls us to take our neighbors words and actions in the kindest possible way. While the full understanding of this command might not be explicit to all people in natural law, most understand that it is not right to intentionally misinterpret another person's words or actions.

Deconstructionism teaches that we can take someone's words in whatever way we'd like. But we don't do this with people's actions. Nobody thinks it's acceptable to kick someone in the shins when they come over and try to help you carry three bags of groceries to your car. We can't take peoples actions in whatever way we want. If you do, you will have no friends and probably be thrown in prison. To disregard the intention of a writer or speaker is not only a violation of God's clear law revealed in the Ten Commandments; it's also a violation of natural law written in everyone's heart. The natural law reveals shared meaning at the core of everyone's heart.

Using Story in Apologetics

Beauty will save the world – Fyodor Dostoevsky

Story as a way in

The use of rational apologetics (evidential, scientific, proofs of God, etc) with those who have been influenced by postmodernism may fall flat and perhaps even be viewed as just another attempt to use the rhetoric of reason to coerce and control. Truly, the Holy Spirit works through the simplest law/gospel presentation. A thorough grasp of key biblical stories, however, that vividly draws out the truths of law and gospel, sin and grace, along with the person of Jesus Christ, may be less foreign to the postmodern ear than a systematic presentation of those same truths that strikes the postmodern ear as the “modern” absolutes they instinctively reject.

If we look at popular culture (e.g., box office hits, most downloaded podcasts, popular shows, etc.) those who are suspicious of metanarratives are still open to stories (narratives). Marketing agencies tell their clients that their businesses should have a story. In the world of linguistics, there has been much debate about how the deep structures of language and grammar evolved. Noam Chomsky suggested that beneath the astonishing ability of humans to create and use language is a universal grammar – a shared system that can be accessed by all. More recently, some have argued that “it is not grammar which inhabits the deepest region of the mind's linguistic capacities, but parable and the ability to tell stories.”⁸⁷ In other words, our minds may have been hardwired for stories.

Stories have a way of sneaking up behind someone and grabbing their heart before they are given a chance to reject the truth contained in them.⁸⁸ Soren Kierkegaard famously commented that parables have a way of “deceiving people into the truth.” Instead of arguing about whether one should believe in

⁸⁷ Denis Dutton, “Which Came First, the Language or its Grammar,” http://www.denisdutton.com/language_grammar.htm

⁸⁸ Stories can be a form of indirect communication. If you are interested in how indirect communication is used in the Old Testament see Mark Paustian, “The Beauty with the Veil.”

objective truth, an apologist can *show* truth in a story and let it become real in the individual's heart. Think of how the prophet Nathan was able to get King David to recognize the seriousness of his sin by telling him a story of a poor family's pet lamb. While systems are often perceived as cold and abstract, stories are personal and alive.⁸⁹ J. K. Adams elaborates,

Stories that sink into our bones are the stories that reach us at the level of the imagination. Our imaginations are captured poetically, not didactically. We're hooked by stories, not bullet points. The lilt and cadence of poetry have the ability to seep down into the fine-grained regions of our imagination in a way that a dissertation never could. The drama and characters of a novel stick with us long after the argument of a book has been forgotten—and then change how we move in the world.⁹⁰

There's something visceral about stories that affect a person's heart. If this is true of narratives in general, how much more of the stories that are infused with the power of the Holy Spirit? One of the challenges of using apologetics is transitioning into gospel proclamation. The beauty of using stories from Scripture is that proclamation is wrapped up in the presentation itself. Consider how often Jesus told a story to answer a question. In fact, he spoke to the crowds in parables so often that his disciples were led to ask, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?"⁹¹ "Jesus was willing to modify the form of his message in response to human defenses as he met them in his day."⁹² If that's true of Jesus, shouldn't it be true of those who follow in his footsteps? In a culture that is deeply suspicious of objective truth claims and logical argumentation Jesus' answer to the question still stands: some will always see and hear while others will neither see nor hear and understand.⁹³

A Case Study

The conversion of C. S. Lewis is an example of the power of story. On Saturday, September 19, 1931, the brilliant English Professor, C. S. Lewis went on a late-night walk with two friends, Hugo Dyson, and J. R. R. Tolkien. They walked along the River Cherwell discussing the nature of metaphor and myth. Lewis remembered that the stirring of wind and the dropping of leaves, which sounded like raindrops, forced them to continue their discussion inside. About a year earlier, after feeling like a series of successful chess moves had been made against him, Lewis had come to faith in God. However, he was not yet a Christian. He could not understand "how the life and death of Someone Else (whoever he was) 2000 years ago could help us here and now."⁹⁴ Something changed on that late-night walk with his friends. Lewis would later refer to that sound of the rustling in the leaves as a metaphor for the Spirit descending in the darkness.

⁸⁹ Mark Paustian's *Prepared to Answer* books provide excellent examples of how an apologist can use story to share the Gospel.

⁹⁰ James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing 2016), 107.

⁹¹ Matthew 13:10

⁹² Paustian, "The Beauty with the Veil," 366.

⁹³ Matthew 13:13

⁹⁴ Alistair McGrath, *C. S. Lewis: A Life*, (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 2013), 149.

But it was more than the sound of rustling leaves that led Lewis to Christ. Alistair McGrath believes that it was J. R. R. Tolkien's presentation of the Christian faith that helped Lewis the most: "Tolkien helped Lewis to realise that the problem lay not in Lewis's *rational* failure to understand the theory, but in his *imaginative* failure to grasp its significance. The issue was not primarily about *truth*, but about *meaning*."⁹⁵ In a letter to his friend, Lewis expressed what finally got him: "The story of Christ is simply a true myth: a myth working on us in the same way as the others [pagan myths], but with this tremendous difference that it *really happened*."⁹⁶ Lewis further explains,

If ever a myth had become fact, had been incarnated, it would be just like this. Myths were like it in one way. Histories were like it in another. But nothing was simply like it. And no person was like the Person it depicted; as real, as recognizable, through all that depth of time, as Plato's Socrates or Boswell's Johnson...yet also numinous, lit by a light from beyond the world, a god. But if a god—we are no longer polytheists—then not a god, but God. Here and here only in all time the myth must become fact; the Word, flesh; God, Man. This is not "a religion," nor "a philosophy." It is the summing up and actuality of them all.⁹⁷

For Lewis and Tolkien myths possessed an innate capacity to open their hearers to truth beyond themselves. "At their best, myths offer what Lewis later termed 'a real though unfocused gleam of divine truth falling on human imaginations.'"⁹⁸ The story of Christ, was the story beneath every other story, the story that gave every other story its power. It's worth noting that this brilliant scholar who was familiar with all the rational proofs and facts about Christianity was finally wooed and seduced into faith not by arguments and proofs, but by the Holy Spirit using story. How many others might follow in his path?

Using the Story of "Anti-power"

The apologist's task is not so much to make up stories, but to share stories of Scripture and show people how they are part of the Story. This is also a primary goal of apologetic preaching. Bring your listeners into the story. Paustian's *Prepared to Answer* books provide wonderful examples on how to do this. Through stories the Christian faith makes itself plausible not because it has the better argument, but because it tells a better story – the love story of God and his creation.⁹⁹

There is something entirely unique about the story of salvation. Postmodernists claim that every metanarrative is laced with hidden power and privilege. But what if there was a different kind of metanarrative? What if there was one built on weakness and grace and sacrifice? Hart explains how the Christian story is entirely different from every other one:

The new world we see being brought into being in the Gospels is one in which the whole grand cosmic architecture of prerogative, power, and eminence has been shaken and even superseded by a new, positively "anarchic" order: an order, that is, in which we see the glory of God revealed in

⁹⁵ McGrath, *C. S. Lewis: A Life*, 149.

⁹⁶ Letter to Arthur Greeves qtd in McGrath, *C. S. Lewis: A Life*, 149.

⁹⁷ Edmund Fuller (ed.), *Affirmations of God and Man*, (New York: Association Press, 1967), 37.

⁹⁸ McGrath, *C. S. Lewis: A Life*, 150.

⁹⁹ Bruce Hillman, "Five Ways Apologetics Can Respond to Postmodernity," <https://www.1517.org/articles/five-ways-apologetics-can-respond-to-postmodernity>.

a crucified slave, and in which (consequently) we are enjoined to see the forsaken of the earth as the very children of heaven. In this shockingly, ludicrously disordered order (so to speak), even the mockery visited on Christ—the burlesque crown and robe—acquires a kind of ironic opulence: in the light cast backward upon the scene by the empty tomb, it becomes all at once clear that it is not Christ’s “ambitions” that are laughable, but those emblems of earthly authority whose travesties have been draped over his shoulders and pressed into his scalp.¹⁰⁰

Tell the story of Christ. Let it shock the unsuspecting out of their apathy. We have the greatest story ever told. It is a story of anti-power, of giving instead of taking, of true humility, of self-sacrifice and love. Christ stood against the most powerful forces in the world by making himself weak. This is the story that changed the very nature of reality and turned everything upside down. The Apostle Paul says, “We preach Christ crucified, because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”¹⁰¹ Paustian offers an observation:

Christians who are taken in by a modernistic view of reason will experience steady societal pressure to justify their belief. To do what is expected of them would mean grounding the reality of Christ in their own powers of rational argument or, in failing that, surrendering it as a viable proposition. It is tragic. The apostolic way was to emphasize their own crushing inadequacy to be any such ground in themselves in order to accent the adequacy of Christ and the Word that comes from him. If it seems like a weak thing not to scaffold the communication of his truth in full-blown rational rigor, that is because it is supposed to be, all so that the power of Christ might rest upon communication and communicator alike (cf. 2Co 12:9).¹⁰²

Jesus says, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”¹⁰³ That same power that reached its goal in the weakness of Christ will also reach its goal in the weakness of his witnesses.

As an additional point that ties the story of anti-power together with natural law, one can point out the necessity of a power story in order to have an anti-power story. Wendland explains,

The paradox of the cross with its anti-power, anti-glory message only works within a world that believes that power makes a person great and glory gives him a reason to boast....To put it another way, I think even an unbeliever can articulate the paradox that’s going on in the crucifixion story. They may even be able to do it quite eloquently. This has nothing to do with belief. It has everything to do with natural law, natural reason, and natural understanding that allows us to make sense of a narrative like this. Paradoxes simply don’t work absent the existence of the counter narrative. There has to be a doxa before there is a paradoxa.¹⁰⁴

In fact, there has to be meaning in order for there to be an attack on meaning. To a certain degree, the reality of the attack proves the existence of meaning and the One who stands behind it all.

¹⁰⁰ David Bentley Hart, *Atheistic Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2009), 174.

¹⁰¹ 1 Corinthians 1:25 (EHV)

¹⁰² Paustian, “Beauty with the veil,” 49.

¹⁰³ 2 Corinthians 12:9

¹⁰⁴ Paul Wendland, personal email to essayist, 3/29/19.

Love is the Answer! Bridges the gap

A Song of Love Unknown

Postmodernism preaches tolerance as the highest virtue. But tolerance is not love. A husband does not bring home a dozen red roses on Valentine's Day and give them to his wife with a note that says, "I tolerate you!" Tolerance does not bring us into a relationship with others. It shows no true concern, no commitment, no affection for another person. Tolerance doesn't lead to engaging with someone else's ideas or beliefs or truly care about where they are coming from. Worst of all, tolerance does not lead us to act on behalf of another. You don't lay down your life for someone you simply tolerate.

John's Gospel and Epistles were written as an antidote to this premodern and postmodern apathy. God didn't tolerate the world with its sin and rebellion, instead, "God so *loved* the world that he gave his one and only Son."¹⁰⁵ Love leads to action. God himself in the flesh says, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."¹⁰⁶ Want to know what love is? "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters."¹⁰⁷ A Christian has something that the postmodern world knows nothing about—love—unconditional love—sacrificial love—reckless love. We love because he first loved us. It's this love that moves us to truly love others. It's this love that we get to share with others who feel lost in a meaningless world. "God loves you! He loves you so much that his Son died for you!" Love is the ultimate metanarrative.

A Song that Plays Out in Christians

This selfless love of Christ for us compels us to love others. In a culture where words are often seen as nothing more than empty rhetoric, Christian love serves as a way of *showing* the truth. The old cliché is especially true in our postmodern world: "People don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care." Love unites both faith (abstract) and works (concrete). Postmodernists believe that meaning is best forged in a personal relationship between two people. They are right. The Scriptural doctrine of vocation, as expressed in the Lutheran Reformation, urges Christians to love people in their specific callings in life. Apologetics, as a way of doing evangelism, is best carried out in the context of a personal relationship that has been formed.

Christian love is a living apologetic that runs deeper than any intellectual argument or rational proof and even allows people to see God. John explains, "No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us."¹⁰⁸ Like a completed circuit, God's love reaches its *telos* in Christians. In his First Epistle Peter encourages his readers to "live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on

¹⁰⁵ John 3:16

¹⁰⁶ John 10:11

¹⁰⁷ 1 John 3:16

¹⁰⁸ 1 John 4:12

the day he visits us.”¹⁰⁹ In a pagan, post-Christian world, Christian lives of love need to serve as the prelude to gospel proclamation.

After all, this is how Christianity broke into the darkness of the ancient world and caused the church to explode throughout the world. Consider this description of Christians written by a philosopher named Aristides to Emperor Hadrian on his visit to Athens in c. 125 AD. He explains,

Falsehood is not found among them; and they love one another, and they don’t hesitate to honor widows; and they rescue the orphans who are being abused. The one who has gives to the one who lacks, without bragging about it. And when they meet a stranger, they take him into their homes and rejoice over him as if he were a brother...And if there is among them any that is poor and needy, and if they have no spare food themselves, they will fast two or three days just so they can have something to share with the one lacking food. They observe the teachings of their Messiah with much care, living justly and soberly as the Lord their God has commanded them.¹¹⁰

Could there be a more powerful apologetic? How well are our congregations showing this kind of love today? In an age when many will detect anything that appears to be a marketing ploy as just another product of our consumerist culture,¹¹¹ perhaps we need to return to our roots. In *Atheistic Delusions* David Bentley Hart argues that the Christian vision and practice of caring for the weak and less fortunate in the ancient church was so counter-cultural and unpredictable that it serves as a powerful proof of Christianity’s supernatural origins.

To look on the child whom our ancient ancestors would have seen as somehow unwholesome or as a worthless burden, and would have abandoned to fate, and to see in him or her instead a person worthy of all affection—resplendent with divine glory, ominous with an absolute demand upon our consciences, evoking our love and our reverence—is to be set free from mere elemental existence, and from those natural limitations that pre-Christian persons took to be the very definition of reality. And only someone profoundly ignorant of history and of native human inclinations could doubt that it is only as a consequence of the revolutionary force of Christianity within our history, within the very heart of our shared nature, that any of us can experience this freedom. We deceive ourselves also, however, if we doubt how very fragile this vision of things truly is: how elusive this truth that only charity can know, how easily forgotten this mystery that only charity can penetrate.¹¹²

The death and resurrection of Christ changed the very nature of reality and introduced a selfless love that had no precedent in the ancient world. The New Atheists claim that Christians have been guilty of violence, bloodshed, and other atrocities throughout history. Not only is this a misrepresentation of the facts,¹¹³ it also ignores the incomparable amount of good that the Christian faith has brought about with

¹⁰⁹ 1 Peter 2:12

¹¹⁰ Aristides, “The Apology of Aristides,” trans. By D. M. Kay, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/aristides-kay.html>.

¹¹¹ In my opinion, the church should also be conscientious when producing a bunch of trinkets and toys as promotional materials that end of cluttering our lives and sitting in landfills. Not only can it have the negative effect of bad messaging to those who have environmental concerns, but it can be a waste of resources.

¹¹² Hart, *Atheistic Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies*, 215.

¹¹³ See Hart, *Atheistic Delusions* for his historical defense of Christianity against this claim.

its hospitals, food pantries, humanitarian relief, foster homes, etc. How does the track record of what paganism and atheism has done for the world compare? Love needs an outside force. Christianity has it in the love of Jesus Christ.

A Song Lived in Community

Earlier, I mentioned the loneliness and isolation that many people in our postmodern world are experiencing. Sadly, some have been damaged by members of a Christian congregation. Some believe that Christians are hypocrites who are only concerned about forcing their ideals on others. Others have experienced Christian leaders who have used power in a way that is commensurate with a worldly view of power. Then there are others who have simply been misinformed about the Christian faith. How can we change that? Not by arguing, but *by loving* – by cherishing our Christian community and inviting others to join in. God has built us as creatures who need connections and relationships (meaning) as much as we need food and drink. In Christ he has adopted us as his children and placed us into a family of believers – we are “brothers and sisters” and “sons and daughters.”

In our postmodern age our congregations must continually strive to reflect this reality in everything they do. People are looking for authenticity. They are looking for sincerity. They are looking for love. This can be demonstrated in the way congregations welcome and love the poor, the elderly, those with special needs, the prisoners, and the mentally ill. It can be seen in sharing meals together, visiting the sick, weeping with those who weep, and supporting one another through good and bad. This type of community is appealing to those on the outside. It is something they don’t have, but so desperately want. Such a community causes people to look around, lean in, and ask, “*What would it be like to experience that? That kind of relationship? That kind of love?*” Then we can tell them about Jesus, the one who loved us first and best.

Conclusion

Postmodernism presents Christians with some new and unique challenges. Meaning is under attack. People are confused. They don’t know where to stand. They are like sheep without a shepherd. However, one defines apologetics, it is ultimately about caring.¹¹⁴ It is about caring about another person’s thoughts enough to carefully listen and understand where they are coming from. It is about caring enough to expose the emptiness of their worldview. It is about caring enough to extend the conversation and share Jesus. Even though the world has changed, the solution remains the same. We must strive to love others and share with them what he has done, so that they too may come to know the most beautiful song of all:

*My song is love unknown,
My Savior’s love to me;
Love to the loveless shown,
That they might lovely be.
O who am I,
That for my sake
My Lord should take
Frail flesh, and die?¹¹⁶*

¹¹⁴ J. P. Moreland

¹¹⁶ *Christian Worship*, Hymn 110, text Samuel Crossman (1624-83)

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