Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Metamorphosis, Part 3 (Questioning Everything)
Scripture: 2 Timothy 4:3-4
Code: B100211

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I have examined and critiqued postmodernism elsewhere (see *The Truth War*, 2007). It should be sufficient for our purposes in this context to summarize the postmodern mind-set by describing it as dubiousness about practically everything. As we noted, the starting point for *modernity* was a rejection of biblical authority (setting aside belief in the supernatural as an untenable or merely irrelevant opinion). Instead, science and human reason were foolishly treated as reliable and authoritative. In the end, the disastrous failure of so many modern ideologies utterly debunked modern rationalism and delivered a deathblow to modern certitude. *Postmodernism* therefore subjects every idea and every authority to endless skepticism.

Modernity's most basic assumption was that the way to achieve unshakable certainty is through a rigorous application of the scientific method. (Whatever could be tested and proved in the laboratory—or logically deduced from scientific "facts"—was deemed true; everything else was written off as mere superstition.) Moderns were convinced that a basic foundation of settled scientific knowledge would easily provide a trustworthy authority by which *all* truth claims could be tested. That process in turn would eventually bring about a uniform consensus regarding all the fundamental realities of life and human existence.

When those expectations were finally extinguished by countless buckets of cold reality, modernism itself lay utterly discredited amid the smoldering ashes. Whereas the modern mind had sought uniformity, certainty, and order, postmodernism canonized the opposite values: diversity, doubt, and defiance. "Question everything" is the postmodern manifesto.

Combine those values with the ease of Internet communications, and what you get is what you see: the elimination of practically all distinctions between knowledge and ignorance, authority and incompetence, expertise and ineptitude.

Where did this notion of postmodernity come from, and how did it sneak up and take over the whole world (as it seems) so quickly?

The word *postmodern* is older than most people realize. It was commonly applied to artistic, literary, and architectural styles as early as the end of World War I. From the mid 1960s through the 1980s,

the term was used with increasing frequency to describe a way of thinking about truth and interpreting language. Jaques Derrida (who coined the term *deconstruction* to describe postmodern hermeneutics) was writing his postmodern perspectives on the implications of language and philosophy in the 1960s. Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard explored the political ramifications of oppressive language and meta-narratives in the 1970s. In the 1980s, spurred on by writers like Richard Rorty and Jean Beaudrillard, postmodernism's trademark contempt for rationalistic certitude dominated much of the academic world. By 1990 *Postmodernism* had already become a familiar buzzword in most college literature and philosophy classes. Students resonated with this way of thinking about truth; their thoroughly modern parents were baffled by it.

By the late 1990s, young evangelicals began to discover postmodernism. Already more than a decade late to the party, they were determined not to be left behind. Coming from the age group then known as Generation X, these postmodernized youth were mostly products of a ministry style that had kept young people sequestered in the "youth ministry," away from adults. They and their peers had learned to "do church" in settings where the focus was mostly on games and activities. Their music was a whole generation newer than the supposedly-contemporary stylings their parents favored. They sported fashions that were even more cutting edge than the slickest seeker-sensitive church would ever think to feature. And the attitudes of youth and youth leader alike were shaped to fit the postmodern style: deeply cynical.

The main problem for those young people was that their parents' churches were indeed pathologically shallow and worldly. The students had grown up being entertained far more than they were spiritually fed. When they began to move out of the youth group into the adult world, they were turned off by churches that simply could not keep up with changing styles. In reality, even the trendiest seeker-sensitive churches were still wedded to the tastes and convictions of a modern, not a postmodern, generation.

That is what inevitably happens when churches abandon biblical ministry in favor of worldly trends. "He who marries the spirit of the age soon finds himself a widower." I don't know who first coined that saying, but it perfectly describes what has happened again and again to churches and denominations that chase fads. By the early 1900s, most mainstream evangelicals had completely bought into the idea that stylishness is paramount. But they were finding it extremely hard to keep up with the times. Even the most culturally-obsessed churches were still trying to come to grips with the fads and worldly values of the '80s (or earlier). That became a major source of embarrassment and frustration to young evangelicals who had been taught that cultural relevance was everything. They understood better than their parents did how the world was changing, and they could see very clearly that the church was not keeping in step.

Since their parents' own example had *taught* them to embrace worldly trends and leverage pop-culture for church growth, they followed the same pragmatic pattern, with even more zeal than their

parents had shown. Their concept of “relevance” was just as superficial and culture-bound as their parents’ had been. But the culture they were determined to blend with their religion was worse by magnitudes, because it was hostile to the very ideas of truth and assurance. Of course, the experts and strategists who had originally championed market-driven strategies nevertheless continued to feed and encourage the pragmatism.

All those developments were already discernible in the early 1990s, and that is precisely what prompted me to write this book in the first place. Evangelicalism’s growing superficiality, a spiraling loss of confidence in the power of Scripture, the relentless pursuit of worldly fads, and a steady drift away from historic evangelical convictions were already widespread and serious problems. Those trends were all driven by evangelicals’ obsession with pleasing the world. It was obvious (to anyone with eyes to see) that the market-driven approach to evangelism and church growth was headed for disaster.

The discovery of postmodernism by Gen-Xers in seeker-sensitive youth groups culminated in precisely the kind of disaster this book foretold. It was a recipe for the perfect apostasy: thousands of young people had been indoctrinated with pragmatism as a way of life; raised with the idea that worship must be tailored to please “Unchurched Harry” in order to be “relevant”; and taught to regard truth as unattainable. Now they were embracing all those errors at once and attempting to blend them all into A New Kind of Christianity.

The earliest conscientiously postmodern evangelicals soon found one another and formed a network. Zondervan signed some of the network’s most provocative voices as authors and started an imprint specifically for their books. The result was the Emerging Church movement. Prominent figures in the movement soon discarded the terms *church* and *movement* and began referring to themselves as participants in “the Emerging Conversation.” It was a typically postmodern, Internet-era “conversation”—sound bites without substance, passions devoid of principle, and zeal without knowledge. It was a movement full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

Emerging mainly from the shallow end of the evangelical movement, the new post-evangelical subculture simply lacked any solid doctrinal moorings. It’s hard to think of a tenet of historic Christianity that has not been questioned or openly attacked by people who are currently leading the Conversation. That goes for truths as basic as the doctrine of the Trinity, as important as the authority of Scripture, and as precious as the doctrine of substitutionary atonement.

Predictably, the Emerging movement fragmented within its first decade. The most prolific authors and leading figures in the network seemed to take their ideas and arguments straight from the original modernist playbook—despite all their talk about being *post*modern. A handful of early participants who were theological conservatives recognized the dangers of such neo-liberal theology and eventually repudiated the movement completely. Several of the moderates in the original Emerging

network still seem to be trying to work out where to go from here.

All those developments have followed the very same pattern of doctrinal and spiritual erosion Charles Spurgeon described more than a hundred years ago and labeled “the Down Grade.” It is the same broad path to destruction I warned about in *Ashamed of the Gospel*. The church still desperately needs to hear and heed the same plea. (Perhaps today more than ever.) That fact alone explodes the typical evangelical notion about what makes a message “relevant.”

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