

Notes on Postmodernism and the Emerging Church (accompanying slides)

Postmodernism

Postmodernism's Importance

- Western world – realm of postmodernism
- Now the popular philosophy in our culture
 - “You can’t impose your values on someone else”
- Multiculturalism
 - *National Geographic's* article on child sacrifice
- Inroads into Evangelicalism
 - Postmodern theology (Stanley Grenz)
 - Emerging Church movement

Three Periods in Western Thinking

- Premodern
 - From ancient Greeks through the 1600s
- Modern
 - From 1700s through about 1980
- Postmodern
 - From about 1980 through present

[Dates approximate]

Premodernism (before 1700)

- Universe is real and can be known
- Truth is what corresponds to reality

- God or gods exist, divine revelation
- Humans are distinct, superior to animals
- Creation, miracles possible
- No critical study of traditional beliefs
- High respect for tradition and authority

Premodernists

- Plato, Aristotle, Athanasius, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin
- In biblical studies: Pre-critical period
 - Acceptance of Bible's statements as true, regardless of miraculous content
 - Little or no concern for critical questions
 - Bible writers, virtually all Christian commentators before 1700
 - Many modern Christians
 - Devotional commentaries

Modernism (1700-1980)

- Universe real, can be known
- Knowledge can come through empirical study (esp. science)
 - Naturalists: no divine revelation
- Naturalists: universe explained naturally
 - No supernatural interference or miracles
 - Humans highly evolved animals
- Low view of tradition and authority of people and institutions

Modernists

- Descartes, Hume, Kant, Voltaire, Rousseau, Hegel, Marx, Darwin
- Liberal Biblical Modernists
 - Reason and evidence can disprove Bible

- Higher criticism, Biblical rationalism
- Conservative Biblical Modernists
 - Bible God's Word, miracles exist
 - Dealing with critical questions via scholarship
 - Most Christian conservative scholars since 1700
 - (Princeton approach, early Fundamentalism)
 - Thus a mixture of premodernism and modernism

Postmodernism (after 1980)

- Universe real, but cannot be known
 - People view and measure all they see and hear through their own matrix of thinking
- Science unreliable, but best we have
- All knowledge is held within isolated cultural and social groups
- There is no overarching, overall truth

Narratives ("Stories")

- Knowledge is not propositional
 - (proposition = statement, sentence)
 - Emphasize relationships, not doctrine
- Cultural groups formed by common stories—values, history, outlook
 - "Local narratives"
- There is no overarching story
 - "Metanarrative"

Postmodernists

- Greek Sophists
 - Pragmatic view of truth
 - (No truth; so just make money)

- Precursors: Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger
- Jacques Derrida (d. 2004), Michel Foucault (d. 1984), John-Francois Lyotard (d. 1998)

Four Major Distinctives of Postmodernism

1. Rejection of all Metanarratives
2. No absolute or objective truth
3. Language arbitrary, cannot communicate clear, objective, ultimate meaning
4. Textual deconstruction must be done

1. All Metanarratives Are Rejected

- No narrative captures all truth or even any absolute truth
- Only local narratives are valuable, only for culture sharing them

2. There Is No Absolute or Objective Truth

- No transcendent perspective possible
- All truths are true only for that community
 - “You must find your own truth”
 - “What’s true for you isn’t true for me”

3. Language Is Arbitrary

- Cannot communicate clear, objective, ultimate meaning
- Any text has meaning only when meaning given to it by reader (hearer)
- Reader brings his thought world to text
- Language obeys no rules, does not refer directly to reality
- Texts and language create ideas, truth

4. Written Texts Must Be Deconstructed

- Texts written not to convey truth, but to exert power, oppress opponents
- Author’s intent not relevant to meaning
- Many “valid” interpretations of any text
- “Deconstruction”—art of taking texts apart to see their purpose in power

Two Good Questions to Ask a Postmodernist

1. "If there is no absolute, universal truth, how can you know or say that there is no absolute, universal truth?"
2. "If you wrote a book saying that all literature must be deconstructed, shouldn't we deconstruct your book too?"

(Logically speaking, postmodernism is "self-refuting.")

Two Views of Truth

(Chart on Samples, *A World of Difference*, p. 226)

Impact on the Church

- Theology
 - Bible less important; must use tradition, culture
- Worship
 - Less structure, more casual, personal, preaching deemphasized
- Evangelism
 - Don't like logical arguments
 - More open to relationships
 - Emphasize personal need, testimony
 - Be clear about forsaking other beliefs

The Postmodern Emerging Church

- "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith."-*Hebrews 13:7*

Instructions to the Church

- Use of leaders and structure
 - Heb. 13:7, 17
- Settled doctrine
 - Heb. 13:9

- Separate from the world
 - Heb. 13:13

Beginning of the Emerging Church

- 1970s – a “movement”
- From England to the USA
- Postmodern idea of “deconstruction” moving to “emergence”
- Leaders: N. T. Wright, Scot McKnight – “emerging”
- Right wing: Mark Driscoll – more evangelical
- Left wing: Brian McLaren, Tony Jones – “emergent”

Criticisms of Current Churches

- Separation of church and life
- Mainline churches have no message
- Fundamental & evangelical churches emphasize teaching rather than living like Jesus
- Mega-churches are slick, commercial; little motive for people to change

Emerging Church Is Post-Evangelical

- Open to all worship styles
- Often no pulpit
- Often in bars, cafes, leisure centers, homes
- No set order of service
- Promote “Jesus,” not “church”

Post-modern Goals

- Rejection of creeds, hierarchy, structures
- Desire for change over stability, a “liquid” community
- Fewer boundaries, inclusion of all

Emerging Church Is Post-individualistic

- Protestantism—focus on individual salvation and responsibility
- Emerging stress on “community” (theologian Stanley Grenz)
- Truth: not propositional, but relational

“Missional” Living

- Be in relationship
- Be in community, working
- Don’t be preaching

Whole Person Involved in Worship

- Thus, many styles of worship:
 - Celtic
 - Eastern Orthodox
 - Casual
 - Mixed

Post-individual activism

- Gospel is more than “mere” message
- Gospel is living as Jesus in the community
- Ecology, “social justice,” etc.

Evaluation of Emerging Church

- Some good points:
 - Replacing empty forms with real life
 - Genuineness
 - Emphasis on outreach

Problems with Emerging Church

- Reduces biblical importance of right doctrine
 - Compromising, contradictory, confused theology

- Ignores biblical commands for church worship and government
 - Absent or weak preaching, no exclusive principle, no church officers duties and responsibilities, no effective discipline
- Can lead to moral fuzziness—adoption worldly lifestyle (live like neighbors)
- Often adopts current popular unbiblical stance on social and political issues
- Actually is divisive
 - Continual criticism of other churches, even sound ones
 - Divides generations
 - Gets most members from other churches, not actual conversions

Meeting the Challenge of the Postmodern Emerging Church

- Biblical, enthusiastic, confessional churches
- Apply covenant theology to next generation
- Shine as light in post-modern world
- Point to the Rock that does not move