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Biblical Hermeneutics and Postmodernism

By Douglas Brown, PhD

In Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, Humpty Dumpty and Alice share this playful exchange:

"And only *one* for birthday presents, you know. There's glory for you!"

"I don't know what you mean by 'glory'," Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't—till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knock-down argument for you!'"

"But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument'," Alice objected.

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all."

While Carroll wrote long before the rise of postmodernism, his fictional dialogue anticipated the hermeneutical chaos raised in postmodern thinking. We see Alice's confusion and Humpty Dumpty's disdain. Alice can't quite wrap her mind

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around what Humpty Dumpty is saying; meanwhile Humpty Dumpty appears to enjoy the confusion his semantic wordplay is causing. This is the same kind of confusion postmoderns champion. Carroll's fantasy has become reality. Postmodernism raises fundamental questions about the validity of communication. Questions such as, where does meaning originate? Who (or what) controls meaning? How do we know what truth is? Is truth objective and knowable? Is communication even possible?

The purpose of this article is to help believers better understand postmodernism and how postmodern thinking has affected the interpretation of the Bible. After exploring the historical roots of postmodernism, we will discuss what postmodern hermeneutics looks like and how it has crept into Christianity. Finally, I will offer some guidance for how followers of Christ should respond to postmodernism.

The Rise of Postmodernism

In order to understand postmodernism, it is helpful to survey its historical background. Scholars basically divide Western thought into three basic eras: premodernism, modernism, and postmodernism. In the premodern worldview, there was a basic belief in God. The Bible was accepted as true

and trustworthy and therefore authoritative. Truth was thought to exist "from above," as revealed by God. It was objective and knowable. In the area of hermeneutics there was a variety of approaches toward the Bible. Most premodern theologians, however, shared a common understanding that the meaning of the text could be uncovered and understood. There was confidence that God's authorial intent in Scripture could be discovered through the study of God's Word.

The Enlightenment marked the beginning of the modern era in Western thought. With the rise of reason in religion and philosophy, rationalism became the accepted authority. The supernaturalism of the Bible came under attack as theologians began to doubt the miraculous. The miracles of the Bible were accounted for or explained away through natural means. Truth was still thought to be objective and knowable, but instead of coming from God it was found in the material world. Truth was thought to be discovered primarily through rational and empirical means—the scientific method. Generally, modernists believed they could investigate and gather data objectively without bias. Hermeneutically, modernism asserted that the meaning of a text can be discovered primarily through historical

reconstruction. Kevin Vanhoozer affirms, "While modern historical critics may not view the authors of the Bible as inspired, the original meaning remains the object of interpretation for them as well."¹ In relation to the Bible, this led to the historical critical method.² Historical criticism led to entrenched skepticism and anti-supernaturalism about the Bible's historicity. Historical critics demanded that biblical miracles must be interpreted with the experience of today. In other words, since modernists did not see or experience miracles, they believed that miracles simply are not possible. Vanhoozer summarizes the similarity between the premodern and the modern eras: "the pursuit of premodernity and modernity alike shared a similar aim in interpretation: to recover the meaning of the text, understood in terms of the intention of the author. . . . In short, the author's intention is the object of traditional interpretation, the longed-for 'home of meaning' where the author's will, words, and world coincide."³

Many believe that postmodernism, which arose in the second half of the twentieth century, is the logical outcome of modernism:⁴ "Postmodernism is a reaction (or perhaps more appropriately, a disillusioned response) to modernism's failed promise of using human

Dr. Brown: Biblical Hermeneutics and Postmodernism



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reason alone to better mankind and make the world a better place.”⁵ Postmodernism finds its roots in existential philosophy as expressed in especially the writings of Martin Heidegger. One of its defining goals is the disavowal of objective truth.⁶ For postmoderns, truth is not something to be found or discovered. This type of pursuit is impossible for a couple of reasons. First, truth cannot be discovered because every interpreter is laden with pre-understanding and biases that prevent him from seeing outside his own situation. Second, postmoderns reject the existence of universal metanarratives to explain the world—absolute truths do not exist in postmodern thinking.⁷ Instead,

postmodernism sees truth as relative and subjective. Each interpreter creates his or her own truth. What is true for one may not be true for another. The ultimate authority is not found in God (premodernism), the world (modernism), but the individual. D. A. Carson states this well: “Postmodernism is an outlook that depends not a little on what are perceived to be the fundamental limitations on the power of interpretation: that is, since interpretation can never be more than *my* interpretation or *our* interpretation, no purely objective stance is possible.”⁸ Truth is merely how each individual perceives it.

The ramifications of postmodernism have been catastrophic not only in hermeneutics but across society. Morally, people have abandoned absolutes and opted for radical relativism. Right is now wrong, and wrong is right. Culturally, society has plunged headlong into radical pluralism.⁹ It is no longer acceptable to hold exclusive beliefs. In fact, one is expected to approve others’ beliefs. Tolerance is now society’s greatest virtue. In relation to religion, postmodernism leads ultimately to universalism. Hermeneutically, it has led to the abandonment of truth and the absence of meaning. As an absolute, postmodernism espouses the untenable conundrum that no one can claim the

truth. Carson asserts, "Philosophical pluralism has generated many approaches in support of one stance: namely, that any notion that a particular ideological or religious claim is intrinsically superior to another is necessarily wrong."¹⁰ Abdu Murray claims that the culture is now post-truth.¹¹ The *Oxford Dictionary*, which selected "post-truth" as its 2016 word of the year, defines it as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief."¹² Murray explains that in post-truth thinking facts are subordinated to preferences.

The Hermeneutics of Postmodernism

The hermeneutics of postmodernism are very diverse and difficult to understand.¹³ Written communication has three components: the author, the text, and the reader. As already noted, premodern and modern interpreters tried to uncover the intention of the author as expressed in the text. What is consistent in postmodern approaches of interpretation is that the author no longer controls the meaning of the text. Authorial intention is irrelevant in postmodern interpretation. Further, the text itself does not control meaning. The text is devoid of meaning altogether. In postmodern

thinking, the reader not only *controls* the meaning but actually *creates* it. The text is merely an opportunity to explore the reader's own perspectives. Vanhoozer explains: "Postmodernity is the triumph of situatedness—in race, gender, class—over detached objectivity. . . . Postmoderns typically think of interpretation as a political act, a means of colonizing and capturing texts and whole fields of discourse."¹⁴

The autonomy of the reader is seen in the field of poststructuralism, for example. Poststructuralists see a text as a web of signs with infinite possible meanings—a playground for playing semantic games. Language is open-ended and detached from historical references. Another common postmodern approach is reader-response, as promoted by Stanley Fish.¹⁵ Fish argues that since it is impossible to recover the authorial intent, interpretive communities should read texts for their own benefit. So interpretive communities should legitimately read their own meanings into texts. Perhaps the most radical school of thought within postmodernism is deconstruction. The French philosopher Jacques Derrida, also known as the father of philosophic postmodernism, developed deconstruction to free the reader from philosophic restraints to find

meaning.¹⁶ Following Friedrich Nietzsche, he attacked Western philosophy and especially traditional views on epistemology—the theory of knowledge and truth. In order to better grasp postmodernism, one must begin to wade into the quagmire of epistemology, metaphysics, and theories of truth.¹⁷ Adu-Gyamfi summarizes this well:

"Postmodernism permits the reader unlimited freedom in reading, complete autonomy, the liberty or license to interpret the text without restraint. Once the text is empty of any objective content, it is open to any number of readings. So the postmodern reader, critical and creative, takes on an unprecedented significance by subjectively constructing meaning."¹⁸

Postmodernism and Christianity

Postmodern theology is very diverse and varied.¹⁹ Many of its forms are extensions of liberal theology within a postmodern worldview. What postmodern theologians share is a rejection of any kind of universal metanarratives, or absolute truths. Consequently, they resist systematic approaches to theology and the Bible. For postmodern theologians, theological systems exclude and marginalize to make things fit the system, and therefore, repress ideas and

other interpreters. Instead they use the Bible to affirm their own situation or cause.²⁰ Interpreting the Bible is about contextualizing it for their respective context.

Some evangelicals have also ventured into postmodernism in an attempt for relevancy. Here are a couple of examples. First, the Emergent Church movement sprang up rapidly in the mid-2000s with national figures such as Rob Bell, Brian McLaren, and Mark Driscoll. While emergent church leaders promised relevancy, the movement ultimately has proved to erode theological and moral foundations within Christianity.²¹ Second, and more substantial, is postconservative theology as represented by Stanley Grenz, Roger Olson, and Nancey Murphy. Osborne characterizes their approach as follows: "They believe the emphasis must shift from battles over the Bible, theological details and liberalism to a new constructive theology that is more open to innovation and

movement. . . . Postconservatives have abandoned foundationalism and believe that the spiritual experience of the church community should take priority over propositional truth—a relational theology."²² They also take a much softer approach toward dialogue with nonconservatives.

Conclusion: A Call for Vigilance

Christians need to understand what postmodernism is and how it affects hermeneutics. Postmodernism undercuts the very possibility of interpreting and applying the Bible. Throughout church history, followers of Christ have believed that the Bible is God's Word—God's revealed truth about Himself and His works in written form. Postmodernism destroys the concept of objective truth and undermines the interpretive process. The church needs vigilance to promote a high view of Scripture and to handle the Word of God correctly.

Furthermore, believers need to understand postmodernism so that they are better equipped to reach people who are entrenched in a postmodern worldview. Postmodern thinking has greatly affected our culture. Relativism, skepticism, and pluralism are common. Christians need to know how to answer postmoderns' questions and provide a reasonable defense for their faith. The church needs vigilance to share and defend the faith.

Finally, the church needs vigilance to prepare the next generation to face the challenges of postmodernism. Equipping youth with a biblical worldview is essential if they are to avoid the moral and philosophical relativism in our culture. High school and college students are abandoning the church in alarming numbers. Pastors and parents need to equip youth for the postmodern world they will encounter.

¹Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 47.

²See Eta Linnemann, *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology: Reflections of a Bultmannian Turned Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2001).

³Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text*, 74.

⁴Robert McQuilkin and Bradford Mullen, "The Impact of Postmodern Thinking on Evangelical Hermeneutics," *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society* 40 (1997): 69–71. Michael Adeyemi Adegbola, "Evangelical Critique of the Influence of Postmodern Worldview on Biblical Hermeneutics, Christian Theology and the Emerging Church Movement (ECM)," *Ogbomoso Journal of Theology* 20 (2015): 67–69.

⁵Yam Adu-Gyamfi, "Adverse Effects of Postmodernism on Interpretation of the Bible," *Ogbomoso Journal of Theology* 20 (2015): 1. See Kevin Vanhoozer, "Theology and the Condition of Postmodernity: A Report on Knowledge (of God)," in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. K. Vanhoozer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 6–9.

⁶Abdu Murray, *Saving Truth: Finding Meaning and Clarity in a Post-Truth World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 14.

⁷Vanhoozer, "Theology and the Condition of Postmodernity," 9–10.

⁸D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism*, 15th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 57.

⁹Carson, *The Gagging of God*, 13–54.

¹⁰Carson, *The Gagging of God*, 19.

¹¹Murray, *Saving Truth*, 12–15.

¹²Amy B. Wang, "'Post-Truth' Named 2016 Word of the Year by Oxford Dictionaries," *Washington Post*, November 16, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/11/16/post-truth-named-2016-word-of-the-year-by-oxford-dictionaries/?noredirect=on>.

¹³These titles provide helpful summaries of postmodernism's hermeneutics: Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, rev. and expanded 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 465–520; and John S. Feinberg, *No One like Him: The Doctrine of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 95–109.

¹⁴Kevin Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation? Truth, Scripture, and Hermeneutics," *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society* 48 (2005): 92.

¹⁵Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

¹⁶Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 482.

¹⁷See David K. Clark, *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003).

¹⁸Adu-Gyamfi, "Adverse Effects of Postmodernism," 7–8.

¹⁹Vanhoozer, "Theology and the Condition of Postmodernity," 19–20.

²⁰Vanhoozer, "Theology and the Condition of Postmodernity," 16.

²¹See, for example, Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), and Rob Bell, *Love Wins* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011).

²²Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 402.



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