

## **POSTMODERNISM**

### **1. Hook.**

- a. True or false?
  - (1) “There is no such thing as absolute truth. Two people could define truth in totally conflicting ways, but both could still be correct.”
  - (2) “There are no absolute standards that apply to everybody in all situations.”

### **2. Definitions.**

- a. Postmodernism: “a broad and somewhat ambiguous term used to describe a philosophical and cultural reaction to the convictions of Modernism (which is sometimes equated with Humanism). Postmodernism is the philosophical proposal that reality is ultimately inaccessible by human investigation, that knowledge is a social construction, that truth-claims are political power plays, and that the meaning of words is to be determined by readers not authors. In brief, reality is what individuals or social groups make it to be.”<sup>1</sup>
- b. Deconstruction: Meaning within a “text” is impossible to pin down.
  - (1) Closely related to postmodernism is deconstruction. Jacques Derrida, the leading literary deconstructionist, described deconstruction as the “death of the author” and “death of the text.” According to Derrida, meaning is created by the reader in the act of reading. The text must be deconstructed in order to get rid of the author and let the text live as a liberating word.

### **3. Beliefs.**

- a. Man cannot epistemologically encounter the Thing-in-itself.
- b. Objectivity is an illusion.
- c. Truth does not correspond to reality.
  - (1) “For the pragmatist [postmodernist], true sentences are not true because they correspond to reality, and so there is no need to worry what sort of reality, if any, a given sentence corresponds to—no need to worry about what ‘makes’ it true.”<sup>2</sup>
  - (2) Correspondence theory of truth: the truth or falsity of a statement is determined only by how it relates to the world and whether it accurately describes that world. True beliefs and true statements correspond to the actual state of affairs. A relationship between thoughts or statements on one hand, and things or facts on the other, exists.
  - (3) Coherence theory of truth: truth is coherence within some specified set of sentences, propositions or beliefs. Truth is a property of whole systems of propositions and can be ascribed to individual propositions only derivatively according to their coherence with the whole.
- d. There is only private truth. There is no public or universal truth.

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<sup>1</sup> Summit Ministries ([www.summit.org](http://www.summit.org)).

<sup>2</sup> Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1982), xvi.

- (1) “Truth is that which is agreed upon by the community to be beneficial to that community. Only those within our group have the ability or right to comment upon or criticize ‘our’ truth.”<sup>3</sup>
- (2) “People are still looking for truth, meaning, and existence. However, now they’re finding it in little stories that don’t claim to be universal.”<sup>4</sup>
- (3) **Jdg 17:6** 6 In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.
- (4) **Jer 7:28** 28 And you [Jeremiah] shall say to them, This is the nation that did not obey the voice of Yahweh their God and did not accept discipline. Truth has perished. It is cut off from their lips.
- e. There are narratives, but no one grand metanarrative that accounts for all reality.
  - (1) “Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodernism as incredulity toward metanarratives.”<sup>5</sup>
- f. Truth is created not discovered.
  - (1) “For Rorty, the key slogan of postmodernism is, ‘Truth is made, not found.’ In other words, it is not ‘out there,’ objective, waiting to be discovered. Beliefs are merely human constructions, like the gadgets of modern technology.”<sup>6</sup>
- g. All metanarratives are power plays.
  - (1) Meta-narratives and all constructs of truth are used by those in power to control the disenfranchised.<sup>7</sup>
  - (2) “Truth isn’t outside of power, or lacking in power: contrary to a myth whose history and functions would repay further study, truth isn’t the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true from false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.”<sup>8</sup>
  - (3) “...[W]e can trace a movement from (1) a ‘premodern’ acceptance of a metanarrative written by God and revealed in Scripture to (2) a ‘modern’ metanarrative of universal reason yielding truth about reality to (3) a ‘postmodern’ reduction of all metanarratives to power plays.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ed Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches*, 132.

<sup>4</sup> Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches*, 132.

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard.

<sup>6</sup> Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth*, 242.

<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault.

<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 72-73.

<sup>9</sup> James W. Sire. *The Universe Next Door*, 5th ed., Kindle Locations 2521-2522.

- (4) Example: the American new media faulted President Trump for lying, but for decades American universities have been teaching students all truth is relative and that claims to truth are power plays. Go figure.

### Summary of Postmodernism

Belief	Statement
The denial of personal objectivity.	"I do believe in God, but that's really the influence of my parents. Nobody can no for sure."
The uncertainty of knowledge.	"The government says the Atkins diet doesn't work, but who really knows for sure."
The death of any all-inclusive explanation.	"You know, things just don't fit into a nice, neat explanation."
The denial of the inherent goodness of knowledge.	"The more knowledge out there, the more dangerous the world is becoming."
The rejection of progress.	"I have all this technology, but I'm still not happy."
The supremacy of community-based knowledge.	"It's arrogant to think that I, alone have figured out spiritual truth."
The disbelief in objective inquiry.	"Here's what I think that verse means, but I could be wrong. What's your interpretation?"

#### 4. History.

- The term "postmodernism" first entered the philosophical lexicon in 1979, with the publication of *The Postmodern Condition* by Jean-François Lyotard.
- Postmodernism is a reaction to modernism, which we can agree was inadequate.
- Modernism emphasises objective reason. Postmodernism emphasises subjective experience.<sup>10</sup>
- Modernism emphasises the individual. Postmodernism emphasises community.

#### Modernism and Postmodernism Compared

Modernism	Postmodernism
Nationalism	Globalism
Reason	Experience
Optimism	Pessimism
Didactic	Narrative
Scientists	Artists
Noncontradiction	Contradiction
Discover truth	Create truth
Metanarrative	Narratives

#### 5. Strategy.

- Indoctrinate the young.
  - "There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative. If this belief is put to the test, one can count on the students' reaction: They will be uncomprehending. That anyone would regard the proposition as not self-evident astonishes them, as though he were calling into question  $2+2=4$ . . . . Openness—

<sup>10</sup> A. Malphurs, *Planting New Churches*, 396.

and the relativism that makes it the only plausible stance in the face of various claims to truth and various ways of life and kinds of human beings—is the great insight of our times.... The study of history and of culture [according to this view] teaches that all the world was mad in the past; men always thought they were right, and that led to wars, persecutions, slavery, xenophobia, racism, and chauvinism. The point is not to correct the mistakes and really be right; rather it is not to think you are right at all. The students, of course, cannot defend their opinion. It is something with which they have been indoctrinated.”<sup>11</sup>

- (2) Example: most university literature departments are dominated by deconstruction, a postmodern view of language.
- b. Destroy all metanarratives (except its own metanarrative).
  - (1) “A meta-narrative is a unifying cultural value that explains and gives purpose to life, meaning, and existence. It’s the reason people go to work and live their lives. ...Christianity is a meta-narrative.”<sup>12</sup>
- c. Portray Christianity as just another subjective mythology.
- d. Portray Christianity as a religious power play.
- e. Use Christian terminology and symbols, but change their meaning.
  - (1) Beware of those who, in order to express the leap of faith they are forced to take, use Christian symbols, not to express Christian concepts, but an irrational mysticism.<sup>13</sup>

## 6. Weaknesses.

- a. It’s an overreaction to modernism.
  - (1) It swings the pendulum way too far in the direction of the subjective.
- b. It’s self-refuting.
  - (1) Postmodernism attacks all metanarratives, but it is metanarrative. It asserts all metanarratives are mere power plays, but it is a metanarrative. If there is no objective truth, then how can it assert to objective truth?
- c. It asserts what it cannot prove.
  - (1) It doesn’t just attack some truth claims. It attacks all truth claims.
- d. It destroys and never builds.
  - (1) “...[T]here is a shift from (1) the ‘premodern’ theistic notion that human beings are dignified by being created in the image of God to (2) the ‘modern’ notion that human beings are the product of their DNA template, plate, which itself is the result of unplanned evolution based on chance mutations and the survival of the fittest, to (3) the ‘postmodern’ notion of an insubstantial self constructed by the language it uses to describe itself.”<sup>14</sup>
  - (2) “In a brilliant parable written over a hundred years ago, Friedrich Nietzsche saw it all. A culture cannot lose its philosophic center without the most serious of consequences, not just to the philosophy on which it was based but to the whole

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<sup>11</sup> Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987) 25-26.

<sup>12</sup> Ed Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches*, 132.

<sup>13</sup> Francis A. Schaeffer.

<sup>14</sup> James W. Sire. *The Universe Next Door*, 5th ed., Kindle Locations 2534-2536.

superstructure of culture and even each person's notion of who he or she is. Everything changes. When God dies, both the substance and the value of everything else die too. The acknowledgment of the death of God is the beginning of post-modern modern wisdom. It is also the end of postmodern wisdom."<sup>15</sup>

- e. It obliterates real meaning and purpose.
- f. It destroys legitimate power.
- g. It causes division.
  - (1) “[The] quest for power is the characteristic feature of modern ‘higher’ education. Students are taught that the world is divided into various groups whose primary identity is reducible to power differentials. A common pursuit of truth is replaced by overt and covert power struggles. In this new and barren world of power, the pursuit of the good, true, and beautiful is replaced by grievance and accusation. Concerted efforts to locate and correct injustice (a concept derived from a theistic account of the world) have been replaced by sweeping claims of ‘systemic’ injustice, in which the entire civilisational edifice must be destroyed in the name of justice. But justice torn from its theistic grounding is merely a blunt instrument of power disguised in the moral language of a rejected world. Such a notion represents a self-refuting enterprise that will usher in not justice but unrestrained power cloaked in the God-haunted language of equality, social justice, and anti-racism.”<sup>16</sup>
- h. It leads to a jump into the irrational.
  - (1) “Postmodernism pulls the smiling mask of arrogance from the face of naturalism. The face behind the mask displays an ever-shifting countenance: there is the anguish of Nietzsche railing against the herd mentality of the mass of humanity, the ecstatic joy of Nietzsche willing into being the Overman, the leering visage of Foucault seeking the intensification of sexual experience, the comic grin of Derrida as he deconstructs all discourse including his own, and the play of irony around the lips of Rorty as he plumps for a foundationless solidarity. But no face displays a confidence in truth, a trust in reality or a credible hope for the future.”<sup>17</sup>
- i. It results in groupthink.
  - (1) “Postmoderns generally choose the worldview of their community. They don’t choose a worldview because it’s true.”<sup>18</sup>
  - (2) “Ours is an age in which ‘conclusions’ are arrived at by distributing questionnaires to a cross-section of the population or by holding a microphone before the lips of casually selected passers-by in the street.... In the sphere of religious and moral thinking we are rapidly heading for a state of intellectual anarchy in which the difference between truth and falsehood will no longer be

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<sup>15</sup> James Sire, *The Universe Next Door*.

<sup>16</sup> Mark T. Mitchell, “The Death of God and the Death of Higher Education,” Real Clear Education, April 2, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> James W. Sire. *The Universe Next Door*, 5th ed., Kindle Locations 2696-2700.

<sup>18</sup> Unknown speaker at Dallas Theological Seminary.

recognized. Indeed, it would seem possible that the words true and false will eventually (and logically) be replaced by the words likeable and dislikable.”<sup>19</sup>

- j. It leads to apathy and the pursuit of personal peace and affluence.
  - (1) “Everything’s boring, utterly boring—no one can find any meaning in it.”<sup>20</sup>
  - (2) “We exist within a set of cultural values that has repudiated many of the assumptions of modernity, such as the importance of the rational, the propriety of the orderly, and the possibility of objective truth. We live in a world where personality has more street value than character, where psychological wholeness is more valued than spiritual authenticity. We find ourselves in a world where pleasures are embraced without moral norms or a sense of social responsibility. Christian truth is attacked not so much for its particular assertions as for its fundamental claim that there is such a thing as binding, objective truth. The quest for truth has been replaced by the preoccupation with pleasure and entertainment. Thus, we live in a world of the therapeutic and the psychological, where people are engaged in an endless pursuit of self-fulfillment and entitlement. Sin has become little more than the infringement of personal rights and privileges; there is little thought of defining it by the standard of the holiness of God.”<sup>21</sup>
- k. It undercuts morality and results in injustice.
  - (1) **Ro 1:18-29** 18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. 19 For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 20 For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. 21 For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Claiming to be wise, they became fools, 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. 24 Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, 25 because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. 26 For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions.... 28 And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. 29 They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil....
  - (2) **Ro 2:8** 8 ...But for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury.
  - (3) **Is 59:15** 15 Truth is lacking, and he who departs from evil makes himself a prey. Yahweh saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice.
  - (4) **Jn 18:38** 38 Pilate said to him, What is truth? After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, I find no guilt in him.

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<sup>19</sup> Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind: How Should a Christian Think?* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant, 1963) 107.

<sup>20</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message*, Ec 1:7-8.

<sup>21</sup> John D. Hannah, *Our Legacy*, 18.

## 7. Response.

- a. Defend truth itself.
  - (1) Truth does exist.
    - (a) **Jn 1:17** 17 Grace and truth came through Jesus Messiah.
    - (b) **Jn 14:6** 6 Jesus said to him, I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.
    - (c) **Jn 16:13** 13 When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth....
  - (2) Living in accordance with the truth leads to righteousness and blessing.
    - (a) **Mal 2:6** 6 True instruction was in his mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and he turned many from iniquity.
    - (b) **Jn 8:31-32** 31 So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, 32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.
    - (c) **2 Jn 4** 4 I rejoiced greatly to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as we were commanded by the Father.
- b. Assert and prove Christianity is the true grand metanarrative, not just another myth.
  - (1) “In the minds of some Christians, since we live in a postmodern culture, we should abandon any attempt to commend our faith rationally as the truth about reality. Instead we just share our narrative and invite people to join in it. ...[T]his is a suicidal course of action. It will destroy any sense of the church’s claim to have the truth about the way the world is—that will be given by scientific naturalism—and Christianity will be seen as mere mythology.”<sup>22</sup>
  - (2) “Christianity is without a serious secular opponent. There are no potent rivals in our culture making claims to having objective, final truth. Such truth claims have been abandoned in the postmodern experience.”<sup>23</sup>
  - (3) “Christianity is not a compartment of our imagination.”<sup>24</sup>
  - (4) “Give reasons. ...Even in a postmodern age, people still care about reasons.”<sup>25</sup>
  - (5) Christianity deals with *all* things. See *All*.
- c. Emphasise Jesus’ cross.
  - (1) “The Christian story is a love story; all other stories are power stories. Power stories can be deconstructed. The Christian love story cannot.”<sup>26</sup>
  - (2) “The resurrection of Christ is a profound symbol of a truth embedded in the very structure of reality. Logos prevails.”<sup>27</sup>
  - (3) Christianity is about the most powerful voluntarily becoming powerless.

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<sup>22</sup> William L. Craig.

<sup>23</sup> John D. Hannah, *Our Legacy*, 19.

<sup>24</sup> Timothy Tennant.

<sup>25</sup> Gregory Koukl, *Tactics*, 190.

<sup>26</sup> N. T. Wright.

<sup>27</sup> Mark T. Mitchell, “The Death of God and the Death of Higher Education,” Real Clear Education, April 2, 2021.

- (a) **Php 2:5-8** 5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Messiah Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.
- (4) Christianity is able to keep the objective and the subjective in perfect balance because it has an objective-subjective God, an objective-subjective Saviour, an objective-subjective Bible, and an objective-subjective faith.
- d. Stop postmodernism from infiltrating the Church.
- (1) “Premoderns seek goodness, moderns seek truth, and postmoderns seek beauty. So beautiful art is a doorway to postmoderns.”<sup>28</sup>
- (2) “The very community that historically has been deeply interested in transcendent, timeless truth seems intent upon focusing on the merely private, personal, and temporal. If I may be so blunt, the church has lost its soul. The quest for contemporary relevance has led it down the path of increasing irrelevancy and marginalization.”<sup>29</sup>
- (3) Ten traits of postmodern churches are:
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| (a) Being unashamedly spiritual.             | (f) Participating in ancient patterns. |
| (b) Promoting incarnational ministry.        | (g) Visualising worship.               |
| (c) Engaging in service.                     | (h) Connecting with technology.        |
| (d) Valuing experiential praise.             | (i) Living community.                  |
| (e) Preaching narrative expository messages. | (j) Leading by transparency and team.  |
- e. Explain the weaknesses of postmodernism to the next generation.
- f. Agree with postmodernism about the weaknesses of modernism without becoming a postmodernist.
- g. Don’t employ the Christian faith as a power play.
- h. Be genuine and transparent.
- (1) Postmoderns are looking for people who are genuine and transparent.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Unknown speaker at Dallas Theological Seminary.

<sup>29</sup> John D. Hannah, *Our Legacy*, 18.

<sup>30</sup> Ed Stetzer, 137.



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