Truth or Snare

By Kurt Theodore Wise

The Post-Truth Theology of Postmodern Theologians

The end of the Twentieth century has witnessed an epistemological paradigm shift. Titles such as "*Reality Isn't What it Used to Be*,"[1] or "*Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be*"[2] suggests that the times are definitely changing. Today's thinkers are moving beyond the traditional view of knowledge and truth and are embracing a new vision of reality. Many Christian theologians, for better or worse, are embracing elements of this new vision in an attempt to remain contemporary and as a result the traditional concept of truth is being radically altered. No longer is there an objective reality that can be called truth. Rather, truth is that which is constructed by minds shaped by a local community's apprehension and description of reality. The consequences of embracing this new vision of reality could be disastrous for evangelicalism. Only a truly biblical view of truth can maintain a sufficient ground for evangelical theology.

While truth is a major component of the new paradigm shift, it is not the only component. It involves much more than just how we know things, it also involves the total culture. Postmodern observers and evangelical theologians J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh point to the changing attitudes towards Christopher Columbus in attempting to

---

[1] Walter Truett Anderson, *Reality Isn't What It Used to Be: Theatrical Politics, Ready-to-Wear Religion, Global Myths, Primitive Chic and Other Wonders of the Postmodern World* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990).

[2] J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1995).

relate the nature and scope of the transformation taking place in modern worldviews. While the five-hundredth anniversary of Columbus' "discovery" of the Americas was celebrated by many in 1992, others mourned what they perceived to be the genesis of centuries of oppression and abuse of the natives and the land.[3] Why point out the changing attitudes toward Columbus? As Middleton and Walsh explain, "The significance of the Columbus debate is that it illustrates the shift in worldview and cultural sensibility from the modern to the postmodern world."[4] Postmodernism, the new vision of reality, is seen against the backdrop of the object of its criticisms - Modernism. A brief description of Modernism is given by theologian Paul R. Shockley who says, "The worldview of modernism arose in response to the single most important social agent in the eighteenth century, the Enlightenment or 'scientific revolution.'. . .Within modernism, three dominant ideas prevail: 1). Reason is employed through the natural sciences to examine and comprehend all aspects of life. This means that absolutely nothing is to be accepted by faith. 2). The laws of human existence and nature can be discovered. 3). The scientific method can create progressively better societies and better people."[5] Other descriptions of modernism include such elements as the belief that knowledge is inherently good,[6] the belief that the will of man is autonomous, and the skeptical materialistic view of reality. [7]

---

[3] Ibid., 10.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Paul Shockley, "Postmodernism as a Basis for Society?," Appendix B to *The God of the Bible and Other Gods*, Robert P. Lightner (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1998), 198.

[6] Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eardman's Publishing Company, 1996), 4.

[7] Jim Leffel, "Our Old Challenge: Modernism," in *The Death of Truth* ed. Dennis

Christian philosopher Douglas Groothuis describes the reaction of postmodernism against the Enlightenment ideal, "The idea of truth as objective, we are told, must be abandoned with the demise of modernism, which is regarded as the misguided attempt of the Enlightenment to attain objective certitude on matters of philosophical, scientific and moral concern. We are postmodern now and have left behind such grandiose endeavors for the sake of more modest aims."[8] Christian apologist Jim Leffel briefly describes the main ingredients of the new vision. "Postmodernists believe that truth is created, not discovered. They think things like reason, rationality, and confidence in science are cultural biases. They contend that those who trust reason - and things based on reason, like science, Western education, and governmental structures - unknowingly act out their European cultural conditioning. This conditioning seeks to keep power in the hands of the social elite." [9] It is no wonder then that there has been such a reaction against portraying Columbus as a discoverer. To postmoderns and to the indigenous peoples of the Americas he was an oppressor.

Postmodern theologian Stanley J. Grenz also attempts to illustrate the change in thinking that has taken place over the last few decades by using an element of contemporary culture. Grenz compares the worldview of the original "Star Trek" TV series with that of its more recent incarnation, "Star Trek: The Next Generation." Grenz compares two of the main characters from both programs. "The hero of the old 'Star Trek' was Mr. Spock. Although the only crew member who came from another planet

---

McCallum (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 1996), p 21.

[8] Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 20.

[9] Leffel, "Our Old Challenge: Modernism," 20.

(Vulcan), his partially alien status actually served as a transcendent human ideal. Spock was the ideal Enlightenment man, completely rational and without emotion (or with his emotions in check). Repeatedly, his dispassionate rationality provided the calculative key necessary to solve the problems encountered by the *Enterprise*. According to the creators of "Star Trek," in the end our problems are rational and, therefore, they require rational expertise."[10]

Next, Grenz analyzes Data, a character in the more recent series. "In 'The Next Generation,' Data replaces Spock. In a sense, Data is Spock, the fully rational thinker capable of superhuman intellectual feats. Despite his seemingly perfect intellect, rather than being the transcendent human ideal Spock embodies, he is an android - a subhuman machine. His desire is not only to understand what it means to be human, but also to become human. However, he lacks certain necessary aspects of humanness, including a sense of humor, emotion, and the ability to dream. . . ."[11] To postmodernists, it seems, human beings are messy creatures, filled with subjective impulses, cultural conditionings, and limited rational capacities. As such, how could humans ever possibly arrive at any objective conclusions about truth? Pessimism about the triumph of human progress has set in.

The results of this paradigm shift are staggering. Political correctness, liberation theologies, ethnic cleansing, and moral disintegration are all facilitated by the postmodern rejection of universal systems of knowledge, or metanarratives. This is illustrated in the

---

[10] Stanley J. Grenz, "Star Trek and the Next Generation," in *The Challenge of Postmodernism*, 2d ed., ed. David S. Dockery (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2001), 78.

[11] Grenz, "Star Trek and The Next Generation," 81.

ethnic conflicts being waged in the former Soviet Union or its satellites.[12] The communist meta-narrative kept the various groups within the Soviet Union in check, but with the demise of the Union and its system of thought, the unity has disintegrated into armed conflict. Although not (yet) fought with physical force, conflict has also been waged in the United States. Groothuis says:

> Just as warfare between nations breaks out after the breakdown of diplomacy, and civil wars break out after the breakdown of agreed-upon legal norms, so culture wars break out after the break down of a consensual understanding of truth as objective and knowable through rational investigation and persuasion. When reasonable debate serves no purpose in achieving a knowledge of truth, all that remains are the machinations of power - whether the cause be racial, sexual or religious. Citizens become tribes-people with little sense of the public good. The maxim of "speaking truth to power" is transformed into "mobilizing our power to overcome the other's power.[13]

Disorientation is another result of the postmodern tidal wave, or what theologian Leonard Sweet calls the "soul tsunami."[14] The postmodern tendency to attempt to liberate people by means of pointing out their bondage to perspective, i.e by "deconstructing" a person's or people's metanarrative, often leaves them with the realization that there is no objective truth, just the constructs of culture. Middleton explains: "The paradox, however, is that with liberation comes disorientation, for at least two reasons. First of all, since it is precisely the function of a social construction of reality to shield us from the abyss of meaninglessness by providing us with a 'sacred canopy' of meaning and order, the

---

[12] Middleton, 75-76.

[13] Groothuis, 26.

[14] Leonard Sweet, *Soul Tsunami: Sink or Swim in New Millennium Culture* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: ZondervanPublishingHouse, 1999), 16-17.

realization that this canopy is humanly constructed (not an inevitable given) leaves us with a sense of vertigo, unprotected before the abyss."[15] Second, not only do we lose the 'sacred canopy' that gives meaning and order, we realize that we have been participants, whether active or passive, in constructing a reality that is often violent and terrifying.[16] Author Peter Berger says, "This is the nightmare *par excellence*, in which the individual is submerged in a world of disorder, senselessness and madness. Reality and identity are malignantly transformed into meaningless figures of horror. To be in a society is to be 'sane' precisely in the sense of being shielded from the ultimate 'insanity' of anomic terror. Anonomy[17] is unbearable to the point where the individual may seek death in preference to it."[18]

Many postmodernists are not so pessimistic, however, because new opportunities are now abundant. No longer must minorities be oppressed by the metanarratives constructed through Enlightenment ideals. Constructivist postmodernists are empowered to create, or construct, their own realities and thus press forward their own agendas through social or political activism.[19] One example of 'reality construction' is the political correctness movement which is sweeping not only American academia but all of society as

---

[15] Middleton, 36.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Anonomy is the loss of any meaningful order to the world which brings security, see Middleton, 36.

[18] Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, N.Y.: Nicholas Hays, 1978), 22 quoted in Middleton, 36.

[19] Jim Leffel, "Postmodernism and 'The Myth of Progress,'" in *The Death of Truth*, ed. Dennis McCallum (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 1996), 48.

well. These postmodernists do not face, as Nietzsche did, the void of meaninglessness. Instead they look forward to the new opportunities for empowerment that come with the paradigm shift from modernism.

That a paradigm shift has occurred is obvious and cannot be overlooked. Discovering the cause of this shift, however, is prerequisite to dealing effectively with it. One possible explanation is found in the natural tendency towards change in human thinking. Philosopher Hilary Putnam says, "But in time, both in philosophy and politics, new ideas become old ideas; what was once challenging, becomes predictable and boring; and what once served to focus attention where it should be focused, later keeps discussion from considering new alternatives."[20] As a result of this stagnation new ideas are put forth that challenge traditional thinking patterns. This, of course, can explain new directions in philosophy or other disciplines but it is not alone sufficient to explain a massive paradigm shift in a whole culture. The move from modernism to postmodernism has a greater cause than just boredom, even if that is one of its elements.

The problem with modernism is that it is dying the death of failure. The idea of progress has been bludgeoned by the brute facts of poverty, illiteracy, hunger, and homelessness. Weapons of mass destruction and the inability of the modern consensus to construct lasting peace have left the postmodern generation with an uneasiness about the future. Economic security is far from certain, especially in the light of constant predictions that such government social programs as Social Security and Medicare are facing financial collapse. Modernity has simply failed to produce on its promises, especially as it relates to human welfare. Shockley says, "The single most important factor in modernism's downfall

---

[20] Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), X.

as a general consensus in Western culture is its failure to fulfill the innate human need for authentic personal peace."[21]

Another factor in the collapse of modernism is globalism.[22] The technological developments of the twentieth century have eliminated the cultural barriers between peoples and have granted easy, and near universal, access to various ideas and beliefs. With the vast array of different beliefs it becomes more and more difficult to assume that one particular view should dominate all others.

The rise of postmodernism must be understood in light of this collapse of the Enlightenment ideal. Grenz admits this when he says, "The postmodern ethos is on the one hand *modern*; it retains the modern. Rather than calling for a return to some premodern situation, the postmodern outlook accepts the Enlightenment, especially its elevation of skeptical rationality. On the other hand, the postmodern ethos is *post* modern; it sees the dangers inherent in the very skeptical rationality it accepts. For this reason, it seeks to live in a realm of chastened rationality."[23] Chastened rationality may be too generous a description of postmodernism, but the point remains, as the hope for progress and the confidence in reason began to fade a new way of thinking began to emerge. The postmodern age, in all of its contradictions and irrational behavior, seems to be the natural outworking of modernism's skepticism and materialism, the inevitable conclusion to an age of self-confidence and rugged individualism.

Like modernism, postmodernism has various, and possibly contradictory,

---

[21] Shockley, 200.

[22] Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2000), 170.

[23] Ibid., 168-169.

manifestations of its basic ideology. Modernism gave rise to such diverse movements as secular humanism, religious liberalism and pluralism, progressive capitalism, communism, and scientism. Postmodernism has as many variations as there are communities but nevertheless, there are certain tenets that define postmodernism. Following the works of philosophers such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Richard Rorty, postmodernists build a framework of ideas that constitute the tenets of postmodernism. These tenets are 1) the absence of absolute or objective truth, 2) the perspectival view of knowledge, 3) the idea that people are the product of their culture which means that objective reasoning does not exist, and 4) the assertion that totalizing systems of knowledge, i.e. meta-narratives,[24] are used to justify oppression and hence are unjustifiable.

The dismissal of objective reality is essential to the postmodern concept and this rejection is tied to the view of humans as distinctly social creatures. Grenz says, "The postmodern worldview operates with a community based understanding of truth. Not only the specific truths we accept, but even our understanding of truth, are a function of the community in which we participate. This, in turn, leads to a new conception of the relativity of truth. Not only is there no absolute truth, more significantly, truth is relative to the community in which we participate."[25] Postmodernists reject the objectivity of the Enlightenment model and thus foundationalism and the correspondence view of truth on which foundationalism depends. The correspondence view of truth simply means that truth is that which corresponds to its referent. Christian apologist and theologian Norman

---

[24] Ibid., 172.

[25] Grenz, "Star Trek and The Next Generation," 81.

Geisler says, "Truth about reality is what corresponds to the way things really are."[26] According to Christian philosopher Millard J. Erickson foundationalism is "the belief that it is possible to base knowledge on some sort of absolute first principles."[27] Correspondence relates to the nature of truth as objectively real while foundationalism relates to the ability to obtain certainty. If certain first principles can be demonstrated to be irrefutable premises, then any conclusions drawn from them should be certain.

Middleton notes the tension between the modern and postmodern views of truth:

> In [the Western] tradition, what is assumed to be *present* in our conceptual systems of truth is seen as a real *given* which exists prior to language and thought and which we have adequately grasped by our language and thought. That is, the Western intellectual tradition, and especially Western modernity, claims to reflect and represent reality so accurately that it simply *mirrors* the way things really are. It is this *mimetic* (i.e., imitative) theory of truth, with its assumption of a substantial convergence between reality and our description of reality, that [Jacques] Derrida and other deconstructionists attack. It is a deconstructionist theme that we can never get to a prelinguistic or preconceptual "reality."[28]

Postmodernists claim that because all knowing involves the knower, it is subjective by nature, and as such relative to the knower. Societal preconditioning and other influences, especially language, shape the knowledge of the individual. A truly objective point of view, one outside of the knower, a God's-eye-view so to speak, is impossible. As culture dictates language and as language is the means by which reality is construed, then reality is subject to the limitations of language. Grenz explains that "critics of realism deny

---

[26] Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, s.v. "Truth, Nature of" (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999), 742.

[27] Millard J. Erickson, *Postmodernizing the Faith: Evangelical Responses to the Challenge of Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1998.), 17.

[28] Middleton, 33.

that a simple, one-to-one relationship exists between language and the world or that any single language can provide an accurate 'map' of the world. Instead, languages are human social conventions that map the world in a variety of ways, depending on the context of the speaker."[29]

Some might think that postmodernists are denying that there is any reality at all, but Middleton says, "While not exactly denying there is a "world" out there beyond our knowledge, postmodern thinkers typically deny that there are any features of this world which could function as independently existing *norms* or *criteria* for truth and goodness to which we could appeal."[30] There simply are no universal standards by which truth claims can be judged. Declaring "war on totality," postmodernists reject the notion that any metanarrative is legitimate.[31] In fact, metanarratives only serve to legitimize oppression as knowledge is power. Postmodern philosopher Michel Foucault says, "There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations."[32] Middleton points out that deconstructionists, insisting that truth is a human social construction, challenge us to consider who is left out or silenced in any constructions that attempt a total account of reality.[33]

---

[29] Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 170.

[30] Middleton, 32.

[31] Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 173.

[32] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 27-28, quoted by Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 132.

[33] Middleton, 34-35.

The demise of modernism and the rise of the postmodern mindset has not gone unnoticed by the evangelical community. The response by theologians to postmodernism has been both skeptical and embracing. For some the critique of the objectivism of the Enlightenment view of truth entails a rejection of one of the few elements that is praiseworthy in modernism. Rejecting an objective view of truth is tantamount to rejecting the claims of Scripture as authoritative. Others, however, see in the postmodern era an opportunity to gain new ground in the promotion of evangelical theology. They may agree with the critics of postmodernism that there are dangers inherent in the new postmodern world and they may reject some of the more extreme elements, but they are willing, unlike many of the critics, to embrace what they perceive to be new found benefits.

Leonard Sweet may be one of the most enthusiastic in embracing what he believes are the new possibilities in the postmodern culture. The excitement with which he writes his treatise on postmodern opportunities, *Soul Tsunami*, is almost contagious. Sweet seems to have embraced a number of the tenets of postmodernism. On the issue of whether truth is objective he comes down decidedly on the side of the postmodernist. He says, "The Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle proves that indeterminacy is inherent in the very structures of the universe. Not one of us can boast immaculate perceptions."[34] Sweet also sides with postmodernism when it comes to perspectivalism. "There is no understanding without standing under. Life exists for each one of us in the same state as Schrodinger's cat, neither alive nor dead, except when one stands under and looks. And once one stands under, one alters the understanding; once one looks, one changes what is seen."[35] In fact, the whole of the subjective nature of postmodernism, including the

---

[34] Sweet, 28.

[35] Ibid.

reliance on feeling that inevitably comes with relativism, seems to be embraced by Sweet. He says, "In postmodern culture, feelings are as important as thoughts. Deep feeling is as important as deep thinking. Emotion work leaves people not just thinking differently but feeling differently. The postmodern challenge of theology is not to help people 'think critically,' but to both 'feel critically' and 'think creatively.'"[36]

Sweet is not the only theologian to embrace the postmodern mentality. Alister McGrath, in the Counterpoints series installment on pluralism,[37] bases a large portion of his critique of John Hick's pluralism on the notion that the modernist foundation of Hick's position has been largely discredited. McGrath says, "The old certainties on which the Enlightenment and its intellectual derivatives stand are dying. The old universals - such as 'experience,' 'religion,' and 'rationality' - are now realized to be strongly particular. The notion of 'common human experience' is regarded as little more than an experiential fiction, in much the same way as 'universal rationality' is now seen as little more than the idle daydream of reason."[38] McGrath continues, "Hick's agenda is strongly foundational, placing an emphasis on allegedly universal concepts, such as *religion* or *religious experience*. Yet foundationalism has lost its credibility, as the assumptions of modernity have been progressively eroded to the point at which they are being abandoned throughout the culture in general and the academy in particular."[39] McGrath has even called for

---

[36] Ibid., 210.

[37] Alister McGrath, "A Particularist View: A Post-Enlightenment Approach" in *FourViews on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, Counterpoints, ed. Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips, 151-180 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: ZondervanPublishingHouse, 1996).

[38] Ibid., 200.

[39] Ibid., 206.

evangelicalism to purge itself of the remaining elements of Enlightenment thought.[40] One might wonder just exactly what those elements are.

Other theologians have embraced elements of postmodernism also. Because he rejects foundationalism, Stanley J. Grenz believes that theologians "need no longer spin their wheels constructing elaborate prolegomena, thinking thereby they have laid a sure foundation for the compilation of seemingly separable units of biblical teaching subsequently elaborated."[41] Daniel Taylor similarly embraces postmodernism when he rejects certitude in relation to reason and truth.[42] Middleton and Walsh reject any kind of realism because they believe that postmodern critiques have proved to strong, even for a critical realism.[43]

The postmodern influence is growing stronger as the modernist worldview begins to crumble into ashes and this influence is beginning to effect the Church. Groothuis notes, "Some church-growth advocates advise that churches tone down any emphasis on the objective truth of Christian doctrine because postmoderns have short attention spans and are only interested in their own felt needs. Many counsel that Generation Xers can be reached only by a relational and largely noncognitive approach."[44] The relational approach to truth advocated by many postmodern theologians is evident in the worship songs prevalent in many churches today. Devoid of any real content, they are the perfect

---

[40] Shockley, 200.

[41] Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 205.

[42] Daniel Taylor, *The Myth of Certainty* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1986), 78.

[43] Middleton, 168.

[44] Groothuis, 21-22.

postmodern expression - experience, relationship, activity; but nothing concrete, nothing to troublesome for the mind.

Postmodernism confronts us whether we acknowledge it or not, but is it correct in its critique? Does traditional evangelical theology fall to the same critiques that have been raised against modernism? Is it time to embrace a community-based epistemology? The answer has to be a resounding "no". The consequences of giving up the notion of an objective truth are just too great and there seem to be no real benefits. Before looking at all that is wrong with the postmodern epistemology, it would first be appropriate to acknowledge any legitimate objections to modernism that have been raised by postmodernists.

First, it should be realized that postmodernism has made some valid points. It is true that the knower has his own perspective in all that he knows. Everyone has presuppositions with which they approach any subject. Cultural conditioning is a major influence in the adoption of these presuppositions. This perspectival nature of knowledge, when tied to a totalizing effort of systemization, can lead to oppression. This is quite evident in the creation vs. evolution debate where creationist views are suppressed not only by the academic elite but even the Supreme Court. It is also true that Eurocentrism has facilitated the oppression of indigenous people's worldwide. Postmodernism reminds us that other points of view should be considered and respected, not ignored or ridiculed. It is also helpful that postmodernism prompts the investigation of one's own presuppositions. Unfortunately, the problems far outweigh these precious few benefits.

First of all, the postmodern ideology presents a problem in defining truth. Groothuis explains:

> It is one kind of problem to believe an untruth, to take as fact something that in reality is a falsehood, yet still believe that truth exists and can be known. If one believes, for instance, that Jesus never claimed to be God incarnate, historical

> evidence can be marshaled to refute this claim. However, it is another kind of problem to believe that truth itself is merely a matter of personal belief and social custom, so that the truth about Jesus depends on who you take him to be; in this case, no amount of evidence or argument about particular matters of fact will change one's belief. The argument must instead be shifted to the very nature of truth itself.[45]

While the traditional evangelical correspondence view of truth states that truth is that which corresponds to its referent, i.e. truth is that which is real, the postmodern view says that truth is nothing more than the perception of reality as constructed through culture. The problem, however, for the postmodernist is that in order to reject the correspondence definition of truth he must employ it.[46] If he says that truth is something other than what the correspondence view describes, he expects to be understood as saying that whatever he describes truth to be, that description does correspond to reality. If he says that truth is relative to the observer, he means that it is really the case that truth is relative to the observer. If he says that truth is that which works, he means that it is really the case that truth is that which works. The same can be said of any noncorrespondence view of truth, whether it is coherence, intention, or sensation. All statements that describe the nature of truth are dependent on the correspondence view of truth to even make their claim. If what they claim about truth does not correspond to reality then their claim is not to be accepted. If their claim is intended to correspond with reality, then they have established the correspondence view of truth by simple use.

Postmoderns also have the problem that their definition of truth is self-defeating. When relativists say that all truth is relative they exclude their own statement, which they

---

[45] Groothuis, 24.

[46] Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, s.v. "Nature of Truth," 742.

assume to be universally and absolutely true. It does no good to make an exception in this one instance, however, because all means all and if all truth is relative then the claim itself is relative. But if the claim is relative it does not apply in all situations. The claim therefore is self-defeating. Postmodernists at this point try to respond that truth cannot be absolute because no one has absolute truth. This misses the point, however, because the issue is the nature of truth itself, not the possession of truth.

Postmodernists also reject foundationalism, "the doctrine that knowledge is ultimately based on beliefs that require no further justification."[47] They argue that because all knowledge is perspectival, and a universal perspective cannot be claimed, then any claims to universal categories, such as reason, are simply false. This critique is really directed at the tendency of modernists to create "metanarratives" which postmodernists see as justifications for oppression. That some modernists have attempted unified explanations of reality building on nothing more than foundational principles is not to be denied, but it is not the case that this leads inevitably to oppression. Foundationalists argue that some kind of first principles must exist in order to even have a basis for thought itself. For example, to deny reason, one must think about the denial, but thinking is reasoning.[48]

There are other problems with the postmodern view as well. Leffel contends, "From the postmodern point of view, postmodernism itself can only be seen as another 'arbitrary social construction' like all other ideologies. As such, we have no compelling reason to accept the theory. We can simply dismiss it as the creative work of extremely

---

[47] *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Thomas Mautner, s.v. "Foundationalism," (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1996).

[48] Norman Geisler and Peter Bocchino, *Unshakable Foundations* (Minneapolis, Minnesota, 2001), 21.

cynical people."[49] Not only is postmodernism arbitrary, it is also self-defeating. Leffel continues, "If postmodernism can be shown to be true, a worldview with objective merit, then postmodernism's main thesis (rejection of objective truth) is wrong. It ends up teaching that there is at least some objective truth - namely, that postmodernism is right!"[50] If it is the case that postmodernism is objectively true then it has itself become a metanarrative and should be rejected on the basis of postmodern sensibilities.

Postmodernism is not only self-refuting it is also refuted by science. If postmodernism were really true there would be no reason to expect scientists in different cultures to complete experiments with the same results.[51] How would postmodernism explain discoveries in science that have taken place in separate and quite distinct cultures and times but with the same results? Other data from science seems to falsify postmodernism as well. Noting the very foundation of postmodern thinking, that language is the root of all thought and language itself is a social construction, Leffel points out developments in child psychology that suggest that infants recognize a world of objects and events. This research indicates that "infants can think even at a *prelinguistic* stage of development, that is, before they can speak."[52] It also indicates that children seek to acquire language because they have already formed a framework of thought.[53] If this is the case, then the postmodern concept of language dependent knowledge is false.

Not only is postmodernism contradicted by itself and by science, it is contradicted

---

[49] Leffel, "Postmodernism and 'The Myth of Progress,'" 53.
[50] Ibid.

[51] Ibid., 52.

[52] Ibid., 54.

[53] Ibid.

by experience. Alister McGrath has proclaimed the death of the Enlightenment ideal, with its universal categories such as truth and reason,[54] but yet he cannot break away from logic and reason itself. He insists, "Only someone of highly questionable intellectual ability and integrity would argue that it is true that 'Jesus did die on the cross' and that 'Jesus did not die on the cross.' Differences must be acknowledged and their implications explored."[55] It there are no universal categories such as reason then how can he be sure that his use of the law of noncontradiction is valid? Does it apply universally? The postmodern worldview cannot be lived out consistently.

In the final analysis, postmodernism cannot stand against a thorough philosophical investigation. Its self-contradictions, arbitrary conclusions, and inconsistencies will eventually cause it to implode upon itself or to morph into an Eastern-style spirituality. Man will not tolerate a meaningless existence but that is where postmodernism leads. The end of the postmodern road is a Nietzchean madness that few can face. The problem is even more acute for those evangelical theologians who embrace postmodern sentiments. They must face the biblical view of truth because as Groothuis says, "Although the Bible does not present a carefully nuanced philosophical discussion of the nature of truth, it does offer a unified perspective on the matter of truth and falsity that flatly opposes the postmodernist orientation. It speaks authoritatively not only on what things are true but on the nature of truth itself."[56]

The Bible views itself as a book of truth. "The entirety of Your word *is* truth,

---

[54] McGrath, 207.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Groothuis, 60.

And every one of Your righteous judgments *endures* forever" (Ps. 119:160).[57] "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth" (John 17:17). Truth in Scripture is that which corresponds to reality. The numerous admonitions in Scripture against lies and falsehoods depend on real, objective truth, without it they have no force. Groothuis notes that because the Bible is a revelation of God, all that it presents as truth corresponds to what really is. The argument that knowledge is contextual holds no power over this revelation. "The word of God is a revelation from a transcendent, holy and communicative being, and so has an inner dynamism that rises above the psychology, sociology and politics of its readers, even though it is mediated through the particular cultural forms of its original context."[58] The truth of God is a certain truth. It is guaranteed by omniscience and by the illumination of the Holy Spirit. Postmodern theologians decry certainty as the arrogance of the Enlightenment ideal, a delusion of reason itself, but the character of God insures that truth, certain truth, is knowable and accessible. True, it can be rejected, Rom. 1:18-19 says as much. "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown *it* to them." This does not mean, though, that truth cannot be known. In fact, this passage says that it *is* known, a priori. The problem isn't that it *can't* be known, but rather that it *won't* be known. Truth is rejected by those who want to live wickedly. They suppress it to avoid the knowledge of a holy, righteous God. The consequences of the reality of God are just too enormous. This is a classic case of psychological denial.

---

[57] Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations taken from *The Holy Bible, New King James Version*, (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, Inc.) 1982.

[58] Groothuis, 66.

God's character also insures that truth is absolute and universal. His inherent justness guarantees that truth is the same for everyone and that it is absolute. It is true that God will take into consideration all circumstances in His judgments, but the standards do not change from person to person. It will not be the case that hell exists for some, but does not exist for others. Either hell exists, or it doesn't. The revelation of God, however, warns that it does.

Correspondence is seen not only in the claim that the Bible is a true revelation from God, but Scripture actually employs the correspondence view of truth. Joseph used it to test his brothers. "Send one of you, and let him bring your brother; and you shall be kept in prison, that your words may be tested to see whether *there is* any truth in you; or else, by the life of Pharaoh, surely you *are* spies" (Gen. 42:16). In Deut. 18:22 Moses gives a means of testing false prophets that is certainly based on the correspondence view, their prophecies had to come to pass. It is also true that if we are going to call on God it must be with a knowledge of Him that corresponds to who He really is! "The Lord *is* near to all who call upon Him, To all who call upon Him in truth" (Ps. 145:18). Postmodern theologians that reject the possibility of certainty in the area of truth seem dangerously close to rejecting the nature of God. The danger for the Church is that the anything-goes mentality of postmodernism will cloud our vision of the nature and character of God, thereby hindering our communion with Him who desires to be worshipped in spirit and in truth.

The postmodern worldview is decidedly unbiblical. It cannot provide a sound basis for the proclamation of biblical truth. Its shifting sands will swallow any attempts at building a foundation. Evangelical theologians who embrace it will be pulled down into a vortex of relativity. A lesson needs to be learned from liberal Christianity. Liberals embraced the tenets of the Enlightenment in order to win acceptance with the modern

culture. They rid themselves of "superstitions," adopted Enlightenment principles, and proclaimed themselves too sophisticated for the supernatural. Evangelical theologian Dennis McCallum points out, however, "Liberal churches. . .failed to gain the acceptance of the culture. On the contrary, liberal and neo-orthodox-influenced denominations have experienced a steady and accelerating decline in attendance as the culture they sought to appease and imitate rejected them."[59] In fact, liberalism divested itself of the very elements that made Christianity a viable option for modernists who, sensing their need for the spiritual, had grown weary of materialism. In the same manner, postmodern Christians risk being so identical to the surrounding culture that they offer no alternative. Evangelicals who continue to hold fast to objective truth, especially as revealed by God, will be able to offer a sure anchor to those tossed about by the sea of relativity stirred up by the demise of modernism. To be sure, in order to communicate effectively evangelicals must realize to whom they are speaking, but the message must not change.

The warning is clear, the Enlightenment experiment may have failed, but postmodernism is no alternative. True Christian orthodoxy is the only solution. After all, Evangelicals have been making many of the same criticisms against modernism for years. Creation scientists have pointed out for some time that the biases of secular humanists were upholding evolution, even in the face of overwhelming evidence against it. The doctrine of human progress, the sufficiency of reason alone, and the oppressive nature of modernism have all been critiqued by evangelicals. It is true that some evangelicals embraced modernists ideas, but it is even more the case that some modernist concepts were founded upon truth. It is in the self-confident assertion and implementation of these

---

[59] Dennis McCallum, "Evangelical Imperatives," in *The Death of Truth* ed. Dennis McCallum, (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 1996), 236.

truths that modernism fails. That the Enlightenment made an idol out of reason in no way invalidates reason itself, no more than being a glutton invalidates the need to eat. Evangelicalism is not a product of the Enlightenment, even if it has been shaped by the war against modernism.

Leffel comments, "Of all the questions raised by postmodern thought, the most fundamental is its critique of reason. Postmodernists offer important challenges to the overly optimistic modernist reliance on unaided human reason. The modernist belief that science will unravel all of the mysteries of the universe is arrogant, as postmodernists have argued. Yet if postmodern skeptics are right, there can be no basis for knowledge of *any* kind. In a postmodern culture, truth as we know it is dead."[60] The words of the prophet Isaiah ring in our ears as we consider the paradigm shift that is known as postmodernism:

> "Justice is turned back, And righteousness stands afar off;
> For truth is fallen in the street, And equity cannot enter" (Is. 59:14).

---

[60] Leffel, "Postmodernism and 'The Myth of Progress,'" 51.