

The Perils of Ignoring Postmodernism

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Those who preach God's word may easily feel overwhelmed by the needs of the ministry. The demands of the ministry never lapse. The needs of people do not take a vacation. Week in and week out sermons need to be prepared and delivered, lessons taught, the hurting consoled, and the straying confronted. Moreover, various administrative matters demand constant attention. And then there are those who are upset over the direction of the church. Speaking with those who are troubled may consume an inordinate amount of time. In addition to all this, the pastor has his own family to shepherd, knowing that quality time can never cancel out the necessity of spending a sufficient amount of time with his wife and children. In view of such pressures, we can understand pastors who are tempted to disregard postmodernism.

They may justify their neglect of postmodernism for at least two reasons. First, busy pastors may reason that postmodernism is too complicated and sophisticated to warrant any study on their part. When even experts disagree on the nature of postmodernism, how can pastors, pressed constantly for time, gain any clarity on the matter? The second temptation may be even more appealing. Pastors might be prone to think that their responsibility consists only in preaching the gospel. The gospel, after all, is "power of God resulting in salvation" (Rom 1:16). One could reason, "Why waste time learning about postmodernism when it is the gospel alone that saves? Indeed, the gos-

pel is so powerful that it punctures and defeats any anti-Christian worldview. Hence, if we preach the gospel we will conquer the nemesis of postmodernism." It is often said that believers should not worry about studying false religions or philosophies. We will know what is counterfeit by restricting our study to what is genuine.

Both of these objections contain some truth. We must note immediately, however, the danger that lurks when we choose to neglect a deviant philosophy, especially when the philosophy is gaining ground in the culture. We may piously claim to be preaching the gospel, while in fact we are in the process of being co-opted by the very philosophy that we have supposedly avoided. Our ignorance may become the platform by which we are subverted. We are all influenced by the culture which we inhabit, and hence we may unconsciously swallow large pieces of the postmodern worldview, and at the same time believe that we are preserving "the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3, RSV). Church history teaches us that orthodoxy was delineated and defined when fierce debates arose over what the scriptures taught. Our understanding of orthodoxy does not stem merely from studying the genuine and ignoring what is counterfeit. Instead, we have often gained a clearer and sharper profile of orthodoxy by comparing and contrasting it with heresy. A pastor who knows nothing about heresy probably has a very shallow understand-

ing of orthodoxy. Those who are in the dark about postmodernism may find themselves clutched by its tentacles.

It is true, of course, that busy pastors and others involved in front line ministries typically cannot become experts in postmodernism. We offer this very issue of the journal, however, to assist pastors in grasping the basic elements of the postmodern worldview. We must not say that pastors have to be experts in postmodernism to understand it. We can, nevertheless, have a reasonably good grasp of many arenas of life without being experts. For example, one can have a reasonably good understanding of auto mechanics without being an expert. Similarly, we can all understand the main features of postmodernism, even if we have not read Jacques Derrida.

Understanding postmodernism also assists us when we speak to many of our contemporaries. Those of us nurtured in modernism may find that we do not speak to the life-situation of some of our younger people, simply because we do not grasp the horizon of their worldview. All evangelicals believe that we must contextualize the gospel to some degree when we proclaim the gospel in different cultures around the world. Surely that same principle of contextualization applies to our culture. When we speak with unbelievers (and even believers!) we want to find a point of contact with their worldview. We see from Paul's address in Athens in Acts 17:22-31 that his speech began by complimenting the Athenians on their religious aspirations. Of course, he did not conclude on that point! The initial compliment led to confrontation with and challenge to their worldview, but the point is that he engaged the worldview they cherished. Paul did not begin preaching to the

Athenians in the same way he spoke to those steeped in the Old Testament scriptures. For those who knew the OT Paul emphasized that Jesus fulfilled the OT prophecies. The OT prophecies, however, meant virtually nothing to the Athenians. They did not pore over the OT and long for the coming Messiah. Hence, Paul engages them at the level of their worldview, but he does so to present them with the unchanging gospel of the resurrected Lord.

We must beware of another danger when we think about postmodernism. We could begin to think that our knowledge of our culture, our expertise in postmodernism, is the key to evangelism. The needs of the human heart, however, have not changed over the centuries. We can be confident that when we proclaim the gospel, its truth echoes in every heart. We know from Romans 1 that every human being knows that there is one God, even if such knowledge has been suppressed (vv. 18-23). Every human being knows, deep down, what behavior pleases and displeases God (Rom 1:32). Some unbelievers get angry when we proclaim the gospel precisely because they know we utter the truth. Their anger is an attempt to muffle the truth that cuts their conscience. Evangelicals will likely be more effective in our culture if they have some understanding of postmodernism, but understanding our postmodern world should never be equated with preaching the gospel. The power of God, unleashed in the gospel, is still the only means by which humans can be saved.