

## You Can't Handle the Truth: Addressing the Tolerance of Postmodernism

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Grace to You

What I have been asked to do in this hour is explain the concept of *postmodernism* as simply as possible and explore the question of whether postmodernism is compatible with biblical Christianity.

Let me cut to the chase by addressing the second part of my assignment as clearly and as straightforwardly as possible right at the outset. I'll tell you plainly: I'm convinced that postmodernism is inherently *incompatible* with biblical Christianity. In fact, the most essential elements of the postmodernist perspective are hostile to the fundamental truth-claims of Scripture, and for that reason, I would argue that a postmodernist mind-set involves some positively sinful ways of thinking.

Now, I realize there are many people (and there may even be some here today) who think the church needs to adapt to postmodernism, and embrace postmodernism, in order to reach a postmodern society. But the error in that approach is no different from the error of people a hundred years ago who tried to devise a modernist brand of Christianity in order to reach a *modern* world. The heart of biblical and Christian truth is destroyed in the process.

You understand, I think, that modernism was inherently anti-Christian. It represented a wholesale rejection of some vital biblical truths. And therefore it proved to be impossible to blend modernism with Christianity. Most of us can see *that* clearly enough these days, and that's why the movements most of us belong to today remained evangelical, when the mainline denominations embraced modernism. Our spiritual forefathers were a handful of leaders in the church who saw clearly that modernism was incompatible with biblical truth, and they were willing to *fight* the modernist trend.

But in precisely the same way, the postmodernist's way of looking at the world is fundamentally anti-Christian. *Both* modernism and postmodernism are exactly the kinds of evil ideology the apostle Paul described in 2 Corinthians 10:4-5, where he spoke of our spiritual warfare this way: "For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing [or "pretension"] that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ."

Paul was saying that spiritual warfare is an *ideological* battle. Yes, our main enemies are demonic “principalities . . . powers . . . the rulers of the darkness of this world, [and purveyors of] spiritual wickedness in high places.” But the battle is an ideological one, not a mystical one. That’s why “the weapons of our warfare are not carnal.” We don’t fight with swords and guns, but with *truth*—and specifically, “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.”

Spiritual warfare is not waged by shouting verbal rebukes at evil spirits, by using spoken incantations that invoke the blood of Christ—or by any other magical or superstitious nonsense. (Demons aren’t like vampires, who can be chased away with the sign of the cross.) But *real* spiritual warfare requires us to refute false ideas with the truth. True spiritual warfare (according to this passage in 2 Corinthians 10) involves tearing down the ideological strongholds of false belief systems.

What I want to show you in this hour is that postmodernism is based on an erroneous set of unbiblical beliefs, and we need to oppose it with the clear and careful application of biblical truth. I think my reasons for saying that will become crystal clear as we go.

So let’s start with some broad definitions.

Let me say up front that because of the constraints of time and the nature of my assignment there is no possibility of treating this subject in a comprehensive way, and that is not even what I am trying to do. My goal will be to simplify—to try to reduce the complexity of what we are dealing with—and that means I am going to *paraphrase*, paint the picture for you in broad strokes, and streamline my description of postmodernism as much as possible.

I don’t pretend to be giving you a detailed or finely-nuanced presentation of all the flavors of postmodernism; I’m just trying to give you a broad survey of the postmodern panorama so that you can have a working picture of what this perspective looks like and recognize it when you see it.

Now, what is postmodernism? It seems like we hear that word all the time. It came into vogue in the mid-1980s, and the term gets thrown around a lot these days.

You may have the vague notion that postmodernism involves a denial that absolute truth may be objectively known. And that *is* the central idea that gave rise to postmodernism. According to the typical postmodernist, Reality itself is not objective; it is an individual concept constructed by the subjective mind. According to postmodernism, the subjectivity of the human mind makes it impossible to discover objective truth. Objectivity is an illusion.

Perhaps when you think of postmodernism, you also think of *tolerance* and *diversity*, because those are the primary virtues postmodernism has elevated above every other kind of moral value. That’s another hallmark of postmodern thinking.

Another one of postmodernism's other outstanding features is its suspicion of (bordering on utter contempt for) any claim that is made with certainty or authority. I'll have much more to say about that as we go.

But all of those things are classic characteristics of postmodern thought. Here are some more:

Postmodernism generally prefers *subjectivity* to *objectivity* and ambiguity to clarity. Postmodernists are skeptical of logic, and they also distrust history. They question every form of dogmatism. Postmodernists don't like authoritative definitions. Try to define something clearly, and they will nitpick endlessly over every ambiguity, every exception to the rule, and every supposed paradox that challenges your definition. They will exploit every generalization to try to make it appear absurd. They like to blur the line in every dichotomy. All of that is how postmodernism's essential relativism plays out in practical terms.

But most important, postmodernism is generally hostile to every worldview that makes any universal truth-claim. In fact, it's fair to say that the whole idea of a "*worldview*"—or a comprehensive philosophy of life—is about as *un*-postmodern as possible. Postmodernism might be defined in a nutshell as the belief that no single worldview offers a universally and objectively true perspective on life and reality.

So postmodernism is a kind of systematic skepticism. It is not a constructive way of thinking; it is always deconstructive. And, in fact, the postmodern hermeneutic on all of life and literature is known by that technical name: *deconstructionism*. If you have taken a college course in literature at any point since 1985, you are probably familiar with that term, *deconstructionism*. It speaks of an approach to handling texts that aims at unravelling their objective meaning by exposing unquestioned assumptions, attacking inconsistencies, exploiting ambiguities, and whatnot.

But in the process of deconstruction, the postmodernist isn't trying to express any clear viewpoint of his own. Nothing is ultimately denied or affirmed. No true postmodernist would ever deliberately argue that a given proposition is right or wrong. That's not the point of the exercise. The only goals are to eliminate certainty, question authority, obliterate clarity, and undermine the very notion of objectivity. That, you could say, is the postmodernist agenda. We'll try to unpack all of that as we go.

Now you might think, *OK, if postmodernism canonizes tolerance above all other virtues and they resist saying anything is wrong or right, how might a postmodernist make a negative critique of Phil Johnson's critique of postmodernism?* And obviously, here is the answer: They would use the classic deconstructive technique. They would probably call me irresponsible for even trying to simplify and explain something as complex as postmodernism. Then they

would quibble about every sweeping statement I might make. They would use pettifogging arguments to try to overthrow every definition I give and every dichotomy I make. And they would call me naive for even attempting to clarify what they insist cannot be objectively explained or understood.

In all likelihood, an experienced postmodernist would not come out and say I am wrong (unless he *really* lost his temper with me). Obviously, if truth cannot be objectively known for certain; if reality and truth are whatever an individual imagines them to be; if each person determines subjectively what is “true” for himself; and if reality is merely a construct of the human mind—then one person’s perspective of truth is ultimately just as good as another’s. So they can’t really say I am “wrong.” In fact, they would probably claim that the only reason *I* can say *they* are wrong is because I’m just an intolerant person clinging to outmoded “modern” ideas. But their own postmodern *tolerance* makes it distasteful for them to have any kind of dialogue about who is right and who is wrong.

So even if they hated my critique of their philosophy, they probably wouldn’t say my view is wrong. Instead, they might say it’s “arrogant,” “naive,” “outmoded,” “xenophobic,” “culturally biased”; “it marginalizes others”; “it’s judgmental”; I’m “using obsolete paradigms”; or whatever. I’m sure you have heard all those things—or perhaps adjectives like those have even been applied to your sermons when you preach. Don’t be intimidated by that kind of rhetoric, especially when it is utterly divorced from any rational justification. (In fact, one of my greatest concerns about the brands of postmodernism that have infiltrated the evangelical movement is the way postmodernism undermines the authority and clarity of evangelical preaching. You can probably already see why that would be the case.)

Perhaps you recognize some of the typical dialogue of the postmodern culture in those expressions (“marginalized people,” “naive judgmentalism,” “faulty paradigms,” and so forth). What you’re hearing is an echo of postmodern thinking. Postmodernism has become the dominant factor in the culture and the public discourse of our generation.

It might help us to understand postmodernism by seeing how it arose. It’s possible to break down the course of Western thought, literature, and art into three broad periods.

Let me help you make a chart you can take with you to show some of the things we are going to be talking about. We need a grid with nine slots in it, so draw a tic-tac-toe grid on your paper, and be sure to make it big enough to write in each box. So you have nine boxes—three columns with three rows. Each of the columns will represent one of the three periods of Western thought.

The first we'll call *premodern*. (Write that above the leftmost column on your grid to label that column "Premodern.") This era would extend from the birth of science and philosophy in the Greek culture until the age of the enlightenment (roughly from the time of Thales to the French Revolution). That would mean the premodern era of Western intellectual history covers almost 2500 years.

Obviously, over that span of time, multitudes of human philosophies and various worldviews arose. Everything in the philosophical world from Plato's Republic to John Locke's empiricism falls in the premodern era, as well as everything in the religious world from Greek mythology to the paganism of the Druids—and more. There were multitudes of philosophies and religions that flourished in the premodern era. But they all had three important things in common:

*First*, they believed in objective, ultimate truth. (Write that in the top left-hand corner of your tic-tac-toe grid: "objective, ultimate truth.") Premodern people believed that whatever was ultimately true was objectively and transcendentally true, so that the same standard of ultimate truth was assumed to be true for everyone. They believed there is an objective reality that is true for the whole universe, and that reality is in some sense capable of being known, apprehended, perceived. Virtually all premodern worldviews made that assumption.

*Second*, in the premodern world, virtually all belief systems made room for the supernatural. (In the center row of the left-hand column, write the word "supernatural.") Premodern people were certain that the limits of reality were not defined by the visible, material world. There was an almost universal belief in the supernatural realm. And even though various belief systems didn't necessarily agree on what the supernatural realm was like, they almost universally accepted the reality of the supernatural.

*Third*, in the premodern world, it was normally assumed that the foundation for ultimate truth was supernatural. All authority derived from God, or "the gods," or the spirit world. (So in the bottom row of your left-hand column, write "authority from God.") Another way of saying it is that along with the idea of ultimate truth, there was always an ultimate authority. Someone or something is the ultimate power in the universe. (That's why they saw the universe as a "universe," and not a multiverse.) And the ultimate authority in the universe was nearly always assumed to dwell in the supernatural realm—God, pagan gods, unseen spirits, or whatever.

That was how people in the premodern world saw things: they accepted without question the ideas of ultimate truth, supernaturalism, and a single, central, universal supreme authority. Those were nonnegotiable and seldom-

challenged concepts in the premodern world. They were virtually universal presuppositions. They were the very foundations of human thought.

But at the dawn of the enlightenment, about the same time as the French Revolution, there was a massive paradigm shift in Western thought, and the world entered the so-called modern era. (So above the center column on your chart, write the label “Modern.”) The modern era. You might call this era *The Age of Reason*, after the title of the famous book Thomas Paine wrote in 1794. That book more or less summed up the spirit of the Modern era, and Thomas Paine was kind of the midwife who helped birth modernity, modern thought. *The Age of Reason*—both the book and the era—was an overt attack on biblical Christianity, and it elevated science and human reason to the position of highest authority.

Now, on *point one*, modern thinkers were in complete agreement with premodern thinkers. They assumed the necessity of objective, ultimate, universal truth. (So you can write that in the top center box of your grid: “objective, ultimate truth.”) There was no change in thinking there. Moderns agreed with premoderns that whatever was really true was true in an *objective* sense. Ultimate truth was the same truth for everyone, even though everyone didn’t agree about what the ultimate truth was.

On *point two*, in stark contrast to premodern thought, the modern mind was skeptical—dubious, cynical, unbelieving—when it came to the supernatural. (So write in the center box of your tic-tac-toe grid: “anti-supernatural.”) Modern philosophies did not necessarily *deny* everything supernatural; but they considered supernatural things irrelevant in the pursuit of truth. Modern thinkers said ultimate truth and knowledge are achieved only by scientific and rational means. Belief in supernatural realities and divine revelation was viewed as outdated and superstitious. One author I read says, “While many Enlightenment thinkers did not completely reject belief in God, they banished Him to the remotest [realm] of the transcendent. If God *did* exist, He was neither concerned, nor involved with His creation.” Perhaps a better way to say it would be this: Distrust in the Almighty was virtually the hallmark of modern thought. So on *that* point—belief in the supernatural—modern thought departed dramatically from premodern thought.

On *point three*—the issue of ultimate authority—the ground and foundation of truth—modern thought partly retained and partly departed from premodern philosophy. Remember, the premoderns believed that truth is grounded in *supernatural* authority. Modern minds retained the notion of an ultimate, central authority, but obviously, they denied that the supreme authority was God—or anything supernatural. Modernity placed a moratorium on God as the foundation of knowledge. Instead, science and human reason became the

supreme authorities. (So in the bottom center box of your grid, write “authority from science and human reason.”)

So the modern world retained the notion of objective, universal truths—but they jettisoned the notion of supernatural reality and therefore said the only authoritative truths are those that can be established by science or reason.

Obviously, much of the world *does* still operate on modern assumptions. But modernism failed badly, and frankly, people who have retained a modern mind-set are philosophically behind the times. The age of reason—the modern era—is over, thankfully.

The main results of modern thought were massive ideologies with centralized, authoritarian control and utopian promises. Fascism, Communism, Socialism, Marxism, Nazism, and similar twentieth-century social experiments all had their roots in modernism. We could include Darwinism in that list. All of them were fundamentally atheistic, humanistic, rationalistic systems. All of them became tyrannical and oppressive. All of them *failed*—and they failed in dramatic ways. After two world wars and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the modern era was more or less declared dead by philosophers, artists, and college professors. The postmodern era had begun. (Above the right-hand column on your chart, write, “Postmodern.”)

As I said, the premodern era lasted some 2500 years. The modern era lasted less than 250 years. And if the pace of worldly paradigm shifts keeps up—and I believe it might—the postmodern era *could* last less than 25 years. It might be over less than a decade from now. I don’t know what will replace it, but if “evil men and seducers . . . wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived” as 2 Timothy 3:13 indicates, secular philosophy is not going to get any better.

But meanwhile it behooves us to understand the times in which we live, and to do all we can to tear down the strongholds of false ideologies. So we need to understand the postmodern moment and be aware of the dangers it presents.

Postmodernism is a radical reaction to the failure of modernism. It rejects virtually every distinctive of modernism, starting with the notion that truth can be objectively known.

Now look at the chart you are making. Remember, premoderns and modern thinkers both assumed that there is a single, universal standard of ultimate truth that is objectively knowable. Postmodernists aren’t too sure that objective truth even exists, but if it *does* exist, they are pretty sure it cannot be known. So they reject the first distinctive of both premodern and modern thought. (In the top right-hand corner of your grid, write: “objective, ultimate truth is unknowable.”)

As for point two, remember that premoderns assumed the existence of a supernatural reality; and moderns either rejected or ignored everything

supernatural. *Postmoderns* are willing to accept supernaturalism, but they have stripped the supernatural of any idea of authority. The supernaturalism of postmodernism is a mystical supernaturalism, where each individual determines reality by what he perceives. (In the middle right-hand box of your grid you can write: “mystical.”) Postmodernists don’t apprehend supernatural realities by authoritative revelation; they do it by personal experience, feelings, and other subjective means. Since objective truth is unknowable, the *only* way to interpret any kind of reality—including God—is by personal experience. Or in other words, since reality is ultimately a construct of the subjective mind, even *God* can be whatever you perceive Him to be.

So, naturally, on the third point—the issue of *authority*—postmodernists disagree with both premodern and modern thought. There is no single, central authority—supernatural or otherwise. In a world that is completely subjective, the idea of authority doesn’t fit. (So in the bottom right-hand box of your grid, you can write “no ultimate authority.”) Postmodern religions are trying to construct a god without authority. He is a soft, pliable, avuncular, friendly, tolerant being—pure love without any real authority. And virtually all postmodern varieties of religion have this notion of God to one degree or another.

You can see, perhaps, why the climate of postmodernism is one of the main things that has made the rise of Open Theism popular. Open Theism—a doctrine that strips God of His sovereignty and His authority—is perfectly suited to a postmodern age.

So there you have a chart that shows in broad terms how postmodernism compares to earlier ways of thinking. That should also give you a pretty good idea of where postmodernism collides with biblical Christianity.

Premodern	Modern	Postmodern
objective, ultimate truth	objective, ultimate truth	objective, ultimate truth is unknowable
supernatural	anti-supernatural	mystical
authority from God	authority from science and human reason	no ultimate authority

If you look at your chart, in each of the three areas we have listed, postmodernism is radically at odds with historic and biblical Christianity.

And yet, there is no shortage of voices in the visible church today insisting that unless we as Christians devise a new form of Christianity that is more acceptable to the postmodern mind, we will lose this generation.

Now let me be clear: I do believe it is our duty as pastors to understand the spirit of the age in which we live and minister. Obviously, I disagree with those who are willing to hide their heads in the sand and ignore the spiritual and intellectual climate of our time, or else I wouldn't be doing this seminar.

But it's one thing to understand the spirit of the age, and quite another to adapt to it. The truth is, Christianity is neither premodern, modern, nor postmodern. Biblical Christianity stood against both the superstitions and the human philosophies of the premodern era. Authentic Christianity also opposed the rationalism and the humanism of the modern era. And we must *also* stand against the evils of postmodern thought. In the words of the apostle Paul, "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ."

Worldly philosophies have always been hostile to the Christian faith, and the church is called to stand apart from them and confront them, not embrace them and adapt our message to suit them. The gospel stands *against* every human worldview and every human philosophy. And that is truer than ever in the postmodern era. If you notice the trend in your chart, you can see that secular thought has become progressively *more* hostile to Christianity as time goes by. The world is *not* becoming more compatible with our faith.

And yet, as I said, there are Christians today—some even calling themselves evangelical—who are advocating the development of uniquely postmodern versions of the Christian faith. *Christianity Today* magazine (CT) has from time to time acted as cheerleader to those efforts. (As I said in a message recently, this is one more reason to write CT off as apostate.)

Let me tell you about two books that explicitly make arguments in favor of postmodernizing evangelical Christianity. One was published in England and the other here in America. The book published in the UK is titled *The Post-Evangelical*. It is by Dave Tomlinson. He is an Anglican who pastors in London. On the one hand, Tomlinson claims that he has "no agenda to move away from Christian orthodoxy or evangelical faith." He says he merely wants to come to terms with our changing cultural context and find an authentic expression of Christianity that works in a postmodern paradigm.

On the other hand, he *attacks* evangelicals who are concerned with objective truth. Post-evangelicals, according to Tomlinson, are those who don't like the old cut-and-dried approach to truth and "find themselves instinctively drawn towards a more relative understanding of truth." So immediately, he announces that he wants a relativistic approach to truth.

In fact, he says—and these are his precise words: “post-evangelicals are less inclined to look for truth and propositional statements in old moral certainties and more likely to seek [truth] in symbols, ambiguities, and situational judgment.”

What about seeking truth in *Scripture*? Tomlinson says, and again I am quoting: “I think it’s fair to say that post-evangelicals have mixed feelings about the Bible. On the one hand they have immense respect for the Bible and are keen to rediscover its relevance for their lives and world. On the other hand, they have a negative backlog of feelings about the way they have seen the Bible used.” He flatly rejects the concepts of biblical inerrancy and biblical authority, and he says we ought to stop thinking of biblical words and biblical propositions as true in and of themselves. Instead, he says we ought to embrace the Bible as “symbolic revelation” (his words). The Bible, he says, ought to be read as a story—or rather a series of stories—“relational stories about faith journeys”; not “propositional expressions of faith.” Again, those are his exact words.

Now keep in mind that concept of the Bible as a collection of stories. I’ll show you in a moment why that is so important in postmodern thought. But for now just flag it in your mind, and understand that Dave Tomlinson is a postmodernist pastor calling for postmodernist version of Christianity—one that rejects the absolute authority and the absolute truth of Scripture, thinks the notion of propositional truth is outmoded, and argues for a subjective, situational approach to truth, morality, and spiritual experience. The title of the book, again, is *The Post-Evangelical*, and in a recent review of this book, Al Mohler wryly remarked that “the most honest aspect of this book is the *post* in post-evangelical.”

The other book I want to mention is an American book that recently won the “Award of Merit” from *Christianity Today*. It’s titled *A New Kind of Christian*, by Brian McLaren. McLaren is pastor of Cedar Ridge Community Church in the Washington, D.C., area. He is an unabashed postmodernist. He has co-authored a another book with Tony Campolo, who also writes with a decidedly postmodern slant. McLaren’s book *A New Kind of Christian* was hailed by *Christianity Today* as one of the most helpful resources available to help us understand the grand implications of the “postmodern moment.”

The book is written in a fiction style, as a sort of extended dialogue between a burnt-out evangelical pastor and a postmodern science teacher who is himself a former pastor. McLaren’s introduction implies that the book is a largely autobiographical account of his own spiritual journey. He says it stemmed from his own crisis of faith when “at the age of thirty-eight, [he] got sick of being a pastor. Frankly,” he says, “I was almost sick of being a Christian.” But in the midst of his crisis, he says, he learned to be a Christian in

a whole new way. “That,” he says, “is the subject of this book.” So the dialogues in the book reflect Brian McLaren’s own thinking.

He has devised a new approach to Christianity that is thoroughly postmodern. As I said, his postmodern faith has received the stamp of approval from CT; his book is very popular among evangelical students on college campuses. I have no doubt that many college students from churches you men pastor are reading and absorbing the vision of a new kind of Christian Brian McLaren sets forth in this book. It is a view you need to be familiar with and be able to respond to.

So I want to draw a few examples from these two books as we talk further about postmodernism and how it is impacting evangelical young people and evangelical churches.

And in order to organize my thoughts, for the remainder of our time together, I want to highlight for you four principles that I would deem essential to biblical Christianity. These four principles are treated with great suspicion or outright hostility by postmodernism, and they are principles that so-called “postmodern Christians” say they are prepared to jettison. In fact, both of the books I have mentioned—*The Post-Evangelical*, by Dave Tomlinson, and *A New Kind of Christian*, by Brian McLaren—expressly argue against all four of these essential biblical principles. Here are the four principles. I’ll give you the complete list, and then we’ll talk about them one at a time. Four essential characteristics of a truly Christian and biblical worldview: objectivity, clarity, authority, and certainty.

Postmodernism is hostile to all four, and I want to explain why. So let’s take them in order, starting with—

## 1. Objectivity

Authentic Christianity has always been concerned with objective truth—propositional truth-claims, history, facts, and doctrine. Do away with the objective, historic reality of the bodily resurrection of Christ, for example, and according to the apostle Paul, you have destroyed the very heart of the Christian faith. In fact, listen to how Paul frames his argument, and note that he relies completely on propositions, historical fact—the objective reality of the resurrection. First Corinthians 15:13–18:

if there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen:

14 And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain.

15 Yea, and we are found false witnesses of God; because we have testified of God that he raised up Christ: whom he raised not up, if so be that the dead rise not.

16 For if the dead rise not, then is not Christ raised:

17 And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins.

18 Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished. All of Christianity, Paul says, depends on the objective truth of the bodily resurrection of Christ. He uses propositions and syllogistic reasoning to make the argument. Notice Paul's repeated use of "if . . . then"; "if . . . then." He is making a systematic argument, building proposition on proposition, to show that Christianity depends completely on the truth of the historical fact of Jesus' resurrection.

But remember, Dave Tomlinson says the post-evangelicals he claims to represent "feel uneasy with such a cut-and-dry approach and find themselves instinctively drawn towards a more relative understanding of truth." According to Tomlinson, "post-evangelicals are less inclined to look for truth [in propositional statements] and more likely to seek it in symbols, ambiguities, and situational judgment."

Tomlinson gives lip-service to history, but listen closely to what he says: "Rejecting naive realism doesn't mean one believes the Bible is devoid of historical content. However, it does mean that our faith need not hinge on everything in the Bible being historically factual." OK. In other words, the history in the Bible is not necessarily *objective* history, or even factually true. It is symbolic, subjective—a story.

Brian McLaren's approach is only slightly more subtle, and he says essentially the same thing. He claims evangelicals err by treating the Bible like a book of history or an encyclopedia of objective facts. Our mistake, he says, is that we read it as if it were a modern text. McLaren's fictional hero says this: "Sure, [the Bible includes] history, but not with all the modern trimmings like a concern for factual accuracy, corroborating evidence, or absolute objectivity" (p. 56).

So both books take a slap at objectivity—the objective truth of biblical propositions.

McLaren says the Bible is not meant to be an answer book—not a book of objective truth—but a story—or better yet, a collection of stories. In his words, "It tells the family story—the story of the people who have been called by the true God to be His agents in the world, to be His servants to the rest of the world." Later in the book, he says, "What a relief to have [this] alternative—to read the Bible as a pre-modern text, emerging from a people who believed that truth is best embodied in story and art and human flesh, rather than abstraction or outline or moralism" (159).

Let me give you one more quotation in this same vein from Brian McLaren. He says (*ibid.*),

According to the Bible, humans shall not live by systems and abstractions and principles alone but also by stories and poetry and proverbs and mystery. And best of all, instead of lending us moralisms that we must try to impose on followers of different stories . . . it calls us to live as part of its own story. . . . As we live by that story, we find followers of other stories interested in ours because our story, rightly understood, has plenty of room for them and for their stories too.

Notice what McLaren has done. He denigrates the importance of objective truth at every opportunity, and he portrays the Bible as something completely subjective—a story—a story we ourselves are subjectively part of. And not only that, but there’s room in this story for other people—non-Christians—and their stories, too. And like virtually all postmodernists, McLaren goes on to argue for inclusivism, the notion that heaven will include people of *all* religions.

Now if you’re familiar at all with the jargon of postmodernism, you know that stories are what all postmodernists prefer to history and facts.

And postmodernists *especially* hate the notion of one big story that authoritatively interprets all of reality. The “big story,” or the *metanarrative*, is the favorite postmodern expletive used to label every comprehensive worldview. Metanarratives are evil. Big stories are oppressive and inherently bigoted. They are used by narrow-minded people to marginalize people with different stories. Brian McLaren says: “[The word] *metanarratives* implies domination, coercion, eradication of opponents, imposition of beliefs or behaviors on minorities against their will, and the like.”

Communism and fascism were big stories—metanarratives. They were evil, and they failed *because* they were tools of oppression. And postmodernists say *all* worldviews are like that—big, authoritative stories that give one narrow perspective and eliminate or oppress all other perspectives.

But Brian McLaren, Dave Tomlinson, and other self-styled “postmodern Christians” insist that the Bible is not like that. It doesn’t give a single worldview, because that would be evil, narrow-minded, and oppressive. It’s the kind of story that accommodates *everyone’s* story. So the Bible is not a metanarrative; it’s a wax narrative that you can shape in any way that suits you. It’s not objective truth; it’s a subjective story. You are part of the story, so you can tell it from your own subjective point of view.

That’s what I mean when I say postmodernism is hostile to objectivity, and this is the inevitable effect if you try to blend postmodernism with Christianity: it undermines the objectivity of biblical truth.

A second point: postmodernism is hostile to—

## 2. Clarity

I've already mentioned that postmodernists don't like definitions and dichotomies. Obviously, if everything is subjective and relative, you can't make any clear dichotomies, and your definitions ought to be as flexible as everything else. For postmodernists, every text, every statement, and every expression has an endless number of possible interpretations.

In the words of one secular advocate of postmodernism—"There is no final meaning for any particular sign, no notion of unitary sense of text, no interpretation [that] can be regarded as superior to any other."

Ultimately, then, every interpretation is false, too narrow, too restrictive. And interpretation is therefore always a work in progress. You might say that the postmodernist story always lacks an ending; and it never has any clear meaning. The meaning is determined by the reader, not the author.

And once you buy that idea, anything can mean everything. Up can mean down, and this can mean that, and everything suddenly means nothing.

You see this very clearly in how postmodernism has influenced the secular and academic world. This is how postmodernists have been able to rewrite history and turn values upside down. Suddenly, homosexuality is no longer considered a disorder; homophobia is. Columbus is one of the biggest villains of Western history, and Ché Guevara is one of the greatest heroes. In fact, history itself needs to be retold, because it is too dominated by European white males. So postmodernists rewrite history books to change the story and bring those who have been marginalized into the center of the narrative.

Apply that sort of hermeneutic to Scripture, and you can see the result. If you start by rejecting objective meaning, clarity is automatically the first victim. Coherence becomes impossible. Nothing can ever really be clear. Of course, theology will be as flexible as the meaning of any word. Doctrinal precision therefore becomes impossible in the postmodern world. But as far as the postmodern Christian is concerned, that's OK. Doctrinal precision isn't even *desirable*.

That point of view comes through clearly in Brian McLaren's book. McLaren thinks Christians should worry less about being right, and worry more about being good. He spends several pages arguing that syncretism is not something we should fear; it's something to be embraced—and he frankly doesn't see why it's not possible for someone to be both a Christian *and* a Buddhist.

His approach, from beginning to end, is to systematically undermine clarity by challenging definitions and removing boundaries. He spends pages having his characters muse about why they don't like the standard evangelical definitions of expressions like *salvation*, the *New Birth*, and *righteousness*.

In other words, clarity is the mortal enemy of postmodernism, because clarity requires definition, and definitions imply authority.

In fact, authority is the next in our list of things postmodernism is hostile to. If you've been taking notes, we talked about postmodernism's dislike of objectivity and clarity. Now here's the third great pillar of a true Christian worldview that postmodernists simply cannot stomach:

### 3. Authority

You can already tell, from some of the quotations I have read and the descriptions I have given, that postmodernists have a general distrust of, and contempt for, authority. They despise dogmatism; they portray the notion of a comprehensive worldview as inherently oppressive. They invariably champion what is marginal and want to dethrone whatever or whoever is in power at the moment.

This stems from the fact that postmodernism is inherently *anti-foundational*. Foundationalism in its simplest definition is the view that knowledge must be constructed on a base of unshakable truths. You start with the foundation and build from there. The foundational truths are accepted without prior argument or justification. Or, to borrow the expression Cornelius Van Til would have used, the most basic of all truths are our presuppositions.

Philosophical foundationalism is a notion that has its roots in the theories of Rene Descartes. In other words, it's a modern notion. Descartes, of course, eliminated the Bible as a starting point and began with his own rational experience as a starting point. You may remember him for his famous line, *Cogito ergo sum*—"I think, therefore I am." That, he said, was the starting point for truth and rationality.

Now, let me make it clear that I'm not defending Cartesian foundationalism. The subject is really too technical and too time consuming to get into here, but let me say this: postmodernism is such a radical reaction to Cartesian foundationalism that it rejects not only the philosophy of Descartes, but also what Descartes sought to establish: the ground of true knowledge. Descartes' error was not that he believed knowledge has sure foundations, but that he began with human experience and therefore built his system on the *wrong* foundation. Postmodernism ends up with *no* foundation for anything and therefore no possibility of sure knowledge. That is why uncertainty and skepticism are the cardinal postmodern values.

In the premodern and modern eras, virtually every worldview rested on *some* foundation. Different worldviews had different ideas about what the foundation of knowledge ought to be. Some said it was common sense; others

said it was empirical data; others made key philosophical or metaphysical propositions their foundation. But they *all* had foundations.

For biblical Christianity, Scripture is the foundation of authentic faith and true knowledge. Scripture stands above every other kind of truth. It is more authoritative and more certain than any other source. It is “more sure,” according to 2 Peter 1:19, than the data we gather firsthand through our own senses. Jesus Himself said, in His high-priestly prayer (John 17:17): “Thy Word *is* truth.” John 10:35: “The Scripture cannot be broken.” And 2 Timothy 2:15 calls Scripture “the Word of truth.” Scripture claims to be infallible, inerrant truth, and therefore Christians accept it as the only sure foundation and the final test of *all* truth. Scripture is the supreme authority in all matters of truth. That’s the foundation of the historic Christian worldview.

I already mentioned postmodernism’s contempt for worldviews; that is just another way of saying postmodernism is anti-foundational. The two go hand in hand.

In Brian McLaren’s postmodern brand of Christianity, Scripture is explicitly eliminated as a foundation. On page 52 of his book, his main character (the guy who takes the mentoring role in McLaren’s semi-fictional dialogue) says this: “The whole notion of authority as so many people conceive it is thoroughly modern.” And then he tells the other character: “Relax . . . I’m only saying what the Bible says. That oft-quoted passage in Second Timothy doesn’t say, ‘All Scripture is inspired by God and is *authoritative*.’ It says that Scripture is inspired and *useful*.”

The other character protests, saying, “We need some rock-solid answers—some hard facts to be the foundation for our Christian worldview. Every building needs a foundation, right?”

The mentor-character replies, “The Bible never speaks of itself this way.” He goes on to explain his view of faith: it’s not like a building, constructed on a single foundation of truth. It’s more like a spider-web, anchored at many points. He says (and I quote), “those points might be spiritual experiences, exemplary people and institutions whom one has come to trust, that sort of thing.”

“But where does the Bible fit in?” the second character asks.

“Well,” the mentor character replies, “it could be seen as one of the anchor points. Or perhaps every passage in the Bible that has affected your life could be seen as an anchor point. Or perhaps the Bible isn’t only in the anchor points. Perhaps it is part of every thread of the web.”

What gets lost, obviously, is the uniqueness and authority of Scripture. It’s been removed as the foundation and now takes its place alongside exemplary people, institutions, and personal experiences, as “one of the anchor points” for our faith.

Now remember, Brian McLaren says he is more concerned about being good than about being right. His brand of Christianity wants to elevate orthopraxy over orthodoxy. The problem is that with no ultimate authority, the idea of “being good” is meaningless. Who is to say what’s “good”? Without a foundation of orthodoxy, orthopraxis becomes whatever you want it to be.

Let’s admit that orthodoxy without orthopraxy is worthless. Scripture itself says so. James 2:17: “Faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.” But McLaren’s answer to that problem is to jettison orthodoxy completely. That’s no answer. You don’t cure hypocrisy by eliminating truth. *Truth* is, ultimately, the remedy even for hypocrisy. What we need is the *clarification* of truth, not the elimination of it.

But postmodernists want to reject orthodoxy not really because they fear hypocrisy, but because they despise authority. Remember, they despise the idea of a central narrative that speaks objectively, clearly, and authoritatively. And yet, isn’t that essential to the Christian message? That Scripture is true *because* it speaks with the authority of God Himself? Psalm 138:2: “Thou hast magnified thy word *above* all thy name.” God’s Word is in no sense inferior to His personal authority. Rather it is the eternal *expression* of His personal authority. He has exalted it above His name. In other words, He has placed it on a higher level than His own reputation. He has made it the definitive, objective, authoritative expression of Himself to us.

So when the Scriptures speak, it is with God’s personal authority. When they command us, we had better obey. When they rebuke us, we have no option but to reform. When they instruct us, we are obliged to yield to their truth. When they warn us, we must take heed. And when they speak to us, it is our bounden duty to listen and submit.

That’s the historic Christian worldview. But it is totally *un*-postmodern.

So postmodernism is hostile to objectivity, clarity, and authority. The final victim of the postmodern onslaught is another pillar in the Christian worldview—

#### **4. Certainty**

In both the premodern and the modern eras, the debate was over which worldview was *true*. Christians argued that the Bible was true and all other worldviews false. In the postmodern era the argument has changed. Postmodernists attack *every* worldview that claims to be true. There is no room for certainty. Dogmatism is a greater transgression in the postmodern era than irrationality or incoherence.

That is why secular postmodernists are equally hostile to dogmatic atheism and biblical Christianity. Theological modernism is no better and no worse than evangelicalism. Both are oppressive because they claim to be right.

Certainty has become intolerable, because postmodernists think certainty is itself a kind of intolerance.

And that perspective comes through loud and clear in the opening pages of Brian McLaren's book. In the introduction, McLaren tears into preachers who have the audacity to think they know anything for certain. This is Brian McLaren speaking here, and not just one of the characters in his book. He writes,

I drive my car and listen to the Christian radio station, something my wife always tells me I should stop doing ("because it only gets you upset"). There I hear preacher after preacher be so absolutely sure of his bombproof answers and his foolproof *biblical* interpretations . . . And the more sure he seems, the less I find myself wanting to be a Christian, because on this side of the microphone, antennas, and speaker, life isn't that simple, answers aren't that clear, and *nothing* is that sure.

A friend of mine, Reid Ferguson, wrote a review of Brian McLaren's book, and in it, he says this:

[The New Kind of Christian] would never "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints." In the first place, he would not *contend* against anyone except Christians who say they actually know something. Secondly, he knows it is far too arrogant to suppose anything like "the faith" exists. Our story maybe. THE faith? No. Third, [Reid Ferguson writes, "The faith] once for all handed down" contradicts the idea that we need to create a new reality. A new story. "Once for all" just doesn't fit the paradigm. "Ever new" is the mantra. Being a "defender" is most certainly undesirable. Only being a "seeker" is kosher. Once you begin to think you've actually found something to defend, you've crossed the line.

That is the spirit of postmodernism. As I said earlier, it is inherently skeptical, cynical, suspicious of every truth-claim. So naturally, postmodernism has no room for certainty, even on the things that really matter.

Brian McLaren recaps a sermon on death preached by his lead character. In the sermon, the character says there are "two dominant stories alive in our culture today."

Story one goes like this: Once upon a time, the universe banged into being for no apparent reason and with no apparent purpose. Someday it will end and there will be no one left to remember it ever existed. In the meantime, we live and die. And that's about it.

Story two begins with a Creator who designed the universe to produce life.

...

And so on. The character spends most of his sermon musing about "what if the second story is true?" And then in his closing prayer, he says this: "God . . .

although I can't be certain or prove it scientifically, the second story we considered today makes more sense to me. . . . "

Two things to notice there: *First*, Brian McLaren's hero has only one reason for believing in a Creator over secular atheism, and it is totally subjective: "[It] makes more sense to me . . . " According to postmodernism, no value system is grounded in *certainty*, so there would seem to be no valid reason other than personal preference to choose one set of values over another.

And second, notice that this character says, in a prayer addressed to his subjective god, "I can't be certain . . . "

Can't be certain? Is that the message of Christianity? How about 1 John 5:10: "He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself: he that believeth not God hath made him a liar; because he believeth not the record that God gave of his Son." First Timothy 1:12: "I *know* whom I have believ'd, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day." First John 3:19: "We *know* that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him." And 1 John 5:13: "These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may *know* that ye have eternal life." Five times in that chapter alone (1 John 5), the apostle John writes, "this we know." "We know." "We know." "We know." "We know." "We know."

First Corinthians 2:9-10: "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit." There's a certainty and assurance in that that stands against the postmodernist skepticism of all objective truth and divine revelation. Verse 12: "Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might *know* the things that are freely given to us of God." The confidence in that statement is an essential element of a truly biblical worldview. And it is an explicit repudiation of the postmodernist perspective.

Brian McLaren's contempt for such certainty undermines his whole approach to salvation and the doctrine of assurance. He spends pages wringing his hands and bemoaning the tendency of Christians who (he says) tend to in-group and out-group people according to who is going to heaven and who is going to hell. McLaren is completely unconcerned about who is going to hell, and he thinks we should be, too. In fact, chapter 14 of the book is titled, "It's none of your business who goes to hell." Obviously the apostle Paul had not read that chapter when he lamented the predicament of his unbelieving Jewish brethren at the beginning of Romans 9 and then again at the beginning of Romans 10.

But if your perspective is that nothing whatsoever is certain, it's hard to ward off that sort of blithe apathy.

My friend Reid Ferguson wrapped up his review of Brian McLaren's book this way. He writes:

So let's recap: The [New Kind of Christian] has a good story . . . [he] refuses to consider that men might perish in a Christless Hell; [he] doesn't know if he's right about anything—especially about God, Christ, sin, salvation or Hell; [he] excludes no other religions; [he] has no faith to defend, and [he] is not concerned about being regenerate. This really *is* a [New Kind of Christian]! Because it isn't a Christian at all. At least not in the Biblical sense. It is a good old-fashioned pagan, "holding to a form of Godliness, although they have denied its power; Avoid such men as these." (2 Tim. 3:5)

You might be thinking the new kind of Christianity Brian McLaren advocates is no real threat in the circles where you minister. If that is what you think, you may be surprised. Brian McLaren spoke last year at an event sponsored by Dallas Theological Seminary's Center for Christian Leadership. They billed him as "one of the leading voices in the development of innovative ministries for the postmodern context. [and] A passionate proponent of communicating the gospel in ways that people today can understand."

*Time* magazine recently featured McLaren in their list of the 25 most influential evangelicals in America. McLaren has been endorsed by Rick Warren. Warren features material by McLaren on his Web site.

*Christianity Today* has been championing postmodern notions for years, and a couple of months ago they featured a cover article on "The Emergent Church," which is the movement Brian McLaren is leading to try to postmodernize the church. The CT article was written with a tone of hand-wringing anxiety about how much out of step the church is with the times in which we live.

Listen: the Christian message has always been out of step with the times. That was true even before the modern era. The message of the cross is an *offense*. To the rationalistic Greeks who desire wisdom, and the mystical Jews, who seek after a sign, we have only one legitimate message to give. It is the preached message of "Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness."

Let's acknowledge that, and embrace it. The gospel has always been out of step with the wisdom of this world. But "the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men." Let's have confidence in that truth, and not be seduced by the subtle arguments of those who are willing to give up everything that is true and clear and authoritative and certain. "We have . . . a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place."

That's *my* story, and I'm sticking to it.