

THE EFFECTS OF POSTMODERNISM ON THEOLOGY: A THEOLOGICAL EVALUATION

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Introduction

THE QUESTION as to the relationship between postmodernism and theology has been a much debated issue in theological circles recently. As Kwabena Donkor indicates, just as the intellectual revolution of modernism reversed medieval philosophical suppositions, in the same way, postmodernism seems to challenge the assumptions of modern categories.¹ Furthermore, Kevin J. Vanhoozer points out that "Modernity and Postmodernity are like two great tectonic plates whose movements and collision uproot and overturn the foundations of earthly institutions: states, universities, churches."² Modernism and Postmodernism represent periods of significant changes in Western philosophical

¹Kwabena Donkor, "The Role of Tradition in Modern And Contemporary Theology: Mediating Epistemic Divides," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 41 (Autumn 2003): 185. See also Grenz, *A Primer On Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 84.

²Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Mapping Evangelical Theology in a Post-modern World," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 22 (January 1998): 9.

thought that seem to challenge every aspect of life.

The ingress of postmodernism in modernism is impacting theology dramatically. For instance, the issue of divine revelation as the sole source of truth is under attack today, lending credence to historicism's¹ assertion that "all truth including that of the Christian faith, must submit to the judgement of history."² The effect of postmodernism on contemporary theology has resulted in the various calls for the "revisioning" of evangelical theology in order for it to reflect contemporary epistemological concerns.³ Though some aspects of postmodernism maybe compatible with and supportive of Christian theology, other aspects are incompatible.

This paper, therefore, seeks answers to these questions: What is postmodernism and its effects on theology? How can the traditional methods of doing theology be relevant in a postmodern world and what is the Christian's response to postmodernism? The study aims at responding to the various challenges postmodernism poses to theology.

This study employs both theological and philosophical method of analysis in examining the relevant materials. It is divided into three sections; a brief definition of premodernism, modernism, and then seeks to define postmodernism, then it looks at the effects of postmodernism on Christian

¹Historicism holds that "all thought is historically conditioned, reflecting the conditions in which it takes place." Therefore there is no eternal truth. See Justo L. Gonzalez, "Historicism," *Essential Theological Terms* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 77.

²William A. Scott, "The Notion of Tradition in Maurice Blondel," *Theological Studies* 27 (1966): 385.

³See Donkor, 186; Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21st Century* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993), 29, 39, 57.

theology and how theology can meet these challenges.

What Is Postmodern Philosophy?

Before discussing postmodernism, I will briefly trace the philosophical epochs that ushered in postmodernism, namely, premodernism and modernism.

Premodernism

The premodern era of history considered the universe as reasonable. The belief system of this period was founded on reason and knowledge based on the premise that the universe was dualistic and supernatural. There was the belief that the world was created and sustained by God or a supernatural being. Moreover, the relation between revelation and history was clearly marked. This era of history was also marked by the belief that there was purpose within the universe and that human life had purpose. History was considered to following an orderly pattern and moving towards a goal,¹ since God's hand was in history. Theology was the main curriculum of this era. Simply put, the premodern era was marked by a belief in the Bible, and theology reigned supreme, permeating every facet of life.

¹See Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed., (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 160; Donkor, 188; Norman R. Gulley, *Systematic Theology: Prolegomena* (Berrien Springs, MI.: Andrews University Press, 2003), 513.

Modernism

Modernism or the “enlightenment” covers a particular era of history characterized by a particular ideology and covers the period 1789 to 1989.¹ Modernism follow a credo that the present or the contemporary, is more authentic than the past. Roy Clements argues that modern thought is built on the premise that “there is an absolute reality external to the human mind, and that the rational processes of the mind are sufficiently congruent with that reality to give us reliable knowledge of it.”² This resulted in the Modern epistemological conviction that everything should be scientifically explained.

The modernist worldview, places much emphases on empirical observation. Thus, whereas the premodern era was marked by a believe in God, modernism rejects anything supernatural.³ Modern thought is rooted in atheism, the power of reason and individual rationality.⁴ Modernism crowned reason as queen, believing that reason alone could lead to truth. Modernism influenced theology in many ways. In its

¹See Erickson, 160; Donkor, 188; Norman R. Gulley, *Systematic Theology: Prolegomena* (Berrien Springs, MI.: Andrews University Press, 2003), 513.

²Roy Clements, “Expository Preaching in a Postmodern World,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 23 (1999): 174.

³At this point, “Events were explained by the social realities that cause them, rather than in terms of the purpose of a transcendent God.” Erickson, 161.

⁴Modern philosophers considered reason as the unassailable foundation of reality. It aims at a knowledge that is “immune from myth, prejudice, culture, and history.” Jack A. Bonsor, “History, Dogma, And Nature: Further Reflection on Postmodernism and Theology,” *Theological Studies* 55 (1994): 295.

attempt to separate science and religion based on its rationalistic worldview, it introduced into theology the “distinction between faith as assent to doctrine and history as the realm of reason and facts.”¹ It also shifts the focus from God to human beings, and since God is out of the picture, human origin is attributed to biological evolution.

There seems to be a sense of discontentment among many today with modernism. Many believe that modernism has somehow failed to accomplish what it sets out to do. For instance philosophy together with cosmology, has raised lots of questions about the Big Bang theory. Another failure of modernism has been its inability to find a basis for morality and society. The abandonment of Greek and Christian principles of life has resulted in chaos and meaningless wars. The notion that science and technology could solve all human predicaments has failed. Human wisdom and knowledge is incapable of solving the world’s problems.

Postmodernism

Students’ revolt in France against Gaullist conservatism² in May 1968 ushered in postmodernism. Many writers wrote in favor of neo-Nietzschean; notable among them were Jean-Francois Lyotard (postmodernist), Michel Foucault (structuralist and post-structuralist) and Jacques Derrida (deconstructionist), who begun their system by criticizing meta-

¹Donkor, 186.

²Gaullist Conservatism emphasizes tradition and order. It proposed a politically united Europe under French leadership.

narratives.¹ Defining postmodernist seems difficult due to its diverse nature; however, Jean-Francois Lyotard characterizes it as “incredulity toward meta-narratives.”² It has to do with doubting everything until you are able to prove its authenticity; others consider it as relativism.³ In short, postmodernism distrust any view considered as universal truth.⁴ It assumes that Jewish, Christian and even Marxist meta-narratives are no longer trustworthy. Lyotard, is regarded as the “first comprehensive theorist of postmodernity,” he “argues that our age has precipitated nothing less than a transformation in the

¹Graham Ward, “Modernism,” *The Oxford Companion of Christian Thought*, ed., Adrian Hastings, Alistair Mason and Hugh Pypier (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 551.

²Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv. B. E. Benson, “Postmodernism,” EDT 2nd ed., ed., Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 939, 940. Metanarrative is said to be the mother of all narratives which provide a frame of reference for judging other stories. See Metanarrative in Wikipedia.

³Relativism implies that everyone has right to his or her view. See Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers, Cambridge*, UK: University Press, 1991, 202.

⁴Several characteristics of postmodernism have been pointed out. For example, Benson describes it as “the calling of all metaphysical explanations into question, . . .” Benson, 940. See also William S. Jonason, “Rethinking Theology: A Postmodern, Post-Holocaust, Post-Christianity Endeavor,” *Interpretation* 55 (January 2001), 5. Hans Kung refer to postmodernism as “post-racist, post-sexist, post-national, post-capitalist and post-socialist.” Kung, “The Re-emergence of the Sacred: Transmitting Religious Traditions in a Postmodern World,” *Conservative Judaism* 40 (Summer 1988), 14. David Hirsch calls it post-Auschwitz, *The Deconstruction of Literature: Criticism after Auschwitz* (Hanover, NH: Brown University, 1991), 202.

status of knowledge. . . . The result is a pervasive cynicism toward the institutions, values, and lofty goals of the past.”⁵ Postmodernism is an affront to institutions and previously laid down societal foundations.

Unlike Descartes who could not doubt his own consciousness, Derrida doubts his own consciousness. He does not believe that reason can lead to a universally acceptable truth or reality. He postulates that “consciousness is not pure: it is rather rooted in a body and a particular socio-political context, and influenced by its language, culture, and time.”⁶ Therefore, a language is reflective of the worldview of its users. And that humans are incapable of a perfect, undistorted view of the world instead, the community creates its own concept of the world.

Postmodernism’s subjective worldview is an affront to modernity’s optimistic epistemology based on science and reason. Consequently, it has abandoned the possibility of one possessing a universal and eternal truth because it considers such truths as impossible.⁷ Since modernism is said to have failed, the postmodernist contention is that universality or objectivity of metanarratives especially in the areas of politics, literature and religious discourse are unacceptable and unattainable.

The postmodernist contend that the individual can maintain and live what he or she considers as truth and ethical. What a person considers as his or her values should not be

⁵Johnson, 5.

⁶Derrida is “an Undoer, a de-constructor; and what he undoes is the covenant between language and reality which characterizes western philosophy’s belief that it can state the truth.” Vanhoozer, 7, 8.

⁷Rolf Hille, “Transition From Modernity to Post-Modernity: A Theological Evaluation,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 25 (2001): 116-17.

considered as relevant for the public at large, because in a pluralistic society there can be no prescriptive worldview or idea binding on all. In this regard, truth cannot be said to be rational or objective, rather, the individual's intellect or emotions or intuition, is the final arbiter of right or wrong.¹

A major tenet in postmodernism is deconstruction: a method of literary criticism which was used only in literary text but is today applied to all of life. It does not aim at ascertaining the intended meaning of the author, instead, it emphasizes the subjective interpretation of the reader. There is no correspondence between words and meaning because it is based on the individual's perspective so the individual decides what a word means for him and determines what is truth for him or herself.

Postmodernism emphasis community than individualism. Each community determines what is right or wrong for them and disregard all universal values. It also stresses the historicism of human knowledge. As Bonsor puts it, "Human beings are creatures of their historical-cultural-linguistic context. This context is the ground for and is intrinsic to all knowledge."² Therefore, ones historical context affects his or her concept of reasonableness.

In contrast with modernism, postmodernism does not believe in realism. It rather subscribes to relativism³ and nihilism.⁴ Vanhoozer compares postmodernism and modernism

¹See Grenz, *Primer*, 5-15.

²Bonsor, 295-96, 310-11.

³The believe that knowledge, truth, and morality exist in relation to culture, society, or historical context and are not absolute.

⁴Nihilism is the rejection of all religious and moral principles. See Ward, "Postmodernism," 551.

this way:

whereas the modern searches for global metanarratives, the postmodern emphasizes local narratives. Where the modern seeks purpose, design, and hierarchy in the natural and social worlds, the postmodern expects the rule of chance, desire, and anarchy. Whereas the modern believes in transcendence-of the knowing subject, of reason-the postmodern stresses immanence.¹

It is therefore clear that these two philosophical currents, though linked in some ways, are actually opposed to each other. Thus, postmodern culture does not believe in a common body of truth, it opposes the modernist individualistic way of life, and celebrates community and diversity.

The Effects of Postmodernism on Christian Theology

In agreement with Gulley, for any systematic theology to be relevant for our era, it has to consider the postmodern challenge. This is so because postmodernism rejects any form of systematization and world view, lending credence to relativism. Relativism also rejects universalism, leaving room only for the individual to decide on what is truth. The individual's perspective holds prominence rather than a universally acceptable worldview. Furthermore, "local reality has replaced the broader context, situation ethics has replaced the moral code, personal preference has replaced values."² Whereas God and Christ are considered as the center of Christian

¹Vanhoozer, 9.

²Gulley, 481,483.

theology and humans are expected to worship God because He is our Creator (Gen 1:26-31; 2:7, 20-25), postmodernism rejects such a center and instead subscribe to individual or community perspectives.

Postmodernism rejects the role of the Holy Spirit in the interpretation of Scriptures. It tries to deconstruct the biblical worldview with a postmodernist worldview. However, Christian theology has its foundation in Scripture which it considers as the revelation of God, and adheres to the principle of *sola Scriptura* rather than community based hermeneutics.¹ Another challenge postmodernism poses to Christian theology is how can Christianity sustain its traditional beliefs in a “nonfoundationalist epistemological milieu.”² Postmodernism rejects foundationalism, metaphysical realism, and belief in any universal subjective characteristics, instead, it espouses radical pluralism, a pragmatic view of truth, and the “centrality of imaginative interpretation.”³ It does not subscribe to any universal truth and the individual determines what is truth.

Should Christian theology adjust its traditional way of doing theology in order to accommodate postmodern or should we continue to hold to tradition as handed down by the patriarchs? Donkor defines tradition as the basis of experience “from which we interpret the world, and with which we should embark on an interdisciplinary conversation.”⁴ Therefore, to question theological tradition is to question the foundation of the church and this is what postmodernism

¹Gulley, 458,515.

²Donkor, 192.

³Erickson, 167.

⁴Donkor, 193.

is all about. There are calls for Christian theology to take advantage of the postmodern critique of the modernist epistemology.¹ However truth is not clearly defined in both modernism and postmodernism. While postmodernism does not necessarily reject the ontological nature of theology,² its interpretation by the theologian is the issue at stake. The postmodern view of tradition in the light of the definition of truth thus redefines the nature and task of theology.³

Also modernism and postmodernism have both challenged the traditional understanding of revelation. The postmodern view of revelation as “an ongoing divine self-disclosure,” has led to the new concept of God among many evangelicals known as the “openness of God,”⁴ while some also subscribe to the process view of God. Postmodernist understanding of revelation is therefore an affront to biblical revelation.

Further, the traditional method of theological construction which is usually based on the supremacy authority of Scripture, tradition, reason and experience, is giving way to only scripture and experience. Therefore, the postmodernist concept of tradition “collapses Scripture into tradition, while tradition in turn is made an argument for experience. . . .”⁵

¹Grenz, Primer, 29-30.

²Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 87.

³Donkor, 194.

⁴Donkor, 195. Among theologians subscribing to the open view of God are, Gregory Boyd, Stephen Franklin, Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker and David Basinger. Erickson, *The Evangelical Left* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 88.

⁵Donkor, 196. See also Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 93; David Wells, “The Theologian’s Craft,” *Doing Theology in Today’s World*,

The implication is that we interpret Scripture based on our personal experiences or the cultural experience. This in turn makes Scriptures subjective to our whims or caprice.

Biblical criticism such as the much vaunted historical-critical method has been accepted as another approach to biblical interpretation today. This is so because to the postmodernist, “no reading is innocent, or objective,” because all reading is influenced by the socio-cultural context.¹ Literal deconstructionist approach to secular literature, is now applied to the interpretation of the Bible.

Furthermore, there are calls to abandon expository preaching because it is considered rationalistic. Postmodernist consider expository preaching as elitist and authoritarian rather than a way of dialoguing or building consensus.² Besides, postmodernists are very suspicious of language and how it is interpreted. They look at the Bible and Christian tradition as metanarratives.

There are diverse forms of postmodern theology. Deconstructive or eliminative theology aims at eliminating major traditional doctrines such as the doctrine of God.³ Also, constructive or revisioning theology calls for the reconstruction of traditional theological worldview with one that is suitable to the postmodern epistemology. As a revisionist, Grenz calls on Evangelical theologians to rethink their theo-

ed., John D. Woodbridge and Thomas E. McComisky (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 175. Gulley, 515.

¹Vanhoozer, 8.

²Clement, 175-76; Gulley, 458.

³Erickson, 167. He mentions theologians such as Mark C. Taylor, Cornell West, Griffin and Thomas Oden.

logy, particularly in the area of Christian experience.¹ Liberation theology also calls for a transformation of the social structure. Since God is liberating the oppressed and the marginalized in society, these theologians call for social justice.² Conservative or restorative theology on the other hand, rejects the postmodernist “relativism, subjectivism, and reductionism,” while retaining “realism, the correspondence theory of truth, the referential understanding of language, and other values found in the premodern period.”³ While the conservatives bear qualities of premodernism, some accept some modern discoveries and insights.

As to the effects of postmodernism on Christian theology, it can be said that it rejects systematization, foundationalism, universalism, biblical tradition and the role of the Holy Spirit in the interpretation of scripture. It considers theological discourse as culturally conditioned; it has a distorted view of revelation and inspiration; it rejects traditional method of theological construction and expository sermons; it is suspicious of language and considers the Bible a meta-narrative. The next section aims at a theological response to the challenges of postmodernism.

¹See Erickson, 168; Gulley, 484; David R. Griffin, William A. Beardslee, and Joe Holland, *Varieties of Postmodern Theology* (New York: State University, 1989), 1-7; Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 57. Theologians such as Grenz, Griffin and James McClendon are calling for a revision in the Christian worldview.

¹Though postmodernism has no world view, liberation theology has liberation as the center of its world view. See Gabriel Fackre, *The Christian Story: A Narrative Interpretation of Basic Christian Doctrines* (Grand Rapids: Eedmans, 1984), 52,10,15,38; Erickson 168.

³Erickson, 168. Erickson list scholars such as Pope John Paul II, George W. Rutler and Thomas Oden.

A Theological Response to the Challenges of Postmodernism

Is there room for Christian theology to be contextualized to meet the challenges posed by postmodernism? Do we have to change the way we do theology or the content of our theology to meet this challenge? Although postmodernism challenges the Christian tradition of continuity, we need cautiously to bear in mind that postmodernism is not the final culture because a new culture may emerge soon. Therefore, whatever we do to meet the challenges postmodernism poses should not be seen as an end in itself.

Grenz calls for a revisioning of Christian theology in order for us to take advantage of the postmodern situation. He calls on theologians to adapt our message to the postmodernist needs. He believes that theology should be adapted toward the believing community.¹ However, Gulley believes Grenz's revisioning theology is not faithful to the concept of the "Spirit-authored biblical revelation."² Grenz seems to sacrifice what is traditionally considered to be truth with the aim of winning the postmodernist. However, whatever we do as theologians to reach the postmodernist should be based on the supreme authority of Scripture so that we can defend the proper place of reason.

Postmodernism can indeed serve as an opportunity and at the same time a challenge for the theology and ministry. In the positive sense, "postmodern thinkers have reminded us that there are many voices that deserve to be heard" howe-

¹Grenz, "Star Trek and the Next Generation: Postmodernism and the Future of Evangelical Theology," *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, ed. David S. Dockery (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1995), 101.

²Gulley, 496.

ver, we need “not reduce the many forms of literature in the Bible to the conceptual.” Furthermore, the authority of the reader should not be substituted for the text or else we may “commit interpretive violence against the text.”¹

As an affirmation of biblical authority, Bible students ought to listen to the Word of God and not force their own views on the biblical text.

The deconstructionist segment of postmodernism has been used by many groups to advance their cause. For example, feminist theologians regard the church as male-dominated. They hold that the meaning of the Bible text is found not in the text but is created by the interpreter. However, this is a “dangerous weapon” and must be rejected.² Truth is not relative, but absolute in a theological sense. We need to distinguish between truth and our understanding of truth, which maybe relative to our circumstances and culture. Furthermore, the individual theologian cannot prescribe truth for the community, hence we need to build consensus based on the Word of God.

When it comes to preaching, especially expository sermons, it is the duty of the preacher to fuse together “the biblical text and the contemporary world in the experience of the listener.”³ This does not mean, contrary to Postmodernism, that the meaning of the biblical text is controlled by the reader or preacher.

Furthermore, in contrast to postmodern rejection of the

¹Vanhoozer, 15. See also Gulley, 458.

²But as John B. Cobb points out, “deconstruction is a dangerous weapon. For all its liberative power, it finally undercuts even the passion for liberation.” Cobb, “Two Types of Postmodernism: Deconstruction and Process,” *Theology Today*, 47 (July, 1990): 149-158.

³Clement, 178.

role of the Holy Spirit in Bible study, we must recognize that the Bible was written through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and He alone can help us understand it. Thus, we must not impose our views on scripture. Just as Paul (Acts 17:30; 1 Cor 1:18-2:5) and the apostles depended on the word of God to defeat philosophies of their days, we need to depend on the word of God to defeat the anthropocentric philosophies of postmodernism.¹ The theologian should not compromise scripture in order to appeal to the postmodernist mind.

James P. Danaher is right: "Christianity is not a meta-narrative in spite of all efforts to make it one. Christianity will always be a personal relationship with the risen Christ, and never an explanation of how things are for everyone everywhere."² Although the Christian God cannot be discovered by means of scientific methods, He reveals Himself and is known to those who humbly seek Him.

Furthermore, to be able to do proper theology in a post-modern world, we ought to understand thoroughly the world we live in and the nuances of its culture. The God we serve is objective, personal, and His word is also objective. Theologians and ministers must take their study of the Bible therefore seriously. While rejecting postmodernism on the basis of strong belief in God and His word, it should be noted that whatever we do today as theologians in response to these challenges should be informed by the fact that postmodernism is temporal and it may lead to another culture very soon.

¹Clement, 176-77; Francis Bremer and Ellen Rydell, "Puritans in the Pulpit," *History Today*, 45 (1995): 5-54.

²James P. Danaher, "The Postmodern Gospel," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 29 (2005): 295.

Summary and Conclusion

The study searched into the effects of postmodernism on theology, and how these effects could be remedied. First, the study looked at postmodernism as a philosophy and its relation to pre-modern and modernism era. The pre-modern world was theocentric, and the universe was considered dualistic and supernatural with a purpose. The pre-modern era was overwhelmed by modernism which questioned every truth and emphasized scientific reason and epistemology. Faith and belief in God or the supernatural was rejected. Modernism was characterized by humanism, individualism, hedonism and naturalism.

Today the modern era is giving (has given) way to postmodernism, a term which has been variously defined. Its main tenet is skepticism toward metanarratives. Meaning is relative to ones experience; it does not believe in a common body of truth, opposes individualism, celebrates community or diversity and consider the future unknown.

Postmodernism affects theology by rejecting systematization, foundationalism, worldview, biblical tradition, universal reality, and the role of the Holy Spirit in the interpretation of scripture, but prefers communal hermeneutics. It sees theological discourse as culturally conditioned, has a distorted view of revelation and inspiration, rejects traditional method of theological construction and expository sermons; it is suspicious of language since it is culturally conditioned and considers the Bible a metanarrative aimed at dominating ones life. It has led to the introduction of different liberation theologies in evangelicalism.

How can we respond to the threats postmodernism poses to theology? It was noted that postmodernism has not yet carried the day and also it may not be the final culture,

it may lead to another. Also, the Christian faith should be presented in a way that the new generation can understand, while making no accommodation for postmodernist influence. Thus, it does not mean we should restate our body of truth. The reader must constantly submit to the word of God, not the other way around, and must allow the Holy Spirit to illuminate his or her thinking. There should be a dichotomy between truth and our understanding of truth.

Just as Paul dealt with the ancient philosophy of his time by depending on the Word of God, so postmodern theology ought to be rooted in uncompromising stance in Scripture. The Christian faith is not a mere metanarrative; it is a saving relationship with Christ. The Bible should not be subsumed under human impulses, for its worldview is unique and absolute. Theology makes a difference. Biblical truth is one and should stand the test of time. Our understanding of truth may change with time, yet the truth does not change. Thus, theologians ought to know and understand the world they live in and be biblically sound in order to meet its challenges.