



UNPACKING POSTMODERNISM

IS A POSTMODERN MINISTRY REALLY WHAT YOU'RE AFTER?

By Kary Oberbrunner

POP. SODA. COKE. SODA POP. DEPENDING ON WHERE YOU LIVE, claiming allegiance to one of these terms can alienate, ostracize or even excommunicate you. Thankfully, my wife and I have agreed to disagree. She calls it one thing. I call it another. I won't comment on who is right or wrong.

Terms can cause unity or division. Terms can bring clarity or confusion. Words are cheap, and words are rich. They can start fights or end wars. We know that words quickly lose meaning if not regularly defined.

My guess is that you've probably heard the word *postmodern*. I am going to make another guess that you have some emotions tied to this word as well. Perhaps your emotions are linked with cynicism. You might hear the term postmodern and wonder why "they" always have to come up with another trendy term. Perhaps your emotions are laced with excitement. You view this word as a savior that will deliver your archaic church into realms of relevance. Still others of you might use this word without really even knowing what it means. Your emotions take root in the realm of fear. You fear looking stupid

for not understanding this stylish word. You have fear of not knowing where this word will take you or your ministry. You have fear of change.

MODERN VS. POSTMODERN

Let's try to unpack the intimidating word postmodern. Remember, one of the main reasons that postmodernism is so difficult to define is that it has an affect on everything, including art, literature, architecture, economics, philosophy, culture and even ministry. Volumes have been written on postmodernism and its affect on humanity. For the sake of our discussion, perhaps the best place to start is by defining modernism. Then we'll look at postmodernism, and finally, we'll uncover some practical implications regarding faith, ministry and this generation's emerging leaders.

Modernity promoted a monolithic mindset that believed in underlying "universal" truths. Knowledge was standardized and derived from objectivity, idealism and absolutes. It was an approach that fit well with the principles of cause and effect, the scientific

method and authority. It acknowledged the existence of fundamentals and the affect of those fundamentals upon society, culture and religion.

If you're like me, you probably just glossed over that last paragraph. Don't. Reread it again slowly. If it helps any, let me give you two popular ad campaigns that capture the heart of the modernist period. Although created in the postmodern era, both these ads typify the modernist period. The first one is: Always Coca-Cola®. "Always" communicates a strong support for a continual and frequent experience. It bucks against individualism. This beverage is for all and always for all. The second ad is: Diamonds are forever®. "Forever" speaks of permanence. It suggests unchanging objectivity.

These ads give us a window into the heart of modernism. So what caused the change from the modern to the postmodern period? It's always difficult to pinpoint a cultural shift. What were the triggers? What fueled the movement?

Concerning the breakdown of modernism, CampusProgram.com notes that "some identify its roots in the breakdown of Hegelian idealism and the impact of both World Wars (perhaps even the concept of a World War)." Regardless, a growing number of people became disillusioned with the promise of humanity's progress. As a whole, cynicism and skepticism set in. People began to see exceptions to the (universal) rule. Postmodernism evolved.

Former contradictions once swept under the rug were now celebrated within art and philosophy. A spirit of distrust surfaced. Distrust in absolutes, authority and objectivity emerged. So began postmodernism, "a philosophical and cultural movement that rejected all metanarratives (ways of thinking that unite knowledge and experience to seek to provide a definitive, universal truth)," according to CampusProgram.com.

Postmodernism invited a blurring, a breakdown and in some cases, a downright rejection of established standards and truth. More than rejection, postmodernism is acceptance. It accepts various ideas, actions and values because all beliefs are worthy of an audience.

A campaign ad that captures the heart of the postmodern period is the latest Outback slogan: No rules. Just right®. These four words typify the belief that there is no external standard. Instead, personal enjoyment exists in its place. Another popular campaign was Burger King's: Your way. Right Away®. This ad argues that every individual's own preference is worthy of an audience—and, mind you, in a prompt manner.

JOURNEYING TOWARDS RELEVANCE

Up until this point, the article has been pretty abstract. This was necessary in order to understand some key definitions. Now let's get practical by comparing and contrasting some aspects of modernism and postmodernism. Although it's probable that a very extensive list exists, here are a few distinctions to start. Feel free to contextualize these examples into your local ministry setting. When discussing these two periods, the temptation is to distinguish which one is right and which one is wrong. In fact, this is one of the primary battles facing the Church today. Many "older" generations and traditional churches hold to components characteristic of the modernist period. Many "younger" generations and emerging churches hold to components characteristic of the postmodern period.

	MODERNISM	POSTMODERNISM
MOTTO	TELL ME	INVOLVE ME
STIMULI STYLE	LOGICAL	VISUAL
LEARNING STYLE	LECTURE	STORY
VALUE	TRUTH	TOLERANCE
VIEW OF SALVATION	A POINT IN TIME	A WAY OF LIFE
HERMENEUTIC	LITERAL, HISTORICAL	COMMUNITY
AUTHORITY STRUCTURE	HIERARCHY	ROUND TABLE
TENDENCY OF EXTREME	LEGALISM	LIBERALISM
ORDER OF WORSHIP	FIXED	FLUID
ECCLESIA EXPRESSION	WE DO CHURCH	WE ARE CHURCH

In my recent book, *The Journey Towards Relevance: Simple Steps for Transforming your World* (Relevant Books), I talk extensively about these two camps in opposition to one another. Although there are exceptions, modernists frequently fall into the camp I call "separatists." Similarly, postmodernists frequently fall into the camp I call "conformists." The following is an excerpt regarding these camps.

The first camp separates itself from people, society, and culture for the main purpose of remaining unstained by the world. This group takes the commands of God, which are not burdensome, and makes hundreds of other rules and laws in order to maintain personal holiness. This camp judges all others by the man-made religion they have created. This camp is laced with fear: fear of sinning, fear of compromising, fear of enjoying anything in the world. These people are the separatists.

The second camp conforms itself to the ideals, philosophies, and goals of the world. They value what it values. They model what it models. They are a cookie cutter image of pop culture. In an attempt to be all things to all people and enjoy what God has created, they become enslaved to the created and an offense to fellow believers. They label others less liberated as backward and legalistic. They flaunt their freedom and condemn others for their disciplined lifestyle. These people are the conformists.

The watching world looks on at this behavior and forms two conclusions. Concerning the separatists, the world believes such Christians are out of touch with the real world. They're without joy. They're motivated by law and judging others. They're against everything. Their main motivation is to prevent anyone from enjoying anything. They believe the separatist is narrow-minded and intolerant.

Concerning the conformist, the watching world believes such Christians are no different than themselves. It fails to see any salt or light. The world is turned off by the reality that sin characterizes the conformist ... The world views the conformist as liberal and tolerant, an exact representation of them.

Thus, both camps, instead of being relevant to their world, become completely irrelevant. Really, I have found that being relevant is reserved for the courageous few. ... The few, the transformists, are willing to live on the fine line of embracing faith and culture.

Hopefully, you noticed the third camp I just mentioned. The "transformists" are those balanced individuals. Whereas the separatist is a deceived God lover, the

conformist is a deceived people lover. However, the transformist is a balanced God lover and a people lover. Transformists are not perfect in the least, but they are in the journey.

Regarding the whole modernist vs. postmodernist question, I believe the transformist is neither. Rather, the transformist pulls from both perspectives, for both have valid points.

Let's take for instance hermeneutics (for those of you out of school for a while, this is the art and science of biblical interpretation). The modernist views biblical interpretation as something inherently external. In other words, the student dissects a passage much like a scientist dissects a specimen in a lab. Whereas the scientist is performing an experiment, the student is performing exegesis. The Word is not considered in regard to personal spiritual formation. Rather, the text is something to be uncovered and excavated. It is brought under the student's control.

On the other hand, postmodernists determine the meaning of a text by discovering what it means for them. In fact, they may even ask their community group for their perspective in order to discover

have, if you will, a widow hermeneutic. The same example could be given regarding an enslaved people group.

There are other examples of this preferred balance personified by the transformist. Most modernist churches have a fixed order of worship and a hierarchy system regarding authority. Thus, their service consists of the same preacher who has gotten up for the last 20 years and shared the same message. As a pew sitter, you'd think this person has all the gifts in the church.

The postmodern mindset brings in a healthy perspective regarding authority structure and order of worship. Some would argue that the postmodernist brings a biblical perspective. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14:26, "What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church." In the context, if this fluid "round table" experience happens, and if an unbeliever is in the room, "he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you" (v. 25).



REGARDING THE WHOLE MODERNIST VS. POSTMODERNIST QUESTION, I BELIEVE THE TRANSFORMIST IS NEITHER. RATHER, THE TRANSFORMIST PULLS FROM BOTH PERSPECTIVES, FOR BOTH HAVE VALID POINTS.

what the passage means for their community. Authority is now placed upon experience. Interpretation is inherently internal. In fact, Columbus area pastor Aric Birdsall views the whole postmodern philosophy as experiential. "That's where we get our truth from," he told the *Columbus Dispatch*, "from our experience, from what works, what we have felt instead of A plus B equals C." Transformists use both methods. They have the skill to use sound exegetical principles. They look at context and word usage. However, they are constantly putting themselves under the authority of the Spirit. They are not seeking an experience, but rather, they're seeking God. As a result, when they seek God, they have an experience. This is obvious in that they can return to the text years later and discover a new meaning. It's not the Word that has changed, but rather themselves, as they've allowed God to sanctify them.

Does a community have a communal hermeneutic? You bet. Modernists might not be comfortable with such a claim. Let's assume that a local church has undergone several deaths. As a result, there is a growing number of widows in the church. When that local church reads the Word, you better believe that they will be more in tune and aware of passages that speak about widows. They

Let's not forget, though, that Paul was writing the Corinthians so that more order would be implemented into their service. He wanted fluidity, but he also wanted some things fixed. We are beginning to see that in order to truly be effective, we need a blend of both the modernist and postmodernist perspective.

The postmodern mindset has brought with it much freedom. Many churches are in desperate need of more involvement, story, community and round table discussions. However, as with any movement, we can go to the other extreme.

IT TAKES TWO

Postmodern ministry tends to focus on packaging. In fact, I was at a pastor's conference a few years back that had a special session on how to minister in the postmodern world. Unfortunately, it was extremely lacking in substance. It was centered on how churches need to get a big sheet at the front of their stage in order to project images. The session went as "deep" as getting some cool lights for the worship service.

Coca-Cola® has to be about packaging. Their logo brings a sense of freshness. They are so in tune with their packaging that

CHRIST WAS ALL ABOUT PACKAGING AND SUBSTANCE.

they change it in order to fit the holidays. They want their packaging to reach us, the consumer, and where we are. They want us to grab their bottle when we're at the store, regardless if it's Christmas, Easter or the Fourth of July.

Let's face it, though. We drink the Coke® for the substance. It doesn't matter how good the package looks. The packaging alone won't quench anybody's thirst.

Ironically, modernists tend to focus exclusively on substance at the expense of packaging. It doesn't matter how good the soda is—if it isn't packaged right, it won't get off the shelf and into my cart.

Both the modernist and the postmodernist need to catch this. Regardless of whether we want to get into the debate of whether Christianity or church is consumed, I know for sure that it's packaged. Packaging may get someone in our doors, but very soon,

if we don't yield substance, the consumer leaves bitter, cynical and frustrated.

The modernist minister needs to focus a bit more on packaging. They need to loosen up a little more on form and method. The postmodern minister needs to remember substance. They need to remember that the message never changes. If they begin changing the message in order to accommodate the packaging, then they've lost it. Gary Underwood, a pastor of young adults at The Chapel, a large urban church, comments on this reality. "Paul was clear that the Gospel would sound 'foolish' to many. If people are going to be turned off by Christianity, let it be because their hearts reject the Gospel, and not because of the way it's packaged."

In the churches I hang out with (the Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches), we just recently wrestled through this. We're planning a National Young Adult Conference called Driven for June '05. I'm on the planning committee with six other passionate pastors. You can bet we're extremely sensitive to the way we're packaging this conference. We're including multi-sensory worship, ancient-future components and many interactive

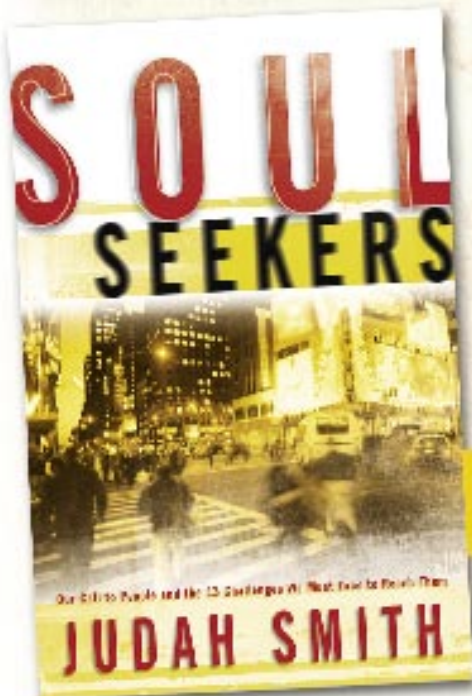
experiences. However, we're also just as concerned about having rich substance within the conference, including communion, diverse workshops and solid biblical teaching.

It's kind of funny, but Christ was all about packaging and substance. In fact, He went back to that whole love God, love people thing (Matthew 22:36-40). That was the substance. As far as the packaging, we're it (2 Corinthians 3:2). He said by our love, all people would know we're His disciples.

Now that we have this postmodern thing all wrapped up, we can move on to more important discussions, like the carbonated beverage name debate. I don't know about you, but I'm sure glad they didn't have it in Jesus' day. After all, what would I do if He called it POP? **RL**

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ISBN 08307314296

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