

Postmodernism and the Uniqueness of Christ

There are two elements in our title. Postmodernism and the uniqueness of Christ. What do we mean by them? What exactly is postmodernism? For that matter what was modernism? And what do we mean when we say that Christ is unique? Moreover what are the implications positively or negatively on postmodernism of Christ being unique? And what challenges does postmodernism raise to people who do hold that Christ is indeed unique?

Postmodernism

Postmodernism is a notoriously slippery word. Different people use it to mean different things. We will try to attempt a definition, but first of all we ought to think about where it has come from, what sort of things have given rise to it, and what is the modernism that postmodernism seems to want to define itself as after, or refuting or surpassing.

We have always been fascinated with how to express the really real, whether it be through art, literature, philosophy, architecture or economics. To understand what is real and to be able to express it is a long-standing quest.

Modernism, as a phase in culture, is always associated with The European Enlightenment, The Industrial Revolution and with Scientific Empiricism the idea that what is really real is whatever is open to exact measurement with our senses. The goal of representing the really real, was understood as being able to perfectly measure and convey an object, a place or a person. The invention of photography during the modernist period was seen by many as the ultimate way to achieve this goal. Even Picasso could say that he had nothing else to learn about representation.

Photography started a crisis in representing the real. It does a pretty good job of recording an instant freeze frame of a moment, but fails in many other areas which are crucial to understanding people and the world. It doesn't do a good job of capturing movement, which the Impressionists tried to correct, it replaces originality with technology, it only allows one viewpoint at a time. Through realising the limitations of photography to capture and convey reality, the whole ability to precisely measure reality began to be called into question. And with it the Modernist quest for perfect scientifically provable data on what constitutes reality anyway. Hence we find that in reaction Picasso and others started to paint their vision of reality in completely different and anti-representational ways. Similar things had already happened in philosophy, particularly with the work of Nietzsche. And in many other areas architecture to ethics, music to particle physics, the underpinnings of disciplines started to accept that rigorous measurement might not be the only measure of reality, or even the most important one.

The next step was to question whether we are able to measure reality at all, and certainly whether the rigorous imposition of scientific materialism on to every day life was actually liveable with. For example modernism heralded World War One as the war to end all wars the

war that would finally put an end to conflict as we learned to put scientific rationalism into everyday practice. World War Two therefore raised a fatal challenge to scientific rationalism.

There has arisen then a distrust of measures of reality that say "we have got it all." Experimentation, it is claimed, simply doesn't bear it out, or where it does, it leads to totalitarianism such as communist Russia the largest single attempt to try to measure and control life according to scientific enlightenment principles.

If the heart of modernism was the idea that the large scale explanation could provide all the answers, at the heart of postmodernism is the complete refusal of this idea. Hence in his famous and provocative book *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean Francois Lyotard could define postmodernism as "a suspicion of metanarratives." Lyotard's statement is the natural outcome of the collapse of representation, and thinkers who challenge enlightenment suppositions about measuring and categorising reality. We are now expected to accept that if big narratives do not provide satisfaction of humane living conditions, then the only alternative is to live by a set of micro-narratives. Each of us works out his or her own story, believing that any wider foundation for truth or behaviour is unavailable.

I want you to note that although the effects of this sort of argument can be seen across many areas of life and study, it is primarily an issue about thought. Thinking, it is argued, simply doesn't allow us access to truth. It is the fact that postmodernism is rooted in a way of thinking that means it crosses boundaries so easily. We now have postmodern thinking in areas that were never modernist to start with. Postmodernism has gone beyond the bounds of the modernist debate into new areas and is, I believe, here to stay.

Distrust of Metanarratives

Here then is a first pillar in our definition of postmodernism distrust of metanarratives. You will see that it is not only anti-modern, but it is also anti-authority of any sort. The desire is to replace supposedly tyrannical external authority, with the self as arbiter of truth.

The sort of objective knowledge sought by modernism, postmodernism claims is simply not available, and hence our actions, our thoughts, our very selves do not gain significance from without from obeying some external standard but only from within. There is no possibility that critical or value judgements can be verified by any external criterion. Hence the only available measure of significance, value or truth is the self. Indeed the words no longer communicate anything of lasting significance, because they themselves do not relate to any external criteria for judgement, but mean only what the self wishes them to mean. As the novelist William Golding said "If God is dead; if man is the highest; good and evil are decided by majority vote." This is the ultimate end of the relativist position that we are unable to know whether our values are good or bad.

Relativism

Here is the second pillar of postmodernism relativism. The idea that all knowledge or claims to truth are only relative to other claims to truth, not to some external standard. Hence there is no criteria for judging between them. We are the ones who give value and meaning to things now.

It is for this reason that anyone who now claims to have THE truth is immediately labelled as intolerant. Because if we have THE truth, then we are saying that other people are wrong, and by a relative definition we have no right or criteria to do that. Therefore we must simply be arrogant, even fascist. We simply want power. By relativist standards, Christians are actually

unethical to claim that there is only one way to God.

But what has actually happened here is that there has been a separation between the language of belief and the language of truth. Belief no longer needs to be connected to truth, only to opinion or feeling. Because what I feel is now the most important benchmark of the validity of a belief. What it does for me is the most important criteria for deciding on the value of a belief.

Philosophical Pluralism

Hence we get to our third and final pillar of postmodernism philosophical pluralism. Not the pluralism that says we belong to a multi-faceted society with lots of different races colours and creeds living side by side, but the pluralism that maintains that because nothing is absolutely true that therefore all options in religion and belief are equally valid. In this environment we are encouraged to pick and mix our own worldview from a whole smorgasbord of options. Our choices need not be long term, and little commitment is required of us. Indeed the increasing variety of choices make it increasingly difficult for many people to think in terms of value judgement at all. Hyperchoice, far from increasing our options in the area of belief is rapidly killing the likelihood of making reasoned decisions.

The Uniqueness of Christ

So much for postmodernism. What about the uniqueness of Christ? What do we mean when we say "the uniqueness of Christ"? And what are the implications of His uniqueness for a contemporary culture that denies truth and deifies self?

Christ is unique in all sorts of ways, isn't he? He is unique in knowledge, His teaching is unique, His death and resurrection are unique, His miracles are unique, His sinless life is unique, His rescuing ministry is unique. The way in which He reveals God is unique. His character is unique both king and servant.

Perhaps most importantly for our culture we need to say that Jesus' authority is unique.

Exercise:

Q. On what grounds can Jesus claim to have unique authority?

A. Jesus taught as one with authority, not like other people. Mark 1:27, Luke 4:36. His authority to speak, His authority to act, in short His ministry and life all derive from who He is.

Q. Read John 5:16-27 Where does Jesus authority come from? What sort of authority does He have?

A. Jesus is the Son of God par excellence. He does only and exactly what the Father does. So close is the identification, and so clear, that the Jews want to kill Him for making Himself equal with God. Jesus' uniqueness is not primarily in a sinless life, or an exemplary ministry, although those things are both unique and wonderful. No Jesus' uniqueness is primarily that this is the sovereign, almighty creator God made flesh.

His ability to carry out His ministry all hangs on that. For example Mark 2:7 Jesus forgives sins and the pharisees ironically ask "who can forgive sins except God alone?" And of course the

answer is nobody. Only the most offended party to a sin can forgive and that is God. Or take a miracle like the calming of the storm a unique event if ever there was one. The disciples are left stunned with one question in their minds who on earth is this that we have hitched up with? And the answer is obvious the one who stills waves is the one who makes oceans with the word of His mouth. He can still them because of who He is.

This is no fiction imposed on Jesus by later writers. Jesus is very happy to claim the prerogatives of God for Himself in a way that was simply unthinkable in a monotheistic culture as strong as this one. He accepts worship as God from Thomas after the resurrection "my Lord and my God," he identifies Himself in the language of divinity, especially in the great I AM statements in John's gospel. I AM the great OT expression of God's name and self. I AM the bread of life, I AM the true vine, I AM the good shepherd, before Abraham was I AM.

Jesus has unique authority then because of who He is. God is sovereign, knows everything and reveals things. Jesus clearly is in possession of unique knowledge.

Exercise:

Q. Read John 3:11-13 Why is Jesus' knowledge unique? What must we do in response to Jesus words according to these verses?

A. The unmissable claim of the New Testament is that God left footprints in the sand in Palestine. Jesus is to be obeyed. His words are true, because he is God. His revelation of God is perfect. He is, in the words of Colossians 1 the image of the invisible God the exact representation of His being.

And most importantly He is the unique offering for sin. We cannot pay the price ourselves except with judgement and death and Hell. But God the Father gave His only Son as an atoning sacrifice for sin. He made Him who knew no sin to BE sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. 2 Cor 5:21. And that, far from being self-empowering is deeply humbling. Far from being able to claim my own merits, I have to come to the foot of the cross and admit my sin, admit that that was God there dying for me, and humbly asks for His forgiveness.

When Thomas falls at Jesus feet and worships Him as Lord and God, that is in no way a subjective or relativist thing. He wasn't just God to Thomas, but I can take or leave Him or make up my own version. He is God over all. Read Col 1:15-20.

So when He commands He has the right to perfect obedience. We are His, by the fact that he made us and as Christians by the fact that he bought us with His blood.

Exercise:

So we need to ask ourselves, how does Christ's uniqueness impinge on this whole question of postmodernism. Remember our three pillars of postmodernism distrust of metanarratives, relativism and pluralism.

Q. How do each of these challenge Christ's unique right to our obedience? What do they say about His authority and Godship?

Q. How does understanding Christ's uniqueness challenge these three pillars of postmodernism? With Bible references.

Q. Why is it vital to be secure about the uniqueness of Jesus?

A. Metanarrative God's salvation plan of which Jesus is the culmination, is a vital metanarrative. Misunderstand this and you are doomed, literally.

A. Relativism Jesus knows and reveals accurately. he commands obedience and deserves it. Makes him the centre not me. Relativism says everything is there to fulfil me, finds meaning in me, etc. Jesus says that the one who needs satisfying is not me but God. Only in Jesus' sacrificial death does God's justice find the satisfaction for our sinfulness.

A. Pluralism John 14: I am the only way to God.

How then should we respond to the confrontation between a culture that denies Christ's uniqueness and the God who demands that fall on our knees and honour His Son?

3 things: know and think Christianly, live Christianly and speak Christianly.

1. Know Christianly

Romans 12:1 says be transformed by the renewing of your minds. Postmodernism contains many values that are spiritual, but it offers them by trying to convince the minds of a generation. Similarly, Paul says we are able to determine spiritual matters as Christians by letting God renew our minds. How do we do it?

Know God's word well. We should never stop knowing better, loving it well, putting it into practice. God's Spirit uses God's Word to create and shape God's people. Actually develop strategies for learning it better get someone to teach you, get a good book or a commentary to help you, decide to read the Bible in a year.

Be discerning with what you take in:

From the media, from TV and video. There is a lot of stuff that if you fill your head with it will stop you having your mind transformed by the Spirit of God.

From your courses. Ask questions about the assumptions of what you are taught. Is it in line with what God has revealed or not? At what points should you raise objections in class? What are the opportunities to talk about it with your course mates. Sometimes just a single "are we really sure about this" can achieve a lot, and maybe even flush out others who think the same but are too scared to say it.

In church. I am a fan of many modern songs. I believe in contemporary prophecy. But I have to say that there are also a lot of songs which are drivel, whose subject is me, and whose effect is to make me feel good rather than to focus on God's everlasting truth. When this happens we see postmodern me-centred culture seeping deep into the heart of the church or our CUs. It makes me tremble to think about where we are heading if we continue. Similarly with prophecy, there

seem to be a great deal of contemporary words that are nothing more than platitudes to make individuals or a group feel good about themselves. Church as therapy. And here it is very difficult to challenge because some want to associate their words with the very words of God. But the New Testament always insists that we be very cautious in assessing and testing such words before we accept or act on them. Be discerning.

Talk about contemporary issues and course work with others trying to work out a Christian point of view on a subject. Very few people actively take an interest in each others' growth any more. This is an important area to recapture talking about things that matter

Read Christian books. Christian reading is going down and down, but it is still an excellent way to grow as a Christian. God wants us to be both wise and understanding.

As you do these things you get to know God better and work out in your situation what it means to be a biblical Christian. We discover that it means that we exist for God's pleasure not the other way round. He is at the centre, not me. Which flatly contradicts our contemporary me me me culture.

2. Live Christianly

We can't learn to think Christianly without it affecting our behaviour. If we do then we haven't really learnt anything at all. We have become stuffed up with knowledge but have no wisdom. No we must put what we know into practice. What does that mean?

Be holy. There seems to be an attitude today that wants to demonstrate that Christians are no different to anyone else. And I know what people mean they don't want to get a geeky anorak image. "We are free in Christ," we say. "We have had enough of the legalism of a previous generation." And that is true to a point. But if we think that we should be just like everyone else then we are badly wrong. Christians are new creations, alive to God. he calls the shots now.

Be involved in a local church. The biggest sign of pomo creeping into our lives as Christians is when I start to say "I don't need to belong", or "I choose a church according to whether it meets my needs." When this happens then what we are seeing is not Christianity that says the one who needs to be satisfied is God, but the world which says that the one who needs to be satisfied is me. That means we need to work out where we fit in the body, and what we contribute as well as what we receive. I frequently hear students say "I go to one church for the teaching and one for the worship." That is not a Christian understanding of the church which is God's redeemed community.

Be clear. It is quite possible to live in a holy way, but to be very obscure about it. Rather than live bold lives before the world, we hide in the closet. We settle for the mediocre rather than take risks for the Lord. If ever there was a time when we need to stand and be counted it is now. If Christ is unique then people should notice some unique things about the way we live. "If you love each other people will know you are my disciples."

3. Speak Christianly

How do we speak to a world that has given up on truth? Some would have us believe that the way is to engage the world at the level of method. The world exists by telling small stories, individual stories, so lets try to communicate on that level. That is fine as far as it goes, but it doesn't go very far. It is great for example to be able to tell my story, but it is limited. By

definition my story isn't your story, so how do you know you can share it.

By contrast the good news is God's story for everyone to share. When we settle for the micro-narrative the next step is to lose our confidence in the big story, as well as our ability to explain it. So we need to do both. We need to be able to share our story, but we need to set in the context of the big story. And when we tell the big story we must do so in ways that are relational, engaging, honest and respectful. But we must have confidence in the fact that the gospel is not only relational but propositional. Christ's uniquely communicates God to us and that means that there is truth which may be known. Known in such a way as to be able to act on it and find it life transforming.

All worldviews aim at coherence, correspondence and transforming power. The salvation that is only found in Jesus is the only satisfaction firstly for God, secondly for us and thirdly of these important categories in our thinking. Only Jesus provides coherence, correspondence and transforming power, because He is true and He is unique.

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Marcus Honeysett

Marcus Honeysett is Director of Living Leadership and author of *Finding Joy: A Radical Rediscovery of Grace* (IVP, 2005).

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