

# UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING A POSTMODERN CULTURE

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Three expressions which begin with "post-" characterize the culture that challenges the church today: post-literate, post-Christian, and postmodern.

## **Post-Literate**

The term "post-literate" refers to the change in culture shaped by the communications media. Some, half-seriously, date post-literate culture to 1985—the year that more videos were rented than library books checked out. It's not that people don't buy books any more; the explosion of trendy bookstore-cum-coffee-shops demonstrates the contrary. It's just that few people read the books they buy.

Post-literate culture communicates in a sight/sound mosaic, a non-sequential collage of ideas involving both hemispheres of the brain and addressing emotions as much as intellect. Richard Jensen, in his book *Thinking in Story*, says that most Americans spend 80% of their non-working, non-sleeping time watching television. The notable exception is the clergy! In *Preaching to a TV Generation*, Michael Rogness identifies five characteristics of TV and its audience that affect how the church's communication is received. 1) Television conveys pictures, not concepts. 2) Information is conveyed in bytes or impressions, rather than sequentially. 3) Our concentration span is shorter. 4) We listen more passively. 5) Television is a combination of verbal and non-verbal communication. Os Guinness in *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds* is more pejorative in his assessment of television's impact. Television turns everything into entertainment, Guinness contends, with a bias against understanding (TV offers superficial, partial, misleading information), a bias against responsibility (TV presents value-less lifestyles as the norm), a bias against history (only the NOW matters), a bias against rationality (performing, not pondering, is the essence of the medium), and a bias against truth and accuracy (plausibility, not veracity, is what holds the audience). That post-literate and postmodern are two sides of the cultural coin will become apparent.

In contrast, the preaching and teaching of the church has been typically linear in nature, emphasizing clarity of argument, logical outline, tight transitions, development of a main point with sub-points, persuasive reasoning and illustrations whose purpose is to explicate a principle. They tend to be analytical, left-brained, and idea-oriented. The sermons and lesson plans we were taught to prepare are the product of an education measured in essays. They often "read" better than they "sound" because they were developed for a literate culture. Personal experience confirms studies which suggest that young people do not respond to such confirmation classes and sermons the way their grandparents did. Their baby-boom parents may have learned the way the church taught, but they have been influenced by post-literate culture to the degree that literate preaching and teaching do not reach them well either.

Interestingly, several authors draw comparisons between the preliterate, *oral* culture of biblical times and the post-literate culture of today in suggesting that there are legitimate alternatives to the communication methods and styles we have—over years—sanctified for use in the church.

## **Post-Christian**

It has become almost fashionable to speak of contemporary America as "post-Christian." Legal challenges to the institutions of the faith and life-style challenges to the values of the faith characterize our

culture. Still, we seem surprised at each new denial of Christian truth and at increasing disdain for evangelical Christians. In his book *The Once and Future Church*, Loren Mead contends that we are undergoing a cataclysmic transition from the paradigm of "Western = Christian" culture that has been in place since Constantine institutionalized the church. Many of our assumptions about what our country's people believe, how they think, what they value, why they do things, and where their hope lies have been invalid for some time. Dealing with the divorce of western culture and Christianity has been frustrating for many Christians, particularly preachers and teachers. Sermons that castigate society rather than call to repentance and classrooms where discipline rather than spiritual growth is the issue are expressions of that frustration. More than we want to admit, members of the church have lost the integration of their faith with their life that a Christian culture promoted. Polls say that people view themselves as "spiritual," while denying absolute truth and biblical morals.

It is no longer possible to assume that people know the basic Bible stories that shaped the Sunday school curriculum of a generation ago. It is probably unwise to assume that they understand and agree with all the doctrines they affirmed with their confirmation vow. While some of our hearers are acutely aware of the conflict between their faith and the world in which they must work, others have comfortably adopted the postmodern pluralism that sees no conflict between opposing worldviews. In a 90-minute seminar on values with audiences that range from Christian college students to Christians attending secular universities, and also with adults, I've observed the same phenomenon. Christians are making value decisions, often good value decisions, on the basis of intuition and reasoning rather than "thus saith the Lord," where a clear commandment of God applies. They have retained the content of truth without the basis for truth. Can that last? The impact of a post-Christian culture may be subtle, but far-reaching within the church. Its impact on the people outside the church to whom the Savior has sent us is more overt, and it challenges our evangelism efforts in new ways.

When we admit to ourselves that our culture is no longer Christian, we may more readily see our community as a mission field. When we get over our frustration, we can get on with our ministry. It is important for the church to understand the context in which it communicates.

## **Postmodern**

### **Defining Postmodern**

Most of our members won't respond to the philosophical definition of postmodernism, so let's begin with a popular representation of the subject.

In art the term "pastiche" describes a collage of diverse, even incongruous, themes and colors and images. On MTV this is recognized in the disjointed and discordant pasting together of images and sounds and typography that assault one's senses with the denial of any unifying and objective reality. The search for a central theme and sequential thought in postmodern rock music will be frustrated, and an underlying cynicism and pessimism will become apparent. "Bricolage" describes articles of clothing that aren't coordinated and may represent different decades. There is a deliberate flaunting of conventional efforts at unification. Michel Foucault coined two terms to describe his philosophical challenge to conventional thought: "heterotopia" and "multiverse." Pop culture simply expresses this philosophy.

In movies there has been a concerted effort to blend and blur the real and the surreal, the historical and the fictional. What is reality in "Groundhog Day"? Oliver Stone's subtle blending of fact and supposition in "JFK" and the imposition of Forrest Gump into historical scenes demonstrate the postmodern argument that history is simply politics, and reality depends on who and where you are. "Who Framed Roger Rabbit?" and "Last Action Hero" deliberately blur illusion and reality. Thrillers like "The Game" and "Conspiracy Theory" play on postmodernism's questioning of the distinction between illusion and reality. "Dances With Wolves" was only the first of several films that celebrate pluralism, with the not-so-subtle suggestion that primitive or native cultures were perfectly fine until "western" (read "Christian") culture was imposed on them.

Television introduces postmodern thought in a number of venues. "Seinfeld" was the cynical show about "nothing" that exaggerated self-centered behavior until it was humorously normal. Cynical representations of

traditional values go down easier in the cartoon format of "The Simpsons" or "King of the Hill." While "Ellen" was either too jarring or too boring, the show made homosexuality part of the pluralistic picture of life television promotes. "Friends" depicts postmodernism's subjective search for meaning in life—sans absolutes—and the ultimate value of a small "community" in which one finds identity and security. The Fox network has emphasized the metaphysical curiosity of postmodernism in shows like "The X-Files" and the still darker "Millennium."

Several authors have depicted the shift from modernism to postmodernism by contrasting the series "Star Trek" with its successor, "Star Trek: The Next Generation." Where Star Trek demonstrated the humanistic ideal of many cultures overcoming their differences in the quest for objective knowledge of the universe—the final frontier, "The Next Generation" presents humankind—and other life forms—in an ecological partnership with the universe. "In this new world time is no longer simply linear, appearance is not necessarily reality, and the rational is not always to be trusted," observes Stanley Grenz. The dispassionately rational Spock has been replaced by an android, and intuitive wisdom is represented by the woman Counselor Troi. While the original ignored God, the postmodern sequel embodies the supernatural in the character "Q," who displays the attributes of omniscience and omnipotence but is morally ambiguous and curiously self-gratifying.

Perhaps the easiest way to recognize the shift in culture is in the slang expressions of America's young. "Whatever," "as if," and "deal with it" express a disinterest in resolving conflicting viewpoints because there is an underlying disbelief in objective and absolute truth coupled with a denial that life has any ultimate or unifying meaning. The average teen doesn't invest the expression with all that content, of course; but there is a philosophical basis for pop culture. "It works for me" is an expression of postmodern pragmatism, subjective and experiential. "Multiculturalism" is the more sophisticated expression for postmodern pluralism, with "tolerance" the value that has superseded all others in the postmodern exaltation of equally valid differences and diversity.

Another way of defining postmodernism is that it is a reaction to "modernism," the culture of the "Enlightenment." Modernism placed man at the center of reality, with confidence in the scientific method's ability to "discover" truth and society's ability to express that truth in universal propositions. To the modern world knowledge was certain, objective, good, and accessible to the human mind. There was unflagging trust in reason and an unquestioning optimism about the progress inevitable through science and education. Stanley Grenz, in his *Primer on Postmodernism*, summarizes: "The modern human can appropriately be characterized as Descartes's autonomous, rational substance encountering Newton's mechanistic world."

In contrast, postmodernism has no center of reality, no core explanation for life. In fact, reality is conditioned by one's context and experience. It is relative, indeterminate, and participatory. There is no "truth" to discover, only preferences and interpretations. Radical pluralism means that there may be many "truths" alongside each other. There can be no "objective" truth or reality because there is no neutral stance from which to view things. Emotion and intuition are valid paths to knowledge, not just reason. And knowledge is always incomplete. "Community" replaces the autonomous self as the measure of things, the arbiter of "relative" truth. A decentralized view of life emphasizes so-called "retribalization," the celebration of differences alongside the need to establish identity in one's own group. Rather than an optimistic confidence in progress, postmodernism has a pessimistic focus on human misery. It is the inevitable conclusion of existentialism, the denial of meaning, end, or reason to life.

While most people would say that postmodernism is only a decade or two old, there are philosophical roots to trace. Friedrich Nietzsche may be the grandfather of postmodernism. More than a century ago he made truth and reality fictional creations of our subjective experience, with language the artist's paintbrush to "create" truth. For Nietzsche life is cyclical, not linear; therefore, there is no real progress or grand plan. Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein went a step further, rejecting the "correspondence theory" on which modern rationalism is built—the conviction that there is a fact or reality to which our words, concepts, and natural laws correspond. They argued that meaning is not inherent in the world, but is a relational process involving the interpreter and his experience. Language, therefore, creates reality within the limits of its cultural "structure."

Three more recent names are usually identified with postmodernism. Michel Foucault denied objective knowledge and universal good, focusing rather on complexity and differentness. He cynically viewed knowledge as "power" and history as political fictions or "myths" designed to validate the systems and values of the present. His angry, negative, and self-gratifying agenda had no room for order or right and wrong. Jacques Derrida denies that language has a fixed meaning that is connected to a fixed reality or unveils definitive truth. His method of "deconstruction" finds meaning in the interplay of reader and text, not in the text itself. Richard Rorty more popularly argues that beliefs are tools for dealing with reality, not representations of reality. There are no universals; all truth claims are culturally conditioned. Truth *becomes* what works for us, what is—therefore—true for us individually. With Rorty the "correspondence" theory of reality is replaced by the "coherence" theory that reduces truth and reality to the experience of a specific culture or community.

One more name bears mentioning. John Hick, once an evangelical Christian, has applied postmodern thought to theology, with a resulting religious pluralism. Hick's thesis is that "the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real (Hick's term for the religious ultimate, what we would identify with God) from within the major variant ways of being human; and that within each of them the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness is taking place. These traditions are accordingly to be regarded as alternative soteriological 'spaces' within which, or 'ways' along which, men and women find salvation/liberation/ultimate fulfillment" (From *An Interpretation of Religion*). In a 1995 publication, *A Christian Theology of Religions*, Hick says: "Thus the Real in itself cannot properly be said to be personal or impersonal, purposive or non-purposive, good or evil, substance or process, even one or many." What Hick expresses in big words is what an increasing number (majority?) of Americans believe, namely, that all paths lead to the same destination, that truth—like beauty—is in the eye of the beholder, that sincerity is the measure of religious truth, and that it is inappropriate and impossible to pass judgment on the beliefs of others.

In summary there are several essential themes that define postmodernism.

**PLURALISM.** Philosophical pluralism is the denial of any one, universal, and central or unifying truth. Rather, there are many truths, culturally conditioned and subjectively interpreted. Pluralism celebrates diversity and difference. It insists on openness to and tolerance for all beliefs, values, traditions, and lifestyles. A necessary corollary of pluralism is relativism, the denial of absolutes and the insistence that truth, right, and reality are determined by the situation, the society, or the self. Jimmy Long in his book *Generating Hope* quotes a student speaker at Harvard's graduation exercise: "I believe that there is one idea, one sentiment, which we have all acquired at some point in our Harvard career, and that is confusion . . . . They tell us that it is heresy to suggest the superiority of some value, fantasy to believe in moral argument, slavery to submit to a judgment sounder than your own. The freedom of our day is the freedom to devote ourselves to any values we please, on the mere condition that we don't believe them to be true." Clearly, there is no room in such pluralism for a Jesus who insists: "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

**NON-OBJECTIVISM.** This clumsy term encompasses several arguments of postmodernism. One is the rejection of reason as the sole and inevitable path to knowledge. Postmodernism believes that there are things that can be known only by intuition, faith, or emotion, that all facts are not hard facts, that not all can be known, and that logical syllogisms and the scientific method have limited application. Further, postmodernism denies that there are absolute truths or objective reality, or at least that there is any way to know or posit these. Philip Kenneson, in the monograph "There's No Such Thing As Objective Truth, And It's A Good Thing Too," says it makes no sense to speak of "truth as viewed from nowhere." Walter Truett Anderson in *Reality Isn't What It Used To Be* concludes: "The postmodern understanding of knowledge, therefore, is built on two foundational assumptions: (1) postmoderns view all explanations of reality as constructions that are useful but not objectively true, and (2) postmoderns deny that we have the ability to step outside our constructions of reality." In contrast, historic Christianity is based on

the premise that God entered real history in the person of Jesus Christ, that our salvation is based on a set of absolute facts he accomplished, and that God not only can but does speak to us in objective, propositional truth that surmounts time and culture.

*DECONSTRUCTION.* Because postmodernism denies the possibility of objective truth, it locates meaning in the interpreter rather than in the text or object interpreted. Postmoderns argue that language "creates" reality, and language is culturally conditioned and subjectively understood. Therefore, it is necessary to "deconstruct" a text, identify its cultural assumptions and philological accretions, then interact with the text personally. But let Betty Jean Craige in *Reconnection: Dualism to Holism in Literary Study* explain. "1. Things and events do not have intrinsic meaning. There is no inherent objectivity, only continuous interpretation of the world. 2. Continuous examination of the world requires a contextual examination of things. We ourselves are part of that context. 3. The interpretation of a text depends on the relative viewpoint and the particular values of the interpreter. To understand a text on the basis of one's life-relation to it is to have preunderstanding. Interpretation does not depend on the external text or its author. 4. Language is not neutral but is relative and is value-laden. It is the medium through which we do our thinking. 5. Language and discourse convey ideology, and a society's intellectual discourse rests on political values and affects society in political ways." Obviously then, to debate the verbal inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture would be ludicrous; and to argue for "correct" theology would be impossible. Hermeneutics, in postmodernism, has no canons, and exegesis retreats to the realm of allegory from which the reformers once rescued it.

*CYNICISM/ PESSIMISM.* If there is no absolute truth, no central and unifying purpose to life, no possibility of arriving at certain knowledge of anything...if history—however politicized—and experience have exploded the myth that knowledge is good and progress is inevitable...if life isn't going anywhere but in circles, then cynical pessimism is inevitable. As evidence consider a few of the "Proverbs of Postmodernism" which appeared on the internet. "The facts, although interesting, are irrelevant." "You can't tell which way the train went by looking at the track." "I have seen the truth, and it makes no sense." "Sometimes too much to drink is not enough." "Happiness is merely the remission of pain." "Friends may come and go; but enemies accumulate." "If you think there is good in everybody, you haven't met everybody." "Suicide is the most sincere form of self-criticism." "Anything worth fighting for is worth fighting dirty for." "I'm OK, but you need professional help." "Not one shred of evidence supports the notion that life is serious." "This is as bad as it gets, but don't count on it." What a contrast to God's plan of salvation in linear history, to Jesus Christ as the center and meaning for life, to eternal life as the hope that makes life worth living, to the love that directs the mission God has given us, to the joy in knowing not just absolute truth but the God who is the Truth!

*COMMUNITY.* Without any universal truth or meaning to life, having rejected both nationalism and globalism, yet needing some basis for understanding self and life, postmodernism fixes life in the "tribe" or community where each individual finds meaning. The "myths" of each community create the parameters for understanding life. (There is no real worldview in postmodernism.) The traditions, experiences, and language of each community express shared truth and reality. And within the community one works out the psychological needs for such things as love and significance. Postmodernism shrinks a too incomprehensible world down to a manageable size and a meaningful context. Life is relational and experiential, not rational, for postmoderns. Can it be that the church became so identified with the tools and trappings of modernism that postmoderns cannot see the relational nature of Christianity and the love Jesus said characterizes his Church? Can we communicate the best of both worlds: absolute and universal truth together with a caring community in which to find identity and meaning?

## Implications of Postmodernism for the Church

In the seminar "Evangelizing Postmoderns" at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Christian apologist Ravi Zacharias described the impact of postmodernism as: philosophy's move toward the existential, art's move toward the sensual, religion's move toward the mystical, the university's move toward the skeptical, and the self's movement toward the transcendental, toward self-deification. Then he posed the challenge: "How do you communicate with a generation that hears with its eyes and thinks with its feelings?"

It is not difficult to recognize several threats to Christianity in the tenets of postmodernism. The anti-historical nature of postmodernism makes the facts of Scripture quaint, cultural period pieces irrelevant to contemporary life and the traditions of the faith mere tools for shoving a religion down people's throats. Pluralism becomes universalism in a religious context, reducing Christianity to just one of many paths to an ultimate reality that may or may not be. The denial of objective knowledge and absolute truth makes "doctrine" a dirty word and reduces "faith" to a psychological search followed by an intuitive leap. Deconstruction is several more steps down the path paved by historical criticism and trod by the Jesus Seminar, the path away from taking Scripture seriously, on its own terms. Scholars use the term "meta-narrative" for an overarching story that explains life. The Bible is such a meta-narrative, from creation to the fall, to God's interventions in word and deed in the life of his people, to the incarnation that accomplishes our salvation, and to the culminating event that will be Christ's return. Postmodernism denies this and any meta-narrative claiming to make sense out of life.

It is more difficult to recognize how much influence modernism has had on the church, despite the fact that modernism's extreme rationalism, scientism, and humanism have been devastatingly antagonistic to Christianity. Have we become a more rational and argumentative church because we have attempted to counter the denials of truth raised by philosophers and evolutionists? Has our development of doctrine followed the principles of logic developed and used by western philosophy, perhaps failing sometimes to distinguish the theological from the logical and the sociological? Our insistence on the objective nature of truth may have been tilted out of balance with the subjective and relational dimensions of Scripture by the modern world in which we've ministered. We communicate far better to the head than to the heart. We have left little room for the "mystery" of Christianity and less room for a meditative relationship with God. Our people seem to have difficulty integrating right doctrine into a life of godly living and loving. We are able to see the guilt of sin because we have modernism's perspective of the courtroom (justification) and the marketplace (redemption). We may not so easily recognize the shame of sin because we are less sensitive to the relational dimension of our faith (reconciliation). Christianity can never be identified with a culture, dare never be domesticated by a culture. Yet Christianity ministers within culture and does transform culture. Modernism and postmodernism are merely different cultural contexts, presenting different threats but also unique opportunities for the church's mission.

Will we recognize the opportunity for witness that exists in a culture devoid of hope and meaning for life? Do we appreciate the opportunity to retell the story-line of Scripture for a society that no longer knows the biblical meta-narrative and has been told there is no such account that makes sense of life? As Don Carson puts it in *The Gagging of God*, "The good news of Jesus Christ is virtually incoherent unless it is securely set into a biblical worldview." Will we live out the love that, Jesus said, identifies his disciples for a generation that is not much interested in dogma but desperately searching for community? Can we adjust our understanding of volunteer service from the institutional model of our past to the relational model that fits our present? Douglas Coupland, the author who coined the phrase "Generation X," says in his book *Life After God*: "My secret is that I need God—that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I am no longer capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love."

In the book *Jesus For A New Generation*, Kevin Ford depicts the readiness of young adults to hear what the Christian Church has to share this way: "Xers are alienated. The Christian story brings reconciliation. Xers feel betrayed. The Christian story restores broken trust. Xers feel insecure. The Christian story brings a sense of

safety within a protective, healing community. Xers lack a defined identity. The Christian story gives them a new identity in Christ. Xers feel unwanted and unneeded. The Christian story offers them a place of belonging, a place for involvement, a place where their lives can be used in service of a purpose that is larger than themselves." HOPE, LOVE, and MEANING are big Christian words that describe equally big avenues to a postmodern generation.

There are implications of postmodernism for the way we instruct our young. On the one hand, we will need to teach the objective and absolute nature of truth with more clarity, relevance, and urgency, testing with "discernment activities" whether we are sufficiently countering the spirit of the age. We will need to confront the arguments of pluralism pointedly and assure that children know Jesus not only as the Savior, but as the ONLY Savior. We must sensitively distinguish between empirical pluralism, which appreciates the diversity of God's creation, and the philosophical pluralism that denies biblical truth and the exclusive claim of Jesus. We can better teach the skills of interpreting Scripture, so that the next generation isn't misled into subjective and deconstructionist approaches to the Word of God which reduce truth to opinion or "interpretation." We can emphasize the hope and joy and meaning that Jesus gives our lives, not only to counteract the pessimism and cynicism of music and movies, but to provide the basis for peer witness to children who are growing up with suicide as a legitimate option.

On the other hand, postmodernism should be a corrective to the heavily rational and cognitive nature of our "modernist" confirmation instruction. If we assume spiritual growth to be a life-long process, we don't have to compress all we want young people to know into two or three years of academic activity. Young people process truth relationally more than cognitively, visually and experientially more than aurally. We can make Christian education more cooperative and relational, more life-related and experiential. We can build a more obviously loving community, in which our youth experience the love of God in the love of others and in which they understand what it means to be the Body of Christ.

There are implications of postmodernism for the way in which we do evangelism. Evangelism with today's young adults cannot assume the Christian worldview on which the "Kennedy questions" are based ("If you were to die tonight, do you know for sure where you'd be?" And, "If God asked you: 'Why should I let you into my heaven?' what would you say?"). In fact, Don Carson and others argue that evangelism today must start farther back, with God, creation, and the fall. If we don't agree on the problem Jesus addressed, the solution won't be comprehensible. Australian Phil Jensen has developed a sixpictograph presentation, drawn while sharing simple truths with six Scripture verses, revolving around symbols for a crown, the earth, and man. It begins at creation, with God the ruler of the world because he created it. Man's rebellion (sin) is depicted as usurping the crown. The result is death. Jesus gives up the crown to become man as our substitute. He reassumes the crown in his resurrection. The conclusion is that there are only two ways to view life, based on who wears (or pretends to wear) the crown.

After working with postmoderns on university campuses Keith Johnson has adopted an approach based on the key question "Do all paths lead to the same destination?" He examines five world religions, using Islam rather than Christianity as the point of reference. He develops the principle of non-contradiction; he distinguishes sincerity of belief from truth and matters of taste from matters of truth with obvious examples. He demonstrates how distinct Christianity is from the other four world religions and how mutually contradictory are their answers to the basic questions of faith. After leading people to conclude that all paths do not lead to the same destination, he offers them the opportunity to examine the claims of Christianity. James Sire addresses this audience with the starter question: "Why should anyone believe anything at all?" Like Johnson he subtly uses apologetic reasoning to counteract the anti-rational delusion that postmodernism has become. Ravi Zacharias offers a three-part outline for beginning witness with postmoderns: a point of reference (he suggests "righteousness"), a point of relevance (he suggests "self-control"), and a point of disturbance (he suggests "judgment").

Nearly everyone working with a postmodern audience emphasizes the need to demonstrate the claims of Christ by genuine love and moral integrity, in small enough settings that people can "experience" the truth of Christianity before they must confront its truth claims cognitively. Christianity is presented as a consistent and

coherent story that explains life before it is taught as an exclusive claim that offers a finished salvation and a Spirit-worked faith and life. The buzz words are "incarnational witness" and "narrative evangelism." The church being the Church, not traditional evidentialist, philosophical, or presuppositionalist reasoning, is the apologetic that counters the arguments of unbelief. Love is the apologetic that is not merely argued, but felt, not merely heard, but also seen.

There are other implications of a postmodern culture for the church. For example, the importance of small groups to reach, grow, and hold young adults, and the value of volunteer opportunities that are people-related—both by creating teams of volunteers and by making the nature of the work helping people. But it is not simply that the culture has changed which suggests changing methods and programs to the church. It is that in a changing culture the church rediscovers in Scripture truths and purposes and possibilities that the previous culture obscured. Postmodernism, for all that is inimical to Christianity about it, may free us to see in God's Word truths and purposes and possibilities that modernism—equally inimical to the faith—obscured.

### **Conclusion**

At the conclusion of his presentation to the "Evangelizing Postmoderns" seminar, Roy Clements offered a parable that I will paraphrase.

A traveler stood at a signpost, perplexed by the innumerable paths before him and intimidated by the mist that obscured everything beyond the first few feet of the paths. Some paths looked wide and straight, but who could tell? One seemed narrow and little traveled. The sign, weathered and illegible at important points, advertised a way to the fountain of truth. Alas, which way it pointed could no longer be determined.

Three other wayfarers appeared as the first stood there. "Excuse me," the traveler said to one of the newcomers. "Can you show me the way to the fountain of truth?" "You don't believe that rubbish about a fountain of truth, do you?" the newcomer responded. "There is no truth. Make the best of where you are."

The second wayfarer responded to the same query by saying: "Ah, who can know? I am an agnostic on the question of truth. One simply can't prove the issue. Just pick any path. I wouldn't presume to impose my ideas on you. Be open-minded."

The third wayfarer smiled and said: "It is an unnecessary question. All roads lead to the fountain of truth. They only appear to go in different directions."

The traveler remained perplexed. His map showed only that there were dangerous cliffs in the region; and the mist seemed even thicker than before.

Then a fourth figure appeared out of the mist. He had come down the steep, narrow, less trodden trail. "Can you show me the way to the fountain of truth?" the man asked him.

"Indeed I can," came the reply. "The others were just guessing. They've never been to the fountain of truth. I live there. Follow me. I am the truth."

As the stranger extended his hand, the man noticed a nail print.

Will he take the hand offered him? Or will he decide that he likes life at the signpost, safe if not sure or meaningful? Maybe he fears that if he takes that hand, he will become a slave to the one who leads him.

Can't he see? This is crucified truth. Crucified truth does not bully or coerce. This One invites: "Follow me. I am the Way and the Truth and the Life."