

IN RESPONSE - POSTMODERNISM & CHRISTIANITY

by Dennis Prutow

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In God's providence, we live in a *postmodern* world. We ought to remember just as modernism was not all good nor all bad, there is also good and bad in post-modernism. Postmodernism presents the church great opportunities.

Modernism, coming out of the Enlightenment, was and is arrogant. Human beings are at the center of the universe. Given enough time and expertise, we can solve all our problems.

[P]ostmodernism is proving rather successful at undermining the extraordinary hubris of modernism, and no thoughtful Christian can be sad about that.¹

One way postmodernism is doing this is in the segmentation of society.

Postmodernism divides society into various groups. America is no longer the *melting pot* of former generations and eras. Take civil rights as an example.

The modern Civil Rights movement, as exemplified by Martin Luther King, Jr. stressed the *unity* of society. Black Americans should have the same right to vote, the same access to education, and the same economic opportunities as every other American. They had the same goal as every other immigrant group—full assimilation into American life.

The postmodern Civil Rights movement, on the other hand, exemplified by Malcolm X, stresses the *disunity* of society. In the 1960s, frustrated by the slow pace of reform, many blacks began to repudiate the dominant "white" society altogether. They adopted black nationalism, an identity centered in race and in the recovery of African culture.²

In the face of this and other manifestations of multiculturalism, we downplay the study of Western Civilization. Why? Western Civilization grew out of a *unified* world view. The *University* prospered. Postmodernism vies for a *Multiverse* and the *Multiversity*.

More specifically, the postmodern era spells the end of the 'universe'—the end of the all encompassing world-view. In a sense, postmoderns have no worldview.³

We highlight diversity at the expense of unity. In America we emphasize we are *African* Americans, *Asian* Americans, *Native* Americans, and *Mexican* Americans. Ethnic and other distinctives come first. We are not Americans first. We accentuate enmity and hostility. We turn the world inside out and upside down.

Hence it is that multiculturalists have turned Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dream into a nightmare. He asked that his children "not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character," which, as Bernstein says, is the "essential ideal of liberalism." But multiculturalists say, "Judge me by the color of my skin for therein lies my identity and my place in the world."⁴

In addition, each of the multitude of cultural groups, or subcultures, within society contends for recognition. Each cultural grouping has its set of values and body of "truth." We have Black values, Native American values, Hispanic values, Asian values, feminist values, homosexual values, traditional values, etc., etc.

We recall values are a matter of preference. They are not fixed.

Values, as we now understand that word, do not have to be virtues; they can be beliefs, opinions, attitudes, feelings, habits, conventions, preferences, prejudices, even idiosyncrasies—whatever any individual, group, or society happens to value, at any time, for any reason.⁵

Each cultural group seeks recognition for its set of values. Pluralism demands parity between cultural groupings and sets of values.

From a postmodern perspective, Christianity is a legitimate culture. Christians are a legitimate cultural group and, from the postmodern perspective, Christians have their set of "values."

What is the *first* allegiance of the Christian? The Bible says, "For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Philippians 3:20). We are Christians *first*. We are citizens of heaven *first*. We are not Americans first. We are not Canadians first.

The dominant virtue of the culture of heaven is love. "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). In addition, "The love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit" (Romans 5:5). John says, "By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit" (1 John 4:13). He then says, "God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him" (1 John 4:16).

For by this it appears that the Divine principle in the saints is of the nature of the Spirit; for as the nature of the Spirit of God is Divine Love, so Divine Love is the nature and essence of that holy principle in the hearts of the saints.⁶

This is the Christian's participation in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4).

It is the responsibility of Christians to display this virtue of heaven, love, to the watching world. Christians must do this as individuals, families and as the visible church. We must live the love of heaven (Romans 13:8-10). Our marriages must reflect the love of heaven (Ephesians 5:25-32). This is heaven's witness in and to the world. "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

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¹ D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 10.

² Gene Edward Veith, *Postmodern Times* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994), 150.

³ Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 40.

⁴ Robert H. Bork, *Slouching Toward Gomorrah* (New York: ReganBooks, 1996), 305, quoting Richard Bernstein, *Dictatorship of Virtue: Multiculturalism and the Battle for America's Future* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 58.

⁵ Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The De-Moralization of Society* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 11-12.

⁶ Alexander Grosart, ed., *Selections from the Unpublished Writings of Jonathan Edwards* (Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1992), 51.

IN RESPONSE - POSTMODERNISM & THE CHURCH

by Dennis Prutow

Last time we discussed Postmodernism and Christianity. My effort was simply to show we can look at Christianity *from a postmodern perspective*. Is this a compromise with the world? Not at all. First, it is helpful for us to understand how postmodern people outside the faith perceive us. Second, when I speak of Christianity as a *part* of the cultural mosaic within society, *I am speaking from a postmodern perspective*.

From a biblical perspective, Jesus Christ is Ruler of all and the Church is the pillar and ground of the truth. Given this biblical perspective, *in God's providence*, we find ourselves in a pluralistic culture. The only absolute is that there are no absolutes. The worldview is that there is no worldview.

As Christians we must propagate the culture of heaven on earth. We pray, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). This means we pray: "That Satan's kingdom may be destroyed; and that the kingdom of grace may be advanced, ourselves and others brought into it, and kept in it; and that the kingdom of glory may be hastened" (WSC 102). We pray, "That God, by his grace, would make us able and willing to know, obey, and submit to his will in all things, as the angels do in heaven" (WSC 103). In other words, we should pray and live for the advancement of the culture of heaven in this world. This is our task and calling.

What is the place of the church in this cultural setting? The church is to be an outpost of heaven. "Our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Philippians 3:20). As travelers from another world, "we are ambassadors for Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:20). We were once alienated from heaven but now Paul urges, "You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household (Ephesians 2:19). The church, the household of God, is tied to heaven. Like the saints of old, we are "strangers and exiles on the earth" (Hebrews 11:13). We are children of God living in a very foreign land. From a postmodern perspective we are even characterized by some as illegal aliens

because we do not fit the mold of pluralism. Herein lies a great danger.

What is the church to do? Should people in the church, as good citizens of America, for example, learn the language of American and drop the language of heaven? As the *modern* mold insists, should we be assimilated into society as we demand for other aliens? Or as the *postmodern* mold asserts, should we maintain our cultural distinctiveness and remain a unique cultural subset within the mosaic of society? Shall the church vie for a multicultural stance *in this instance*? I think the postmodern approach is proper *in this case*.

Many churches are going down the opposite road. We see this in the fervent drive in the direction of so-called contemporary worship. The result is little difference between particular churches. My wife and I attended a Presbyterian Church in America in North Dallas. We might have been in an Assembly of God Church. In addition, the church's distinctiveness with the world is breaking down at this point. Is this wise? Is this even what our postmodern world expects from the church? Most evangelicals are familiar with the Willow Creek model. Many churches are seeking to emulate it.

About twenty years ago, evidence showed that people in the area [of Willow Creek Community Church] did not attend churches because they found the services boring, the music old-fashioned, and so forth. Recently Dr. David Fisher, senior minister of Park Street Church in Boston, arranged for a somewhat similar survey to find out about their 50,000 nearest neighbors. The results were interesting. About 65 percent were single and under the age of thirty. Many of those interviewed, when asked why they did not attend church, thought it surprising that anyone should think they should. Music was not listed as a major factor in drawing people. Why should they attend church to hear contemporary music? The[y] had their own CDs. But 85 percent were at least "somewhat" interested in "spiritual" issues an astonishing figure in secular Boston, even allowing for the

diversity and ambiguity behind "spiritual." Of the factors that might draw these people to church, the response with the highest percentage (65 percent) had nothing to do with program, entertainment, excitement, music, or the like: these people said they would probably come to church if a friend invited them. Moreover, when Sunday evening services were "slanted" to the people they discovered their neighbors to be, the "twentysomething" Christians in the church, much to the minister's delight, insisted that these be "church" services, not entertainment or amusement. Their big word was "authentic": they wanted their friends to see what *real* Christianity looked like.¹

I discovered the same thing in Sterling, Kansas, from a focus group, men who grew up in the church but were currently inactive. One business man intoned,

And that's one thing that bothers me... I shouldn't say churches but I should say ministers... But it bothers me that what they are saying or what they stand for doesn't jive with what I'm reading biblically.²

I concluded my report with these words. As I analyzed the discussion of Group Two, it strikes me that these men are simply asking the church to be the church. They want nothing more, nothing less. Except for the chemist born a Muslim, each of these men had a childhood associated with the church. Each of them, for one reason or the other forsook his roots. But as each of them looks at the church before them in our community, the cry is simple. Just be the church!³

If we do not maintain the radical distinctives of heaven within the church we fail to serve God, His church or the world.

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¹ D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 493-494.

² D. Prutow, "Being a Friend to Sinners" (Paper, Reformed Theological Seminary, 1993), 14.

³ *Ibid.*, 15.

IN RESPONSE - THE ANSWER TO PRAGMATISM, POWER & PLEASURE

by Dennis Prutow

Having laid some groundwork regarding postmodernism, Christianity and the church, I want to briefly relate how I see Christianity and the church responding to the pragmatism, power and pleasure characterizing postmodernism.

We've emphasized Christians are citizens of heaven and strangers and aliens regarding this world. We've also emphasized the church is an outpost of heaven. I want to zero in on this further. The calling of Christians and the calling of the church is to propagate the culture of heaven in this world. This is part of the cultural mandate of Genesis 2:28,

God blessed them; and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

We are to build a culture and society in the world which honors and serves the living God. This process begins with individual Christians and churches.

We must also realize, whether we agree with it or not, we live in a pluralistic society. We have an obligation, in God's providence, finding ourselves in this pluralistic society, to argue for the truth of God in the marketplace of ideas.

As private citizens, Christians are free to advocate their Christian view in any and every form. In America that is a fundamental constitutional right. Christian citizens should be activists about their faith, striving by their witness to "Christianize" their culture—not by the force of the sword, but by the force of their ideas.¹

As seen earlier, postmodernism is consumed with pragmatism. The key questions are: Does it work? Is it practical? Christians must not be intimidated. Believers must understand and be convinced the gospel is the most practical message on earth and the church is the most practical organization on earth.

When we say this, we realize we are not talking about the felt needs or the perceived needs of people outside the faith. We are speaking of real needs.

To put the matter bluntly: If you begin with perceived needs, you will always distort the gospel. If you begin with

the Bible's definition of our need, relating perceived needs to that central grim reality, you are more likely to retain in tact the gospel of God.²

Our obligation is therefore to address the real fears and apprehensions of men and women with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Nothing is more practical.

As also seen, postmodernism places priority on the exercise of power manifested in choice. Since human beings remain at the center of their respective universes, autonomy reigns. Choice is central to satisfied living.

Similarly, evangelicals have tended to emphasize the role of choice in salvation. People are urged to make a "decision for Christ," a commitment regularly described as a function of the human will. This terminology corresponds well to the postmodern mind-set, which understands religion and morality in terms of choice, not truth.³

The problem here is that the Reformed faith opposes this type of choice.

For Luther, Calvin, St. Augustine, and many other biblical theologians, the human will is in bondage to sin, so that our choices drive us away from God. We are not saved by our wills, but by the grace of God which transforms our wills by the power of the Holy Spirit.⁴

While choice is denied at this level, the gospel is supremely practical because it is the power of God which produces the liberty and freedom experienced in no other way. "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Romans 1:16). "It was for freedom that Christ set us free" (Galatians 5:1). The freedom we have in the gospel is the freedom to follow Christ in the multitude of good things He has for us to enjoy in this life.

There is therefore great pleasure in following Christ. This is not the self-centered sensual and lust filled pleasure of both modernism and postmodernism. The first answer to the Westminster Shorter Catechism sets the record straight. "Man's chief end is to glorify God and *enjoy him forever*" (italics

added). God does not place human beings on this earth to enjoy themselves as a first priority. Contrary to popular opinion *self-fulfillment* and *self-pleasure* are not the primary objectives of life. Joy, however, is not excluded. The joy of the believer is God and Jesus Christ. "My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (Psalm 73:26). Reformed people place heavy emphasis upon glorifying God. We do not place enough emphasis upon the second objective of saved humanity, *enjoying God*.

Answer 2 of the catechism goes on to tell us: "The word of God, which is contained in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the *only* rule to direct us how we may glorify and *enjoy him*" (italics added). Scripture alone explains how we come to enjoy God. In Scripture we find the humiliation of Jesus Christ consisted in His "undergoing the miseries of this life," and "the wrath of God" (WSC 27). Christ suffered these miseries and this wrath from God so that,

At the resurrection, believers being raised up in glory, shall be openly acknowledged and acquitted in the day of judgment, and made perfectly blessed *in the full enjoying of God to all eternity* (WSC 38, italics added). Enjoying God begins in this life and finds consummation in the life to come. "These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full" (John 15:11).

If postmodern people are seeking that which is practical, that which presents the greatest freedom in choice conceivable, and that which brings ultimate and eternal pleasure, Christianity is the answer. Individual Christians and the church therefore have a tremendous opportunity.

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¹ Charles Colson with Ellen Santilli Vaughn, *Kingdoms in Conflict* (Grand Rapids: William Morrow and Zondervan, 1987), 305.

² Carson, 221.

³ Veith, 212.

⁴ *Ibid.*

IN RESPONSE - "I HAVE A DREAM"

by Dennis Prutow

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had a dream. His dream was a color blind America. His dream has been turned into a nightmare. I too have a dream. My dream is that individual churches and congregations might truly be the outposts of heaven. Too often, when people of the world look at the church, they do not see a vision of heaven, they see a nightmare.

What are Christians to do? What is the Church to do?

[I]f the church is to do anything at all useful for culture, if the church is to resist and conquer the barbarian invaders, the church must first . . . concentrate on being faithful to its identity in Jesus Christ. *The church must be the church.* That is its first duty.¹ This may be primary but too often the world sets the agenda for the church. This ought not to be. God sets the agenda in Scripture. "The church best serves the world when it is most distinctively and most unapologetically the church...."² We ought not to buy into the methods and madness of postmodernism to attract postmodern people. We should analyze the outcomes of postmodernism in our society and address real needs, the fears and apprehensions, which are present.

[T]he church has provided the principle dynamic of social change in the West only when it has been most distinctly and unapologetically the church.... When the church transcends culture, it can transform culture.³

This gets at my dream. The church is an outpost of heaven. When we come together for worship we are on the periphery of heaven. We are gathered around the throne with angels numbering "myriads and myriads, and thousands of thousands" (Revelation 5:11). We are gathered before the throne of God and of Christ with "every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth" (Revelation 5:13). We worship and sing the song of Moses, the bond-servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying,
Great and marvelous are Your works, O Lord God, the Almighty;

Righteous and true are Your ways, King of the nations! Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify Your name for You alone are holy; for all the nations will come and worship before You, for Your righteous acts have been revealed.

In this worship we are vitally connected to heaven, to Christ the forerunner, and to all the saints who have preceded us. We are also gathered together around the throne with saints all over the world. We are on the very edge of heaven because we are part of that great multitude purchased by the Lamb who was slain. We should not underestimate the significance of this worship.

After WWII, Albert Einstein said, When the Nazis came to power I looked to the Universities that prided themselves upon their intellectual freedom, and they failed me. I looked to the German press, which prided itself on the freedom of the press, and it failed me. Until at last the churches stood alone, and that for which I once had little regard earned my respect.⁴ The church can have the respect of a watching world if she does not abandon her first calling and her first love.

Christians often debate whether or not they should throw themselves into the political realm. Some say we should, because Christians should be involved in saving our culture. Some say we shouldn't because our culture is soon headed for Davy Jones. No one appears to be saying that our culture and our political life can be transformed, and that is why we should concentrate on learning how to worship the Lord.⁵

I raise the issue. Since the church is an outpost of heaven and since the worshipping community is actually on the periphery of heaven, those entering the worship of the church should "have a taste of the good word of God and the power of the age to come" (Hebrews 6:5). This does not mean the introduction of new worship forms to adapt to the fads of our culture and society.

The actual audience being discovered out there is one preeminently characterized by the hunger for continuity,

stability, the freedom to sustain and enhance traditional values, historical identifications, and old fashioned ways.⁶

What does this mean?

The traditions of the church—including traditional worship—may have more appeal than we realize, especially to a generation that lacks traditions but yearns for them.⁷

This should not surprise us. "The hymns, Scripture, and liturgy of ancient Christianity continue to echo through the decades...."⁸ "The confessional churches survived the church struggle of Hitler's Germany, Polish Catholicism undermined communism, and Eastern Orthodoxy outlasted Soviet rule."⁹ More so thoroughgoing biblical Christianity in our own day. The worshipping community tied to Scripture and vitally united to heaven will have impact upon individuals and upon culture itself.

My dream, therefore, is to see churches, worshipping bodies, become communities of heaven in the earth. As the apostle Paul explains, the impact can be immense. In such circumstances, if an unbeliever or an ungifted man enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all; the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you (1 Corinthians 14:24-25).

This is very practical Christianity.

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¹ Charles Colson with Ellen Santilli Vaughn, *Against the Night* (Ann Arbor: MI: Servant Publications, 1989), 135.

² *Ibid.*, 136; from a speech by John Richard Neuhaus at Congress on the Bible, September 1987.

³ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁴ Focus on the Family Citizen, "Q & A with Father Charles Carroll," October 20, 1997, 14

⁵ Douglas Wilson, "The Cultural Impact of Worship," *Tabletalk*, November 1997, 59.

⁶ Thomas Oden, *After Modernity.... What?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 194.

⁷ Veith, 227.

⁸ Oden, 184.

⁹ Veith, 231.