

“Christian Faith in a Postmodern Society”
Cornerstone Festival
Bushnell II
July 2-4, 2002

first presentation
“From the Modern to the Postmodern: The Intellectual Transition in Contemporary Society”

I. From modernity to the postmodern critique

A. The modern project

1. The historical basis for the modern project in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment

a. The Renaissance as the age of humanism

b. The Enlightenment

(1) The genesis of the Enlightenment in the aftermath of the Thirty Years War

(2) The Enlightenment focus: reason

2. The central dimensions of the intellectual “revolution” that inaugurated the modern era

a. Knowledge is certain, objective and good

b. The mind or language is the mirror of the objective world

3. The modernist “narrative: the story of humankind progressively emerging out of the dark ages characterized by ignorance and superstition (and the domination of the perpetrators of ignorance and superstition) into the fulness of knowledge leading to a utopian civilization

4. The literary-cultural expression of modernity: the detective story

B. Postmodernism as a critique of the modern project

1. The genesis of the postmodern critique

2. Aspects of the postmodern critique

a. The rejection of modernist utopianism

b. The rejection of the modern intellectual project

c. The questioning of the modernist metanarrative

3. The critique in pop culture

a. Science fiction as the postmodern literary genre

b. The critique exemplified in Star Trek

II. Central aspects of the postmodern turn

A. The postmodern turn as a transition to a new set of values

1. The transition from ratio-centricity to a holistic understanding of the human person
2. The transition from the normative “center” to the celebration of difference (diversity), with heterotopia and the multiverse replacing utopia and universe
 - a. It entails the rejection of the concept of the universal in favor of the particular
 - b. It entails the rejection of the metanarrative in favor of the local story
 - c. It entails the rejection of uniformity in favor of diversity
 - d. It entails the rejection of the ideal (e.g., the ideal human) in the sense of the normative against which every particular must be judged in favor of a variety of standards that are all local in character
3. The transition from the ideal of the autonomous individual and the self-made man to an emphasis on community or persons-in-relationship
4. The transition from the hegemony of empirical science to the quest for spirituality

B. The postmodern ethos illustrated

second presentation
“‘Spirituality Today’: Religion, Reason, and the Postmodern Turn”

I. Faith, reason and the transition from the modern to the postmodern

A. The background to the modern view of faith: the Enlightenment understanding of religion

1. The goal of the Enlightenment: to overcome the struggles produced by religious differences
2. The means to the goal: discover the truth that is universally available through human reason
3. The result: Enlightenment religion as reasonable religion
 - a. A religion that focused on ethics rather than dogma
 - b. A religion that focused on the natural rather than the supernatural
4. The Enlightenment view of Christianity: a spectrum of opinions
 - a. Christianity as the truly reasonable religion
 - b. Christianity as incompatible with the religion of reason

B. Religion in the modern age: finding a place for faith in a realm of science

1. The foundation: the bifurcation of faith and reason, religion and science
2. The resulting attitude: the subordination of faith (religion) to reason (science)
 - a. Faith viewed as at best a leap into the realm beyond reason

C. Typical Christian responses to the demise of faith in an age of science

1. Show the reasonableness of faith and Christianity
 - a. By making Christianity palatable to modern knowledge (the approach of liberalism)
 - b. By devising an evidentialist Christian apologetic (the approach of fundamentalism and mainstream evangelicalism)
2. Carve out a separate sphere for faith and Christianity
 - a. The sphere of morality and ethics
 - b. The sphere of the personal, interior life

II. Faith and the postmodern turn

A. The postmodern turn as a longing for a lost spirituality

1. The basis: the postmodern critique of modernism
 - a. The reigning modern naturalistic is intellectually deficient

b. The reigning modern naturalistic outlook is ethically deficient

2. Aspects of the quest

a. The quest for “the reenchantment of everyday life” so as to overcome the loss of “soul” produced by the modern culture

b. The quest for a rediscovery of the supernatural

c. The quest for a rediscovery of God

B. Spirituality in the postmodern context

1. Spirituality in the postmodern context is post-modern

a. It is not simply a return to a premodern spirituality

b. It seeks to discover a spiritual dimension to life in the wake of the modern

2. Characteristics of postmodern spirituality

a. Postmodern spirituality is not necessarily connected to religion

b. Postmodern spirituality is non-absolutist

c. Postmodern spirituality is eclectic (or it becomes fundamentalistic)

d. Postmodern spirituality is theologically vague

e. Postmodern spirituality is facilitated by alternative delivery systems

third presentation
“Christians and Culture: Responding Christianly to the Postmodern Ethos”

I. Christians and culture

A. The nature of culture

1. The meaning of the term

a. The original meaning

- (1) The care and tending of crops or animals
- (2) By extension: “the growth and tending of human faculties”

c. The Enlightenment meaning

- (1) The “refined individual” and hence the rise of “high culture”
- (2) The “civilized” person

c. The anthropological meaning (arose in America in the 1920s)

- (1) The ongoing practices of human beings in the context of groups by means of which participants in the group construct the character of their own lives
- (2) The specific pattern of behaviors that distinguishes any society from all others

d. The postmodern meaning

- (1) The ongoing struggle to determine the meaning of public symbols and thereby to build a consensus
- (2) “Shared knowledge”

2. The role of culture

a. Culture functions as a “signifying system through which a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored”

b. Culture generates a shared context in which a people engage in the construction of meaning and of meaningful social actions

3. Important aspects of culture

a. The foundational aspects of culture

- (1) The primal aspect: language
- (2) The non-linguistic aspect: metaphorical images and symbols

b. The attendant aspects of culture

- (1) The body of shared assumptions about the world, including the shared

“knowledge” base

(2) The ways in which people articulate their felt aspirations as well as the issues and concerns of people

(3) The technological tools which people use in the pursuit of their goals and aspirations

B. The gospel and culture: Should our proclamation be culture-sensitive?

1. Mistaken answers and their attendant dangers

a. “No”

(1) The assumption of the position: the gospel is transcultural—only the “language of Zion” is needed

(2) The danger of the position: imperialism

b. “Yes”

(1) The assumption of the position: the gospel is radically cultural—the gospel must be compatible with the thought of the host culture

(2) The danger of the position: syncretism

2. The appropriate model: an interactional or conversational approach

a. The general character of the approach

(1) Our gospel proclamation takes culture seriously

(2) We foster a critical engagement between our articulation of the gospel and culture

b. The basis for a culture-sensitive approach

(1) The foundational theological principles

(2) The implications of these theological principles

C. Engaging with culture

1. Central aspects of the culture-sensitive task

a. The constructive task: setting forth an account of the Christian faith in a culture-sensitive manner

b. The critical task

(1) Analyzing the culture through Christian eyes

(2) Appraising the manner of articulating the Christian message and the various practices of the community embedded within that culture

2. Aspects of the process of analyzing cultural artifacts

a. Listen

b. Bring to light

(1) Seek to “tease” out the particular belief system at work in cultural phenomena

(2) Seek to discover through these cultural expressions the longings, aspirations and heartfelt needs of people today

c. Appraise: How does this belief system square with Christian conviction?

(1) Note points that are helpful contemporary expressions of biblical truth or of aspects of the gospel

(2) Note points that are counter to, or a distortion of the gospel

d. Respond

(1) Learn from culture: “How does this cultural expression cause me to read Scripture through new eyes and come to understand the gospel more deeply?”

(2) Seek points of contact for the gospel with culture: “How does this offer a vehicle for bringing the gospel into this cultural context?”

II. Central challenges of the contemporary cultural context

A. The challenge to take pop culture seriously

1. The background: the loss of culture as a spiritual expression

a. The medieval link between culture and the church

b. The cutting of the tie (Renaissance, Enlightenment) and the rise of secular art

c. The advent of “pop” culture

2. The postmodern turn: the “respiritualization” of cultural expression

a. The beginning of the turn: the 1960s

b. The contemporary phenomenon: “pop” culture as an Ersatz-religion

(1) Its basis

(2) Its characteristics

3. Pop cultural artifacts as conveyers of meaning

B. The challenge to reset the apologetic face of the Christian faith

fourth presentation
“A Christian Appraisal of the Postmodern Turn”

I. Ethics and the transition to the postmodern

A. Ethics in the modern era

1. The reduction of ethics to decisionist ethics
2. The reduction of ethics to the private “sphere”
3. The debate in philosophical ethics between Kant and the utilitarians

B. The changing shape of the ethical landscape

1. The reemerging public interest in ethics
 - a. Examples of the renewed interest
 - b. The basis of the renewed interest in the specifically public discussion
2. The emerging quest for a community-based ethic of being
 - a. Postmodern ethics as an ethic of being
 - (1) Its characteristics
 - (2) Its basis
 - b. Postmodern ethics as an ethic of life-in-community
 - (1) The theory: ethical judgments arise from, and must be articulated in accordance with the belief structures of the community in which a person lives
 - (2) The foundation

C. The new pluralist postmodern ethic

1. Its context: the multicultural situation
2. Its characteristic: in a situation in which a multiplicity of communities exists side-by-side, ethical discourse becomes a discussion of the moral practices of differing communities
3. Its presupposition: what appears wrong from one vantage point, when viewed from within the community that practices the act, may actually be right.

II. Christians and the postmodern ethos

A. A Christian appraisal of postmodernism

1. Common ground
 - a. The rejection of the Enlightenment epistemological assumptions

- (1) Aspects of the Enlightenment approach that Christians reject
- (2) The theological basis for the Christian rejection of Enlightenment epistemology
 - (a) Human finitude
 - (b) Human sin

b. The acknowledgement of the social nature of life

- (1) The social nature of the world
- (2) The social nature of human personhood

2. Standing our ground

a. The Christian rejection of radical epistemological skepticism

b. The Christian rejection of the “incredulity toward metanarratives”

- (1) The valid postmodern skepticism: the rejection of the secular metanarratives
- (2) The Christian assumption: the theocentric metanarrative
 - (a) God is the subject of history
 - (b) In Christ we find the disclosure of the universal human story
- (3) The historical background to this development: the advent of history and its secularization
 - (a) The development of a theocentric understanding of history in Israel
 - (b) The secularization of history
 - (c) “Incredulity toward metanarratives” as a rebellion against the loss of mystery in history

B. The gospel in the postmodern context

1. Central concerns in shaping the gospel for postmoderns

a. The concern for fostering true “community”

- (1) People are searching for authentic relationships, but contemporary consumerist culture is ultimately unsatisfying
- (2) The distinction between a true community and a lifestyle enclave
- (3) The postmodern context calls us to recognize the importance of the community of faith

b. A concern to embody the multidimensional nature of truth

- (1) The postmodern reminder
 - (2) The significance for the gospel
 - c. The concern to address the whole person
 - (1) The person as body and soul
 - (2) The person as reason, emotion and intuition
 - (3) The aesthetic as well as the cognitive
 - b. The concern to promote wisdom, not merely knowledge
 - (1) Significant postmodern pointers to the gospel
 - (a) The contemporary awareness that the human problem is not merely (or even primarily) ignorance for which the antidote is simply knowledge
 - (b) The contemporary quest for spirituality, inner strength and transformation of character
 - (c) The contemporary concern for relationality—to others and to creation
 - (2) The implication: the gospel we proclaim must move from head to heart and ultimately to hand
2. Embodying and proclaiming the gospel in the postmodern context
- a. The gospel must be embodied
 - (1) In Christian ethical living: personal holiness
 - (2) In Christian community: corporate holiness
 - b. The gospel must be proclaimed
 - (1) We must reiterate the unchanging character of the gospel
 - (2) We must proclaim the gospel in a manner that can communicate with people today

fifth presentation
“The Missional Character of a Truly Postmodern Church”

I. What is a missional church?

A. The basic answer to the question

1. A church that understands that it is a people entrusted with a mission
2. A church that understands that its very existence is for the sake of fulfilling the mandate given to it

B. The church’s overarching mission

1. The mission itself: to glorify God
2. The context of the mission

C. The church’s dominically-ordained mandate

1. The central dimensions of the mandate of Christ to the church: worship, edification, outreach
2. The interconnected nature of the dimensions
 - a. The basic assertion: They comprise one mandate with three focal points and hence are inseparable
 - b. The implications

D. The church’s calling to be community

1. The theological basis for the church as community
 - a. The basis in God
 - b. The basis in the indwelling Spirit
2. The practical dimensions of the community character of the church
 - a. The distinction between a "lifestyle enclave" and a true community
 - b. The church is a community of memory and hope
 - c. The church as a place where we belong
 - (1) We find here our identity
 - (2) We find here fellowship, support and nurture

II. What is a postmodern missional church?

A. Mistaken understandings of a postmodern church

1. That it is about a universally applicable formula that can be packaged and exported

2. That it is about outward forms

B. The central hallmarks of a postmodern missional church

1. It is postmodern: it views the postmodern condition as the occasion for a renewal of biblical Christianity

a. The theoretical aspect

b. The practical aspect

(1) A postmodern church ministers to the whole person

(2) A postmodern church celebrates diversity

(a) Rather than being content with reflecting the preferences of one particular “tribe,” it seeks to reflect a true multiculturalism

(b) Rather than being leader-centered, it celebrates the giftedness and ministries of its members, while promoting the unity of the whole

(c) Rather than limiting itself to one particular church program, it acknowledges that the Spirit can work in many ways to accomplish God’s will among and through his people

(3) A postmodern church acknowledges the insufficiency of the individual and the importance of being in relationships

(4) A postmodern church understands its task as that of fostering spirituality

2. It is missional: it seeks to understand the times for the sake of the advancement of the gospel

a. A postmodern church understands its calling to serve the present generation (It sees itself as elect for the sake of service to the world)

b. A postmodern church understands that it is called to be indigenous

c. A postmodern church understands that it serves under the lordship of Christ and the empowering direction of the Holy Spirit

d. For this reason, a postmodern church can “boldly go where no one has gone before.”