

Sharing God's Love With Postmodern America

By Dennis McCallum

How to build bridges to people who believe that truth is different for everyone

Jason took another sip of his coffee as he finished sharing his testimony with Jean, the attractive co-ed from his calculus class. "So my whole life has been revolutionized since I met Christ."

Jean smiled broadly. "That's wonderful, Jason! I thought you were spiritual. I could just tell. You know I've been getting pretty excited about Zuni spirituality myself."

Jason tried not to grimace as he nodded thoughtfully. "Yeah, Hmmm. Why don't you tell me what you're learning. . ."

As they discussed nature religion, Jason began to take exception to some of the ideas Jean shared. Finally, it came out that he considered animism and Christianity to be incompatible. Now Jean looked down uncomfortably before gazing out the window. She turned back to him with a frown. "Well I understand it may be incompatible for you."

"No, I mean it's incompatible in principle. Contradictory. You know, incompatible for everyone. After all, Jesus said, 'No one comes to the Father but through me.'"

Jean was visibly shocked. "I can't believe you're suggesting this is true for everyone. Can't you see how arrogant it is to claim you know the truth for others? Really, Jason, that's offensive!"

Jason felt a nervous flush pass over his face as he realized the conversation was headed south. He continued to plead his case without apparent success, all the while wondering inwardly why the conversation had taken a nasty twist for which he was not prepared. Worse still, he realized as he walked home that this was the third time this quarter he had been in conversation that seemed to move in this direction. He shook his head. Why don't people just deal with whether or not the gospel is true?

Shifting Ground

Jason was dealing with an increasingly common problem in society today. A huge shift is rocking every corner of western thought and culture like an earthquake. Understanding this shift is our most urgent

task as Christians intent on communicating the gospel to our generation. Observers call it the rise of "postmodern" culture.

In the 1970's witnessing Christians might share their faith with non Christian friends and hear responses similar to these:

"Yeah, well, it might just be psychological—the power of suggestion. I think religion is mostly self-deception, a crutch for the weak."

"That's superstition. I can't believe you're falling for that stuff."

"I don't believe anything that can't be proved."

"Religion is just a way to get people's money."

These replies are all typical of the outlook known as modernism. They all assume that the important question is whether Christianity is true or false, and of course, they assume it is false. Modernism is the enlightenment idea that people can discover truth through rational thought and observations of the five senses. The spiritual and supernatural is discounted.

Today we hear fewer of these kinds of responses. Instead, today we hear responses to a Christian testimony similar to those voiced by Jean:

"Cool! That sounds great! I've really been getting into spirituality too—Zuni religion is really deep."

"I'm offended that you're suggesting this is true for everyone. Can't you see how arrogant it is to claim you know the truth for others?"

"I guess I can't overlook the exploitation and patriarchy Christianity has fostered over the years."

"I'm glad you've found something that's right for you."

These replies are all the same in one respect: They all discount the question of whether or not Christianity is true. Instead, they focus on personal experience as the basis for truth, and assume that people with different experiences have different truths. Besides personal experience, these statements also focus on pragmatism—how does Christianity affect society? We as Christians may conclude that even if the Christian church has committed atrocities, that's a separate question from whether the Gospel is true or false. But to these hearers,

the practical effect of a belief matters more than whether the object of belief is true in some objective sense.



This new outlook in our culture is called postmodernism.

Postmodern people see themselves as beyond, or after modernism.

They no longer accept the old assumptions that we can prove or disprove truth. The postmodern outlook is skeptical, not just of Christian truth claims, but of any

and all truth claims. They especially deny that we can ever know truth in any universal sense. Instead, according to the postmodern view, we don't discover truth, we create truth. Rather than THE truth, postmodernists say we have many truths. Instead of trying to understand and adjust to one, shared reality, postmodernists argue that each group has its own distinct reality and therefore, its own truth.

Postmodern thinkers claim that any attempt to make everyone accept the same truth is an insult to their cultural identity. Instead of trying to make everyone agree with our view, we should celebrate diversity—that is, we should accept and “respect” others’ realities and others’ truths. Most of our accepted “truths” they say, are just the opinions or interpretations of the powerful and are violently imposed on the weak.

Christians and Postmodern Culture

Most of our Christian apologetic material has been developed in response to modernists who deny the supernatural. These approaches focus on giving evidence or rational arguments designed to convince skeptics that Christian truth claims are valid after all. These apologetics remain important, partly because millions of Americans are still modernists. But when you think about it, such approaches are not likely to succeed with postmodern hearers unless we first establish the idea that truth exists and can be known. We need new approaches suited to the new outlook of in our culture.

While formulating this new approach, we should think in three areas.

First, what are our common values and assumptions. What is our common ground with postmodern culture?

Secondly, what are the differences that cannot be reconciled? Where must we resist postmodern conclusions?

Finally, what background factors can help us communicate effectively to people who think and speak differently than ourselves?

Common Ground

Several values and beliefs found in postmodern culture correspond partly or completely with the Christian world view. These areas of concordance are important in establishing rapport with postmodern people.

Here are just a few.

Western culture is not progressing. Postmodern people deny the modernist belief that western culture is progressing from a dark past of superstition and ignorance toward a glorious future based on science and reason. We, too, as biblical Christians, never believed human society was progressing toward any kind of utopia. No matter how many discoveries scientists made, they never changed the fallenness in human hearts. Of course we are different than postmodernists on this point also, because we don't believe reason was to blame for western exploitation of weaker peoples. We know from the Bible that people are selfish and violent naturally because of the fall. Science only gave the means for exploitation, not the motive.

Communication beginning point: Humanity is not progressing toward a technological utopia. What are we progressing toward? Do we have any basis for trying to change our fate?

Concern about racism and unfairness. Christians should be leading the way in racial reconciliation and caring for the poor. In this, we find common ground with postmodern culture, although we find difference as well. Unlike postmodern culture, we cannot agree that homosexuals and lesbians are no different than oppressed racial minorities and deserve the same help. Neither do we agree on what should be done to further race relations. Postmodern thinkers call on African Americans and other minorities to resist oppressive efforts to make them part of the “melting pot” of America, and instead affirm that African reality is different than majority culture's reality.

Communication beginning point: Postmodern thinkers say the group in power calls its view “objective truth,” but what matters is power relations, not so-called truth. Will African Americans benefit from an approach that substitutes power for truth? Martin Luther King Jr. led an effective civil rights movement based on universal morality. Is it wise to abandon his approach? What will we have in its place?

Concern for the ecology. Christians should be leading the way in ecological conservation based on the doctrine of godly stewardship of the earth. Postmodernists think we should respect nature because we would be arrogant to think we are any different than the rest of nature.

Communication beginning point: Might not the view that people are no different than animals lead to lowering the status of humans rather than raising the status of animals? For instance, Hitler believed people were part of nature, and look where that led. Why do we want to avoid violence toward deer and bunnies, but not toward mosquitoes or rats?

Emphasis on artistic creativity. Postmodernists see art and creativity as vehicles for creating reality and truth. Just as modernists looked to the scientist for understanding, postmodernists look to the artist and poet for meaning. Christians see creativity as a clear mark of the image of God in humans.

Communication beginning point: Contemporary cinema, musical lyrics and TV all contain messages, most of which today are postmodern. Christian communicators must study postmodern media, thinking about the implications and alternatives in these creations. Churches and groups can use video and music and other media to express their message.

Personal freedom of choice. At its heart, postmodern culture seeks to escape all restriction on personal autonomy, including even reality and reason itself. Postmodern thinkers hate being told what they have to do, and love being offered choices. Paul says “it is for freedom that Christ set you free, so be not subject to a yoke of bondage.” (Galatians 5:1)

Communication beginning point: Considering that everything is up for grabs in the area of truth and opinion today, why is everyone saying the same things? Postmodern rules for speech and belief are actually very restrictive and narrow—politically correct—and people must say and believe the right things or face heavy censure. Christians should be able to appeal to postmodern resentment over authority to suggest that they are being bossed around and need to consider something different than the party line—for instance, radical, biblical Christianity.

Relationship is all-important. Postmodern culture places personal relationships at the center, specifically more important than truth or morality. Ironically, however, most postmodern people are unsuccessful in relationships and feel lonely. While we, as Christians, believe relationship is at the center of life, we also believe that love only works when expressed in the framework of truth and righteousness. (Ephesians 4:15; Colossians 1:8,9; Philippians 1:8,9) Still, on the whole, we have significant common ground on the importance of relationship, both with other people and with the God who is love.

Communication beginning point: Christians should talk about relational thirst and focus on the difference between outward religious legalism and personal relationship with God.

Separate Ground

While Christians can identify some areas of common ground between themselves and postmodern culture, other areas cannot be reconciled in any way. While these areas may not be the first topics we choose to discuss, we must eventually face the need to confront postmodern people with the truth. Several key areas are:

There is only one reality. While our experience of reality may be different, we all live on the same world, and we were all created by the same God. Postmodern people argue that our perspective or our “story” is our reality—different from group to group. As a result, what we believe determines what is true for us. The result is similar to the New Age concept of mind power, and New Age should be viewed as a subset of postmodernism. As Christians, we believe our shared reality is also our basis for relating to one another. By emphasizing only differences and never shared reality, postmodernism is fostering bitterness and suspicion between races, classes, and genders.

Communication beginning point: We don’t want to argue about semantics, but we need to emphasize that some things are the same for everyone. Death, for instance, is not just for some. All people have spirits. All will face God one day. What other aspects of reality are held in common by everyone?

Objective Truth. That which is objectively true, is true for all, not just for some. One God exists, and he is the God of the Bible. This is not true because we believe it—we believe it because it is true.

Postmodernists point out that we must always perceive reality and interpret our perceptions, and therefore we can never know whether we are distorting reality. Just as someone in a moving car cannot gauge the direction and speed the clouds are moving, they claim we can never view any fact “objectively” or impartially. While Christians may admit that all of this is true to some extent, we deny the exaggerated version of this problem presented by postmodernists.

Evidence shows that even with human subjectivity and interpretation, people are able to perceive and understand objective truths, and we must be able to grasp the truth of the gospel if we are to avoid divine judgment.

Communication beginning point: The claim that we can’t know truth objectively is an objective truth claim! How could anyone know that no one can know truth? If we are arrogant when we claim to know truth, what does this say for one who says he can tell the exact limits to all others’ knowledge?



Objective moral norms are universally binding. Postmodernists believe each cultural group develops its own moral norms based on what they find useful. Therefore, people cannot criticize moral choices made in a cultural reality different than their own. Christians argue that, while human societies may develop arbitrary morals, some moral norms are universally binding because they are based on the character of our creator God. Communication beginning point: How can we criticize any moral wrong, including atrocities like Hitler's, apart from universal moral norms? How can postmodernists advance values of tolerance and inclusion when these are moral values? Once postmodern thinkers admit some morals are universal they have crossed a threshold into a unified reality where we can discuss universal truth.

Background Factors

Because we see the urgency in communicating the gospel to those who need to know Christ, we also realize our communication will be more effective if we incorporate background features suited to postmodern culture. These include:



Relationship - Thirty years ago we may have been able to walk onto the street and share the gospel with a stranger using a Bible tract. Twenty minutes later, we may well have been praying "the sinner's prayer." Today, such cold canvas successes are far more rare as suspicion and alienation pervade postmodern culture. Postmodern people distrust arguments and truth claims, but want to trust friends. We believe friendship evangelism is more important now than ever. Serious outreach-minded Christians will take the time to make friends with non Christians as the best context for sharing the gospel.

Community - Postmodernists extol community even though postmodern culture has not produced successful community in real life. We, as Christians have the opportunity to demonstrate what a relational community is like, while we explain the spiritual basis for our unity. Many a lonely postmodern heart has softened in the presence of a vibrant, caring group of Christians practicing God's love with one another.

Media - Christians should embody their message in modern media. Computer graphics, the World Wide Web, videos, and music are all clear examples of media through which we can get the attention of postmodern hearers.

Authenticity - Analysts of postmodern society are convinced that such people are progressively more suspicious of glitzy, showy approaches to spiritual things. The postmodern mood is one of suspicion and cynicism anyway, and Christians have to bend over backward to project honesty and authenticity in all we do.

As thoughtful Christians learn the new language of our postmodern age, we will enjoy continued success sharing the love of God to people who need him more than ever.

Dennis McCallum is senior pastor of Xenos Christian Fellowship in Columbus, Ohio and author of several books including [The Death of Truth](#), a book on Christians and postmodernism, and [Christianity: The Faith that Makes Sense](#). Visit the Crossroads web site for information on postmodernism or to dialog with the author (<http://www.crossrds.org>), or call 1-800-698-7884 for a free catalog of materials.



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Concern for the ecology.

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Objective Truth

Objective moral norms

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Community - the presence of a vibrant, caring group of Christians practicing God's love with one another.

Media - Computer graphics, the World Wide Web, videos, and music

Authenticity - bend over backward to project honesty and authenticity in all we do.