

# (Postmodern Times) Post Modernism and Biblical Literacy

by D.A. Carson

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*D.A. Carson addresses the challenges of postmodernism and biblical literacy in contemporary evangelism, emphasizing the need for new methods and cultural understanding.*

**Duration:** 1:09:34

**Scripture:** Matthew 22:37, John 10:10

**Topics:** "Postmodern"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the changes in culture and how they have affected evangelism and the mission of spreading the word of God. He mentions Immanuel Kant as a transitional figure who believed that the human mind imposes order on data. The speaker also highlights the challenges faced in modern evangelism, such as questions about the validity of Christianity and the imposition of Christian morality. He emphasizes the need to adapt to the changing methods and ground rules for discussion in a postmodern world.

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## Transcript

I do thank you for the opportunity to speak to you on these important subjects. This is a missions conference. Let me tell you where we're going over the five sessions.

Missions in North America are changing extraordinarily quickly because of the fact that the culture all around us is changing quickly. Just about everything that, shall we say, worked 25 years ago in evangelism in the Western world is now dead in the water today. And if we rely merely on methods, the methods are changing.

If, on the other hand, we simply say, Oh, I don't believe in methods, I just believe in theology, and try to act as if we don't need to understand the surrounding culture, we discover that our churches begin to wither and die on the vine too, whether we like it or not. I've been doing university missions now for about 25 years, and the whole approach to university missions has changed enormously during that time. Let me quote someone whose name you will know, Josh McDowell, who has worked with Crusade, for example, for many, many years, and used a kind of evidentialist apologetic for many years, giving all the evidences for Christ and so forth.

Oh, about 15 years or so ago, he was to speak at a large university in the United States. They put in a lot of money and time and planning and advertising and so forth, and drew about 2,300 students, and many people make Reflection of Faith. Two or three years ago, he went back to the same university.

The organization put in approximately the same amount of money and time and energy. They drew 300, and almost all of them were Christians. So as a result, Josh McDowell's ministry has very little to do with evangelism in university campuses anymore, except in Latin America, where it's another sort of cultural construct.

And in North America, he's doing much more on family values and so on within the Christian domain. And so it is the evangelistic thrust in North America that has been set aside, in effect. It used to be that, for us, evangelism meant something like this.

The surrounding culture already presupposed much of the Bible's storyline. Even when you were dealing with an atheist, you weren't dealing with a generic atheist. You were dealing with a Christian atheist.

That is, the particular God in whom you disbelieved was a Christian God. So that the terms of discussion were still Christian. It's not as if the atheist disbelieved in a Buddhist conception of spirituality, or a Hindu God, Krishna perhaps.

The kind of God that was disbelieved in was a Christian God. And thus, in many ways, in the Western world, we set the terms for the debate. Because the Judeo-Christian culture had so come down on every front that there were certain things that were givens amongst us.

When I was a boy at school in this country, every school child would have been able to fill out the next line of a Christmas carol such as, Boy, I know what generation you belong to. But the fact of the matter is today, that the average 10-year-old, 15-year-old, they don't have a clue. The categories simply aren't there.

So if you come along to the older generation and say, God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life, then whether you like the old crusade approach to evangelism or not, at least that was dropped into a Judeo-Christian setting. Automatically, that's where it was dropped in. The kind of God who was doing the loving was the God of the Bible.

There is a heaven to be gained and a hell to be shunned. There is a difference between right and wrong. History is going along a teleological line to a final end, and so forth.

Those were all givens. And yet, if you now move into a world where people, many people, have never held a Bible in their hands, where they've never heard of Moses, or else if they have, they confuse him with Charlton Heston, or where they have no view of truth as being objective. If you're under the age of 30, especially if you have a university education, you've got into a post-modern epistemology, almost certainly.

We'll come to that in due course. Then suddenly, all the ground rules for discussion have so changed that you start asking, where do I even start? And moreover, it's not merely in academic circles, universities, and that sort of thing. This is so filtered down through the public media now that these sorts of problems are at virtually every level of the culture.

Two or three years ago, the latest version of Star Trek came out on television. What's it called? Voyager, or whatever. And, you know, harking back to my misbegotten youth, I recall the earliest versions, and Patton Kirk, and all the rest.

I thought this was pretty harmless stuff. We don't watch a lot of television in our family, but one of the rules that we have is if the kids watch television, one of us has to watch it as well, which means they don't watch a lot of TV. It also means we know what they see.

And so I thought this would be a harmless thing to do after an evening one night. So we flicked this on, and I thought they might enjoy it. I could scarcely believe my eyes.

I hadn't seen this series for years. I knew that they had a whole lot of series. I hadn't spent any time watching any of it.

And here were the same sort of recycled plot lines. The acting, not quite as good. The graphics considerably better.

But at the end of the day, what struck me was the change in worldview. The old series, the first series, was modernist. This was post-modernist.

I'll come to those terms in a few moments. And it struck me how many, many values were being got across by the program that were completely antithetical to what was got across by the program a bare 25 years ago. And I would stop in the middle of this program and say, Do you see what's going on there? We're going to talk about that at the end of the whole program.

Watch that, remember that. And my aim began to be to try to destroy Star Trek for my kids, or at least to inform them as to what was going on. For as we shall see in due course, Christians should be neither modernist nor post-modernist.

There are other ways. In our seminaries and elsewhere, we train people, we try to, who are going overseas to communicate the gospel cross-culturally. We train them, at least we try to, to read the culture.

To find out what its sense of humor is like. To find out what its assumptions are. To find out how it thinks.

And the reason we do that is because we understand that unless these missionaries can go and mesh with that culture, understand what's going on, they will not find the ways in, in terms of presenting the gospel. We also warn them that when they're going to a culture that has very little Christian background, then they have to start a lot farther back. You can't assume, as we used to be able to assume in this country, that people have a Judeo-Christian set of presuppositions already.

And so what preaching the gospel looked like to a missionary going off to the high country of northern India was a bit different from what preaching the gospel looked like when we were sending them off to a topical. But nowadays that's changing. For years and years and years we haven't bothered trying to train local pastors to think cross-culturally.

But that's exactly what we have to do. And not simply local pastors, but leaders, anyone interested in evangelism in the local church. Because within half a mile or a mile of a church like this there are tens of thousands of people from different languages and cultures and races and backgrounds, many of whom have very, very little common background in a Judeo-Christian heritage.

So what I intend to do, therefore, in this first address is talk about the problems of post-modernism that have arisen in the Western world and the corollary of biblical illiteracy. What does that mean? What kind of challenges does that present? And then this afternoon I shall begin to address what we should do about it. Both of those things are topical by nature.

And then tomorrow morning at Sunday school I shall try to show that what is at stake finally is what I call worldview evangelism. It's not a shared worldview anymore in which you present a little bit about Christ. What is at stake now is a whole confrontation of one worldview with another worldview and to try to work out what that means a little bit.

And then in the morning service we shall see how Paul himself confronted something like that in Athens and what he did about it, as we shall look at Acts chapter 17 and then in the afternoon Romans 3. Now let me begin with this ugly term, post-modernism. It's ugly because, hey, it's not transparently obvious. If modern refers to what is contemporary, one might have thought that post-modern refers to what is future.

And of course it doesn't. One really can't understand post-modernism unless one understands modernism and where it came from. And one needs to go farther back than that to the Middle Ages in the time of the Reformation.

At that point there was a certain epistemology. Now, epistemology is merely the study of how people think things. Why do you think what you think? What is the basis upon which you come to know anything or claim to know anything? At the time of the Middle Ages and the Reformation, the epistemology in the Western world worked something like this.

Just about everybody in the culture assumed that God knows everything. God is there and he knows everything. We are finite beings.

We can only know a little bit. But anything that we truly know is necessarily a small part of what God knows. So the whole crux of human epistemology was how some part of all that God knows could be disclosed to us, so that we might know something too.

And within that framework, because we're assuming now it's Judeo-Christian God who is omniscient, all of human knowledge depends finally on revelation. Whether revelation in Scripture, or revelation in the natural world, or revelation by the Spirit, or revelation through the tradition of the Church if you were a Catholic, all human knowing finally turned on God graciously disclosing something of what he knows. So all epistemology was Christian in that sense.

Now, a Catholic medievalist like Thomas Aquinas, or a reformer like John Calvin, were at one on these points. They disagreed on all kinds of sub-points. For example, they disagreed on how much revelation was actually given in nature.

Aquinas thought there was so much revelation given in nature that you could be saved by studying nature. You could study and think through what could be learned from the natural world, draw enough inferences, and finally be drawn, in fact, to the truth of the Gospel. Calvin didn't think so.

He thought that took special revelation. But they were agreed in this, that all human knowing is a subset of God's exhaustive and perfect knowing, and therefore all of our knowing depends finally on God's gracious self-disclosure. Now, the period now dubbed Modernistic, Modernism, the period of the Enlightenment began to set that aside.

That didn't happen overnight. Nevertheless, the figure that many people connect with the changes is a Frenchman called René Descartes. And as a result, we speak of Cartesian thought.

Now, Descartes, at the beginning of the 1600s, was not an atheist. He was not a skeptic. In fact, he was a devout Roman Catholic.

But he was discovering that as he tried to talk with intellectuals in Europe at the beginning of the 1600s, there were rising numbers who no longer shared Christian presuppositions. And so he tried to find some common basis on which they could build a common epistemology. Otherwise, how could you actually win them to the faith of the Mother Church, from his perspective? And he set himself the task, therefore, in 1619, to doubt everything.

Not because he was a doubter, but because he set himself to try to find some common base upon which he and his skeptical, even atheistic, friends could build a common structure so as to have a common playing field when they talk about truth and the claims of Christianity and the like. And he had a wonderful intuition, he felt. He was so chuffed with himself that he went off and offered prayers to Saint Anne at a nearby monastery because he was so pleased with what he felt was his discovery.

And eventually, in the 1630s, it all came out in a long book. Now, his discovery, as every first-year student of philosophy knows, is summed up in one Latin clause. Cogito ergo sum, I think, therefore I am.

What he was trying to say was that whatever else you can doubt, you surely can't doubt your own existence. The very fact that you're thinking about your own existence proves that you exist. So you may doubt the existence of the outside world, or you may doubt the existence of God, or you may doubt the existence of truth and beauty.

You may doubt all kinds of things, but surely, if you're thinking about it, even if you're doubting it, your very thinking and doubting demonstrate that you yourself must exist. Now, whether or not that's good logic is immaterial. It's what he said.

I think, therefore I am. In fact, he wasn't the first to say this sort of thing. About 1200 years earlier, Augustine had said, Si fallo sum, if I er, I am.

So he had said something along similar lines. But when he said it, he said it just in passing, it was just part of the flow of the argument. Whereas for Descartes, he was trying to establish a brand new sweeping epistemology, note carefully, that did not presuppose God.

I think, therefore I am. Not, God knows everything. How can we know something of what God knows? But I think, therefore I am.

Now you have finite beings, who don't know everything and can't know everything, becoming the baseline for all human knowing. Now, it needs to be said, in possible terms, that Descartes himself, when he spoke along these lines, was not trying to introduce methodological atheism or anything like that. From his point of view, he was trying to find a baseline by which he could then communicate the Gospel to the secular people of his age.

That's what he was trying to do. And it has to be said that during the Enlightenment, during all of the early centuries of the Enlightenment, the first two centuries, the vast majority of Enlightenment thinkers were either Christians or Deists. That is, they weren't atheists.

So there were many people who were being seduced by the autonomy of human reason that Descartes had ticked off, but still were devout Christians. Nevertheless, on the long haul, there are some implications to modernist thought that need to be understood. Notice, first, Descartes' dictum, I think, therefore I am, begins with I, the knower.

I think, therefore I am. And sooner or later, people will start noticing that that I does not know very much, and that all the different I's claim to know different things. We'll come back to that point.

Second, it was assumed under this regime that epistemological certainty, that is, certainty about what you claim you know, was both desirable and attainable. That is to say, you could know the truth. All you had to do was to establish the right foundation, the right axiom to begin with.

And then truth was attainable, objective truth, truth that everybody would have to see as truth, real truth. That was assumed. Moreover, it was assumed under this sort of thinking that reason was the way to truth.

It was really the only important way to truth. Third, this whole approach to epistemology was foundationalist. That is to say, it established a pattern of trying to establish a kind of foundation, a set of axioms that everybody accepts.

And then, in the fourth place, it built some methods upon it. You start with certain foundations, and then you erect some methods, and then you turn the crank, and out comes objective truth. That was the assumption.

So that in the different disciplines in due course, whether chemistry or literary criticism or history or biochemistry, whatever, you try to establish certain axioms, certain foundations for knowing, and then in each discipline you built up carefully controlled methods which could be revised and improved with time. Then the assumption was that with those foundations plus those methods, you could turn the crank, and out would come objective truth. Then in the fifth place, over the centuries, this way of looking at things, this modernist epistemology, was increasingly tied to naturalism.

That didn't happen right away. Naturalism is the assumption that there is no reality outside of what can be observed in nature. That is to say, there is no reality outside space, time, matter, energy.

That's it. That's all there is. Thus, all knowing is bound up with the natural world, which gives a very high emphasis to naturalistic science, which, after all, under modernist epistemology, has been extraordinarily fruitful, hasn't it? Moreover, in the sixth place, it was assumed, therefore, under this way of looking at things, that any truth that you found achieved ahistorical universality.

That is to say, any truth that you found was truly true everywhere in history, at any time in history, whether it was recognized as true or not. It was an ahistorical, that is, non-historical, universality. It was universally true.

So that if you found in chemistry, for example, that two atoms of hydrogen and one atom of oxygen make up a molecule of water, that's true in Quito, Ecuador, and it's true in Peru, it's true in Toronto, it's even true in Chicago. No matter where you go, that's true. That's the nature of truth.

Truth belongs to the realm of the ahistorical universal. It is always true for all people everywhere. And it was assumed, moreover, that this was also the case in non-scientific disciplines as well, so that if you found a fact of history, that fact of history remained a fact, a brute fact, a true fact, everywhere, no matter

who was looking at it, from whatever culture or background.

And the same, it was thought, is true in the realm of theology, so that you had theology and theological study becoming more and more rigorous at a certain level, lots of emphasis on Greek and Hebrew and historical backgrounds and religious backgrounds and so on. And if you could invent new literary theories and structures for how these things came to be, if you had your axioms well in place, your foundations and certain methods, and turned the crank, out would come these truths, these universally agreed discoveries, such that it was assumed that theology was advancing, as history was advancing, as physics was advancing, as we laid aside the false assumptions of earlier ages and we made new discoveries. Oh, if we had to tweak the methods now and then or change the foundations because we saw that they were flawed, that's fine, but that was further proof of our advancing.

And then these assured results of modern criticism, you had to believe them or else you were a bit of a twit. You were intellectually irresponsible. You couldn't see what everybody could see was an ahistorical universal truth.

Now you can see how that plays out in all kinds of ways. In Marxist thought, for example, until very recently, Marxist thought, pushed by totalitarian regimes, argued that the only appropriate way, the only scientific way of reading history, was by reading history in the frame of class warfare and economic analysis. Various groups struggle against one another and you have to do an analysis of producers and workers.

You have to do an analysis of capital and labor. And the various groups need to fight against each other. And the entire analysis of what takes place at, let's say, the Reformation, turns, therefore, not on Luther's theology, but on the economics of the peasant revolt and things like this.

And this is scientific history, such that if you don't see it that way when it is explained to you, then there's something wrong with your head in exactly the same way that if you don't see what a water molecule is made of when it's explained to you, there's something wrong with your head. Clearly, you're inferior in your brain and therefore you don't deserve to go to university. And in the worst cases, maybe you should be shut up in some asylum somewhere because you're obviously a hopeless case, mentally speaking.

You're a twit at best, maybe insane at worst. And so you can understand that from a modernist epistemology that works itself out in a Marxist, naturalist history, incarcerating people who are so stupid they can't see the truth when it's explained to them, makes good sense. It's entirely sensible.

But of course, recent political events since about 1989 have so transformed the face of the Marxist world that there are fewer convincing voices for Marxist historiography around the world now than there once were. There's still a lot of them left in China and a few elsewhere. But apart from that, that empire has largely dissipated.

Nevertheless, during the years of its hegemony, the assumptions of a modernist epistemology universally prevail. That is to say, universal truth, discoverable by human reason, rising naturalism, certain basic assumptions, appropriate methods. Turn the crank and out comes real truth.

That was the world that governed us. Now within that kind of framework then, hermeneutics, another word we need to think about, hermeneutics, which is the art and science of interpretation, hermeneutics was understood at that time to be the set of rules and principles by which I, the knower, come to understand a

text or come to understand reality or a painting or whatever it might be. And the trick was, even in seminaries, to learn your biblical hermeneutics in such a way that provided you applied your hermeneutics to the text, the biblical text, fairly, if you turn the crank, you got true truth coming out the other end.

That's what hermeneutics was. Hermeneutics gave you the ground rules such that if you applied them fairly to the text, your principles of interpretation, you get true truth. Can't you see that? That was how hermeneutics was taught to me when I was at seminary.

But eventually, this whole approach had to go. It was built on sand. When I refer to modernism now, I'm referring only to epistemology, as I've outlined it, how people come to think about things.

I'm not talking about modernism in religion or modernism in Christian theology. I'm talking only about epistemology. So, so far we've looked at medieval and Reformation epistemology, which was God-centered.

It had its problems, but it was God-centered. Then modernist epistemology, and now we are into the realm of post-modern epistemology in the Western world. What does that look like? People date the onset of enthusiastic post-modern epistemology, really, from 1970, 1980.

Some see its roots in 1950, 1960. It depends. There are elements of it that go back into the late 1700s, early 1800s.

But in terms of it becoming a powerful force in the entire culture, it's really only about 20 years old, such that it dominates most of our centers of learning and our media and so forth. It's really only about 20 years old. I am not given to apocalyptic pronouncements of gloom and doom, but I have to tell you that as far as I can see, the changes now going on in Western culture, not only Canada, or Canada and the United States, but in Western Europe and Westernized countries like Australia and so forth, the changes going on are as epochal.

They are as significant as the changes that went on at the dawning of Renaissance. These are massive changes. These are not things that are going to be reversed in a day or two, or a year or two, or even a decade or two, apart from massive revival.

These are deep, deep cultural shifts, and we need to understand what they are. Virtually all of the points that I have just outlined describing modernist epistemology, those six points, all but one of them have now gone. They've been blown away, and we need to think how this has happened and why, and then what it means, finally, for evangelism and mission.

It is worth remembering, perhaps, that the changes that have brought us to this point did not take place all at once. For those of you who have looked at such things, one of the transitional figures was Immanuel Kant in Germany. Now, he was not a post-modernist, but Immanuel Kant insisted that the human mind imposes order on data.

That is, it's not that the human mind simply infers order from data. Now, in his case, what he was doing was making a distinction between the phenomenal world, where all our data exist, and the noumenal world, the world of our thought, the world of the ideal. We don't need to go into German idealism here, but listen carefully to what he's saying.

He is saying that the human mind imposes order on the data. There's something in the human mind that orders the data. As soon as you say that sort of thing, you are already suggesting that there is a subjective element from the data themselves.

Do you see? So, in one sense, Kant is already shifting the discussion a little bit. Then, another great German thinker, whose work really came to fruition under Hitler, was Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche was the first systematic, rigorous nihilist.

He really claims that there is no basis in God. He was a naturalist. There's no basis in morality.

There's no basis in objective knowledge anywhere. Since there is no objective morality, no objective truth, no objective God, then, at the end of the day, you establish what is right and wrong, and you establish what is true by the sheer means of power. The one with the power wins.

The victors write the history. The victors control the guns. Small wonder, then, that Mao Zedong, in his little red book, has this famous saying, power comes out of the barrel of a gun.

And, of course, that was exactly Hitler's view as well. You establish the truth of something by having a Goetting and others to control the media. So that, at the end of the day, you establish the nature of truth, and thus see Jews an entire culture.

But we may press on to contemporary hermeneutics. Hermeneutics, if you recall, is the art and science of interpretation. There arose in Germany, especially what came to be called the New Hermeneutic.

Picture it this way. The old hermeneutics had me, the knower, approaching it, the text, the thing to be known, in which I, the knower, approach the text, and with my appropriate foundations and my appropriate methods, I ask the text some questions. And if I ask the right questions, because I've got the right methods, the text talks back to me and gives me some truth.

Or it gives me at least what it says. I can understand truly what the text is saying. I can interpret it precisely because I have the right methods and it speaks back to me.

I am the knower, it is the known. I am the knower, it is the known. But supposing, instead, the world works a little differently.

Supposing you wake up in the morning and it's a bad hair day. You're feeling crummy. Everything's going wrong.

You've just been sacked. Your spouse has left you and the cat has died. It's just a terrible time.

Now you read the text. And you read the text within a certain kind of framework. So the kinds of questions you ask of the text are different than if, instead, you would approach the text and you had just celebrated your 25th year of glorious marriage and you had just improved your golf game or you had just inherited half a million and your health was wonderful and the children are ideal.

Now you approach the same text from a different perspective. What are the questions you ask of the text now? What do you hear from the text? Supposing you're a Muslim approaching the text. Supposing you're a Hindu approaching the text.

Supposing you're a 10 year old boy approaching the text. Supposing you're an 80 year old woman approaching the text. Supposing you have three earned doctorates approaching the text.

Supposing you're a plumber approaching the text. Don't we all bring certain baggage to the text? Even the same person approaching the text brings different baggage on different days, don't we? Or at different times of our life, don't we? We know that intuitively, don't we? Listen to preachers. You get the young preacher who's about 28, just married, one kid, and all his illustrations have to do with babies.

When I was at school, that sort of thing. Now you listen to a preacher who's about 80, he's got an enormous number of illustrations about how to prepare for death. You know what's on his mind, don't you? The point is we're finite.

We don't approach anything from the neutrality of omniscience. We bring our baggage with us. And therefore, the questions we ask as we approach a text are shaped by who we are.

And the answers that we can hear are shaped by who we are. So instead of having a straight line relationship, I'm the knower, it's the known, I ask a question, it gives me the answer. Now, as it were, I come up to it and I sort of swipe it with who I am, with all my baggage, and it sends back an answer that has a certain spin and bounce on it because of what I addressed it with in the first place.

It would have had a different spin and bounce if I had addressed it rather differently, wouldn't it? So I swipe it, it comes back and it hits me, and by hitting me with whatever insight I think I see there, which I may not see tomorrow and might not have seen yesterday, but which reflects who I am today, then it affects me subtly, so that when I approach the text tomorrow, I am not quite the same person as I was today. I'm a little different. And therefore, when I hit the text tomorrow, I am bound to hear something a little different than what I heard today, and a little different the next day, and a little different the next day.

And now you see, instead of a straight-line relationship with the text, I've got a hermeneutical circle set up, in which, as it were, I'm interpreting the scripture, but there's a sense in which the scripture is interpreting me. It's doing something to me, it's adjusting me every time it hits me, and then my reading of it is correspondingly adjusted. It's no longer a question of me being the stalwart knower, the immovable, and it being the set of brute data.

Now I'm spinning the data, and it's spinning me. They're spinning me. Isn't that the way it works? That's the new hermeneutical.

But of course, if you push that far enough, then there's some very uncomfortable entailments. If you push that far enough, then you're driven to the position where you start to say, there is no objective truth in the text. What there is, is truth for you.

Truth for you in your circumstance. So that as early as the 1930s, there were two very famous German thinkers, by the name of Fuchs and Ebeling, who argued that the aim of interpreting texts, of interpreting anything, is not to find the truth. That's modernist.

That assumes that there's a historical universal truth out there to be found. The aim of reading texts is insight. One called it Sprachereichnis.

Germans can invent new words by putting bits together. Sprachereichnis means something like a speech event, a speech happening. And the other spoke of Wortgeschehen, that is to say, a word happening, or a

word becoming.

So the aim is something like an aha experience, a moment of insight, a moment of serendipity. You read the text and you get some new insight. Aha! But not propositional truth.

The propositions will change depending on who you are from day to day. Now clearly if you push that argument far enough, you find yourself on this hermeneutical circle and you can't get out of it. Then what does Christian Witness look like? All you can talk about suddenly in Christian Witness is what it looks like to me.

It might look very different to you. Mind it? Now that was the pattern that came out of the German track. Meanwhile there were other patterns coming out of French intellectual thought.

It came out of literary history and the movement called deconstruction. This has gone through several metamorphoses and I needn't go through all of it. It started, innocently enough, with some true observations by the father of modern linguistics who was a great thinker called Ferdinand de Saussure.

De Saussure taught linguistics for many years in Paris and wrote almost nothing. But his students took voluminous notes and after he died, they published his material posthumously and this cool *Linguistique*, this linguistics course, came out in four volumes from his students' notes and he really became the father of modern linguistics. Now amongst the many things that he argues is this.

At this point, history has shown him to be largely right. With this, very few would disagree. He says, what does the word tree mean? What is the essence of the word tree? You see, many previous experts in language had thought that there was something intrinsic to the word tree that meant tree-ness.

But what he says is the connection between the signifier, the tree, the word tree, and the signified, that is the thing that it's referring to, the tree, is arbitrary. You can see it for all kinds of reasons. I mean, after all, in another language, let's say French, it's not the word tree, it's the word *arbre*.

And if you move to German, it's *Baum*. So there's nothing intrinsic to tree that means tree-ness, is there? In fact, the way tree, the word, means tree is by being different from all other words. It's not three, it's not me, it's not tea, it's not rhinoceros or hippopotamus.

It's different from all other words and it has become associated in our culture with what we mean by tree-ness. Now, in fact, this became part of a whole complex set of linguistic assumptions that has moved into various fields and has been very helpful for Bible translation and all kinds of things around the world. I'm not knocking linguistics, I think it's an extremely important discipline.

And came to be taken, intellectuals, in a number of different ways. Eventually it was argued that not only at the level of the word, but at the level of sentences and at the level of discourse, at all levels, language is arbitrary. It doesn't mean anything intrinsically.

It might mean something to you, but somebody else hears it and it means something a little different. I'll give examples of that this afternoon. You hear one thing, somebody hears another thing.

They put it together in a different way. And as a result, the possibilities of miscommunication are enormous. And in simplest sorts of communication, you never understand everything the person says or meant to say, because the original speaker or writer never gets it all down, in any case, and might

misspeak himself or herself, and you don't share their exact vocabulary, and you come at it from a different point of view, and so on.

So that as a result, you can't really meaningfully speak of truth being conveyed from one person to another person, rather there are impressions and so forth. Your aim, therefore, in studying a text is not, therefore, to find the truth, as if you can communicate with the author. It can't be done.

Rather, the aim is to find the bits in what you read in the text that mean something to you, and you put those bits into your thinking. You integrate them into your thinking, and out of this you then deconstruct the text. You deconstruct what's left.

You criticize what's left. You criticize the text that's there. You have to recognize that text manipulates you, and you have to manipulate back.

So as a result, Michel Foucault, for example, argues very strongly today that all texts, including his own writings, are intrinsically manipulative. Please turn to side B now. Male, or they're Eurocentric, or they're female, or they're African, or they're from a power base.

Everybody's trying to make a point. No text is neutral. All texts are manipulative.

They're all exercises in power. That's what they are. They have very little to do with truth.

They're forms of expression of power. And then there are other voices that have come from this pattern as well. Stanley Fish in this country has done something of the same sort of thing.

Instead of talking about the individual approach to text, he starts talking about interpretive communities, people who come from a certain community think along a certain line. And he tells the story of when he was lecturing one day in his university. He was lecturing, I think it was at Duke, when he suddenly had a crazy idea.

He was lecturing on critical theory in the first hour, and he put on the board the names of some authors that he wanted the students to read. These essays were all drawn from a certain book by Rosenbaum and somebody else, Gavids maybe. The essays were written by chaps called Horn and Levin and two or three others, including Oman.

And then he put a question mark after Oman because he couldn't remember whether it was spelled O-H-M-A-N or O-H-M-A-N-N. So then he said, now read that, read those essays. Students left the classroom.

Then his next class was a class on 17th century English poetry, English religious poetry. So when the students came into the room, he put a box around these names that he listed on the board and put page 43 over the top and he said to them, I'd like you to interpret this poem. Well, they worked away at it and they worked away at it, Rosenbaum.

Rose tree, part of the medieval symbolism for the life that comes from the cross, the tree, Rosenbaum. That was where Christ died, hence thorn. Levin? Well, Levin is such a biblical symbolism for what is evil.

By the cross you get rid of evil. And eventually they got down to Oman at the bottom and they suggested maybe it was an expression of worship. Oman, which doesn't sound very 17th century to me, but perhaps that's my year.

Now, Stanley Fish's argument in all of this is that different interpretive communities interpret the text differently. To the first interpretive community, his first classroom, it was a list of authors whose essays had to be read for an assignment. To the second interpretive community, the very same text, really, was a religious poem, which could be interpreted very creatively.

You see? It all depends on your point of view. Now you can see immediately at least the beginnings of what you're up against when you start evangelizing. You see, the vast majority of younger hearers now who have bought into postmodern assumptions will tell you that's just your point of view.

Twenty or twenty-five years ago we could put up a sign for a university mission, something catching, like, has anybody ever come back from the dead to tell us? And then you pray and you organize your meetings and you get all the students to invite their friends. And then, in that kind of framework, you would try to prove that Jesus really did rise from the dead. You would give all the reasons for holding that Jesus was who he said he was and so forth.

And, humanly speaking, if you could convince people that Jesus really did rise from the dead, you were eighty or ninety-five percent of the way toward getting them to become genuine believers. But not today. Nowadays, if you put up a sign like that, nobody would come.

Except the Christians. And not many of them. For it will be assumed that you're some sort of religious person who's trying to impose his or her views on other people.

That's totalization. That's Michel Foucault. That's language's power game.

It's manipulative. The one bad thing you must not do is convince somebody else that they're wrong and win them to your point of view. That's proselytizing.

What right do you have? Other people's views are as good as your views. You don't stand on some sort of secure base. You're finite, too.

Do you see? So that proselytization, what we call evangelism, is viewed as an intrinsic evil. So you're not only faced with a problem, in that kind of worldview, of showing that what you're saying is interesting and important, you have to overcome the assumption that you're an evil person for even being engaged in it in the first place. Or if instead you're merely saying, well, I have found some pleasant realities in Christ.

Let me share them with you because I'd like you to share some of my pleasant realities in Christ, too. That's not offensive. Because then it's just your opinion and their opinion.

They say, well, I've found some pleasant realities in crystals and in New Age thought or in Krishna. My yoga meditation has helped me enormously, you know, and maybe we can share insights. Now, at that point, that's fine.

There's nothing rude about that. That's acceptable. But to say, Jesus, and Jesus alone is Lord and every knee will bow to him, that's narrow-minded, bigoted, nineteenth-century, right-wing, hate-mongering.

It is a modernist epistemology that really doesn't understand the modern world. That's the way it's viewed, right off the bat. And you see, even people who've never been to university never face these kinds of things at a sort of intellectual level.

Nevertheless, many have bought into this sort of worldview just from what's on television. The worst opprobrium, the worst scorn, is always reserved for anybody who makes an absolute claim, especially in the religious field. The only absolute claim that is tolerated is the absolute claim that there are no absolute claims.

The only heresy left is the heresy that there is such a thing as heresy. Now let me lay out for you, to make matters a little more miserable, let me lay out for you some corollaries of postmodernism. These are neither causes nor results.

They are reinforced by postmodernism, and they stir up and fan the flames of postmodernism, but nevertheless they are not simply causes or results, but they're things that we need to think about and understand. First, what this does in part is change our views on tolerance. It used to be that a tolerant person was understood to be someone who might have held strong views, but who insisted that you have the right to your views.

Nowadays, a tolerant person is someone who doesn't have strong views, except perhaps the strong view that you must not have strong views. In fact, there have been polls along this line recently in American universities, in which students are asked which is the more tolerant person, A or B? A, the person who has very, very strong views and insists he is right, she is right, and you are wrong, and tries to convince you of those views, but also insists that you have every bit as much right as he or she to promulgate your views, or B, the person who does not have strong views. Eighty-five percent of American university students opt for B. In other words, it used to be, under the old understanding of tolerance, that a tolerant person was one who might hold strong views, but was tolerant of individuals.

Under the new regime of tolerance, in fact, there is now tolerance for all ideas, and very little tolerance for individuals who don't accept that idea. And that changes things enormously. Second, in many parts of the Western world, we now live with much more empirical pluralism.

Now, part of the problem when you talk about pluralism is that it means different things to different people. Empirical pluralism is merely the historical root facts that now, in many parts of the Western world, we live in a time with greater diversity, more languages, more cultures, more religions, and so forth. And if you're a person who likes an international camaraderie, that's a good thing.

If you're scared by it, then it's a bad thing. But, strictly speaking, intrinsically, there's nothing either good or bad. It's just the way it is.

Empirical pluralism is merely looking at the shifts that have taken place in the culture. From a fairly wasp town, Toronto is now a very cosmopolitan town. And that's empirical pluralism.

It's neither good nor bad intrinsically. In one sense, one can even look at it as a kind of foretaste of heaven. Because in heaven, there will be people from every tongue and language and people and nation.

It's not all going to be wasp there. Yet, there are a lot of pressures that come with cultural pluralism, especially in a democracy. For in a democracy where there is a consensual voice, based on a consensual value system, you can have minimal government.

Because so many people share the same outlook. When you read in the American form of the democratic experiment, when you read the so-called Federalist Papers that were written about the dawning of the American Revolution, the founding of the Republic, when you read the papers of Madison or Jefferson or

Hamilton or almost any of them, even though they came from very different perspectives in many respects, they all had this to say that it is impossible to have minimal, genuinely democratic government without a common base of morals and values. Now supposing you have a culture that is empirically more pluralistic.

Now you have Christians and atheists and Muslims and Buddhists and New Agers and people who think that homosexuality is right, people who think that it's wrong, people who are materialistic through and through, people who think that self-sacrifice is the way to go, people who are green and people who like green currency but not other things green, and so forth. You have many different people. Now every culture has some diversity, of course.

But when you multiply the axes of diversity to contemporary Western standards, what eventually happens? There is an enormous pressure in order to keep civility in culture. There is an enormous pressure to say that nobody is wrong, that no cultural heritage has any intrinsic superiority or inferiority to any other cultural heritage. And moreover, the way you maintain order is by increasing governmental control.

So you have more and more and more things that are controlled. You cannot have minimal democracy when you have enough diversity. Things have to be imposed.

Do you see? Those are entailments as well. Then there are still other entailments. Secularization is an interesting term.

Secularization does not refer to the abolition of religion. Secularization refers to that movement in a culture by which religion is squeezed to the periphery of life so that you can be ever so religious. It just doesn't matter that much anymore.

It used to be at the turn of the century that religion in America and in Canada both, and still even in parts of Europe, played a huge role in ordering the ethics of the nation, in ordering the legislation of the nation. A hundred and fifty years ago you couldn't write a doctoral dissertation anywhere in the Western world on the subject of history without trying to draw some inferences about what Providence is saying to us out of this. Now you can't write a doctoral dissertation anywhere in the Western world that even refers to Providence.

So secularization has squeezed religion to the periphery of life. It used to be that religious impulses governed a great deal of debate in the area of war or suffering. People fought about theodicy, whether what they thought was correct or not is immaterial.

Theodicy, that is trying to justify the ways of God to men, to explain suffering. They fought about these things. As late as Spurgeon's lifetime, which was after all only a hundred years ago--he died in 1894--people used to transcribe his sermons and then cable them across the Atlantic so that they would be printed up in full in the Thursday edition of the New York Times.

Can you imagine that taking place today? Now you see what happens is something like this. Os Guinness says in one of his books that he interviewed a Christian executive for McDonald's and he asked this man what his priorities were. He says, well, on Sunday my priorities are God, my family, and McDonald's in that order.

And the rest of the week I reverse the order. Now we might not put it so crassly, but that's the way a lot of us are, isn't it? That's secularization. What happens under secularization is that religion gets squeezed to the periphery so that I can be ever so religious between 11 and 12 on Sunday, but it doesn't shape how I live.

It doesn't shape my value system. It doesn't shape how I think, what I do with my money, how I rear my kids, my family devotions. It doesn't affect how I think communally.

What happens under secularization is that religion becomes a very privatized thing. The God of the Bible is a remarkably public God. He establishes moral order.

Now religion becomes a therapeutic thing that merely tries to help me in my individual mess. It has very little to do with public righteousness and justice. And then, of course, if you follow this track very far, morality itself changes, doesn't it? It becomes an individual thing.

It becomes what feels good, what works for you. Nowadays in a university mission, if I gave an ordinary traditional sermon trying to prove the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, amongst the first five questions certainly would be something like this. Well, Don, I'm very glad that this Christianity business has helped you.

I'm really pleased for you, but what about all the Hindus? And then, one of the next questions would be, are you trying to impose Christian standards of morality on all kinds of people who disagree with you? What right do you have to do that? But above all, above all, two elements amongst the corollaries are particularly frightening. Picture Ms. Christian going off to university. She's come out from a fine Christian home.

She's been reared in a church like this one. And she goes off to university and she's determined to be a Christian witness. She links up with a crusade group, an inter-varsity group, and the like.

And she's now not taking biology. We used to be frightened that our kids would lose their faith taking Biology 101. Don't worry about it.

The dangers nowadays are in English 101, Sociology 101, Cultural Anthropology 101, Language 101, Linguistics 101. That's where the dangers are today. Ms. Christian goes off to English 101.

And somewhere along the line she sticks her oar in and tries to give something of a Christian witness, a Christian testimony. And the teacher says, well, I'm very glad that you think that way, Ms. Christian. You come from a Christian home, don't you? Well, yes, from a Christian church, yes.

So do you think that you think that way in part because you were brought up in a Christian home and a Christian church? Well, yes, of course. So that over here, Samin Lane, over here, he's from Ghana, in French West Africa, in West Africa. He was not brought up in a Christian home.

He was brought up in a Muslim home. So he thinks the way he thinks because of the way he was brought up, wouldn't you say? Yes. So why do you think that your views are any better than his views? Oh, but I'm claiming that my views are transcendental truth.

There is a real God there. Yeah, but he's claiming the same thing for his. Why should you think any differently? He's got his views, you've got your views, and you think that you're right and he thinks that he's

right.

Now that's just the thin edge of the wedge. By the time Ms. Christian has been taught a rigorous approach to deconstruction by the time she's been taught a rigorous approach to the new hermeneutic, you see, what has happened to her Christian faith? Unless she's received a great deal of help, if she's got any Christian faith left, it's been interiorized and privatized. It's gone all down inside her.

It's still okay for her privately, but it's not the public declaration that Jesus is Lord. So what you get is the complete relativizing of Christian witness, and the only Christian witness that is allowed is a kind of gentle sharing of my experience that may help you, not proclaiming truth in the public arena to which we will one day have to come to terms. But the most severe thing of all, the most severe thing of all, is this.

It is biblical illiteracy. It is biblical illiteracy. That's how I began this address, if you recall.

The vast majority of people that we're dealing with nowadays when we evangelize--unless we are evangelizing only in churchy circles, amongst people who still have some connection with the Church, people who may have been brought up in a Lutheran church or a Catholic church or a Baptist church and have a Judeo-Christian structure in their minds and have fallen by the way somewhere along the line, they still have those structures--unless we're evangelizing only those kinds of people who are now increasingly in the minority in North America. If we are evangelizing outside those churchy circles, then we are dealing with people who are biblically illiterate, either because they belong to some other faith community--Muslims or Buddhists or whatever--or because they have abandoned any semblance of connection with organized, traditional religions and have been swept into new age thinking of some sort or another, or because they just refuse to think about religious things at all. But in any case, because we no longer sing the hymns in the schools and we no longer sing--and these people do not attend churches, they haven't been indoctrinated by their singing, they haven't been indoctrinated by scripture, courses taught at school.

In Canada, I had scripture lessons in school when I was a boy. Many, many of these people have no knowledge of the biblical text whatsoever. Now, suppose you go to one such person and say, God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.

What does she or he hear? Oh, boy, that's good. What does that mean? More sex? More money? Self-fulfillment? Self-identity? Self-actualization? Supposing you say, Jesus promises the abundant life. Well, we're all for that, aren't we? What does abundant life mean? What does abundant life mean to a secularist? You try to explain it, then.

The abundant life, you see, that expression only crops up once in the Bible. It shows up in John chapter 10 in a connection with sheep. The abundant life for sheep meant a lot of grass, but you can't speak of a lot of grass in a university campus either, without a few words of explanation.

You see, at almost every level, your discourse isn't connecting. The people whom you evangelize nowadays, their limited religious vocabulary, such as it is, does not mean the same as what you mean by those same terms in any expression. God? Do they mean a personal, transcendent, sovereign God who speaks and is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? A triune God? Do they mean that? But you can't understand the rudiments of Christianity without some notion of the Trinity, can you? Spirit? What do they mean by spirit? The Holy Spirit? Well, it can mean almost anything.

Spirit of the age, the spirit that's part of the force, the spirit that comes to you from the matrix of properly aligned crystals that line up with your spirit. Truth? That's been knocked out in any sort of objective sense because of postmodern epistemology. Sin? If they ever use the word, it's a sticker word.

She's sinned. There's no odium to it, there's no opprobrium attached to it, there's no shame connected with it. Faith? Faith is over against fact.

Faith now means something like personal preference. I tried that and it seemed nice to me, so I sort of, it's my faith. And if there's one thing you can't criticize, it's my faith, because my faith means roughly my opinion.

And my opinion's as good as your opinion. It's got nothing to do with a God-given faculty to apprehend objective truths and realities that are truly there, and the trust that casts all of one's life on this objective Christ and his objective crosswork on my behalf. It's got nothing to do with that at all.

Faith is in the private arena. It's not in the public arena. It's not in what Newhouse calls the naked public square.

It's private. So the question is, where do you start? Isn't that the problem that many of us feel in local churches, with our neighbors and our friends, whether in university campuses or elsewhere? Eventually we start getting discouraged, because we don't know where to start. We just feel as if we're in another world.

It's as if we're on a mission field and we didn't volunteer to be in one. We pay people to go to foreign mission fields. We're at home, where everybody's supposed to be from a nice Judeo-Christian background.

You can just sort of share your faith and people get converted. But now I'm on a mission field and I didn't volunteer for that, thank you. And we're frightened, a little threatened, somewhat alone.

The world is changing fast, and some of us who are a little older are quite prepared to go to glory, because we don't want to see what's coming next. And some of us who are a little younger, well, some of us have just got snookered by it all. So what do we do? Well, I have to give you some reason for coming back at one o'clock this afternoon, don't I? Let's bow in prayer.

Our Father, we do bless you that in every generation you do not leave yourself without witness. We thank you that at the end of the day our confidence is in the Lord Jesus Christ who said, I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. Yet at the same time, Lord God, we recognize that the Master most commonly uses means, poor, failed, faulted means like us, but means nevertheless.

And we hunger, Lord God, for all of our failures and our timidity, for all of our fears, still to be useful in your hands in our needy, challenging generation. For these mercies, we do earnestly entreat you, in Jesus' name. Amen.

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