

Addressing the Tolerance of Post-Modernism

by Phil Johnson

Phil Johnson argues that postmodernism is fundamentally incompatible with biblical Christianity and poses significant challenges to the church's authority and truth claims.

Duration: 1:11:13

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 2:9

Topics: "Post Modernism"

Description

The video discusses the impact of post-modernism on evangelical young people and churches. It highlights two books, 'The Post-Evangelical' by Dave Tomlinson and 'A New Kind of Christian' by Brian McLaren, which argue against essential biblical principles. The speaker identifies four principles that are essential to biblical Christianity: objectivity, clarity, authority, and certainty. Post-modernism is shown to be hostile towards these principles, as it promotes subjective beliefs and rejects the idea of absolute truth.

Transcript

What I want to do in this hour is explain the concept of postmodernism as simply as possible and explore the question of whether postmodernism is compatible with biblical Christianity. And let me just cut to the chase by addressing the second part of that just as clearly and straightforwardly as possible at the outset. I want to tell you plainly to begin with that I am convinced that postmodernism is inherently incompatible with biblical Christianity.

And in fact, the most essential elements of the postmodernist perspective are hostile to the fundamental truth claims of Scripture. And for that reason, I would argue that a postmodernist mindset involves some positively sinful ways of thinking. That's a pretty strong statement, and I realize there are many people, and there may even be some here today, who think that the church needs to adapt to postmodernism, to embrace postmodernism.

And if we don't do that, we can't reach a postmodern society. But the error in that approach is absolutely no different from the error of our forefathers a hundred years ago, who some of them tried to devise a modernist brand of Christianity in order to reach a modern world. The heart of biblical truth is lost in the process.

And you understand, I think, that modernism was inherently anti-Christian. That represented a wholesale rejection of some vital biblical truths, and therefore modernism proved to be incompatible with Christianity.

And most of us, I think, can clearly see that these days.

And that's why the movements that most of us belong to, the churches that most of us belong to, the schools that most of us studied at, all remained evangelical when the mainline denominations embraced modernism. Our spiritual forefathers were a handful of leaders in the church who a hundred years ago saw clearly that modernism was incompatible with biblical truth, and they were willing to fight the modernist trend. And in precisely the same way, the postmodernist's way of looking at the world is fundamentally anti-Christian.

Both modernism and postmodernism are exactly the kinds of evil ideology the Apostle Paul described in 2 Corinthians 10, verses 4 and 5, where he spoke of our spiritual warfare this way. He said, "...for the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty in God, for pulling down strongholds, for casting down arguments and every high thing or pretension that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ." Paul was saying that spiritual warfare is an ideological battle. Yes, our main enemies are demonic principalities and powers, the rulers of the darkness of this world, the purveyors of spiritual wickedness in high places.

But the battle is an ideological one, not a mystical one. And that's why the weapons of our warfare are not carnal. We don't fight with swords and guns, but with truth, and specifically the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.

You know, most of you know, I think, that spiritual warfare is not supposed to be waged by shouting verbal rebukes at evil spirits or by using spiritual incantations that invoke the blood of Christ or any other kind of magical or superstitious nonsense. You know, demons aren't like vampires who can be chased away with the sign of the cross. But real spiritual warfare, what Scripture describes as spiritual warfare, requires us to refute false ideas with the truth.

That's where the battle lies. True spiritual warfare, according to this passage in 2 Corinthians 10, involves the tearing down of ideological strongholds and false belief systems. And what I want to show you in this hour is that postmodernism is based on an erroneous set of unbiblical beliefs, and we need to oppose it with the clear and careful application of biblical truth.

And I think my reasons for saying that are going to become clear as we go. So let me start with some broad definitions. And let me say also up front that because of the constraints of time and the nature of my subject here, there is no possibility of treating this in a comprehensive way.

And that's not what I'm trying to do. My goal in this hour is to simplify, to try to reduce the complexity of what we're dealing with. And that means I'm going to paraphrase.

I'm going to paint the picture for you in broad strokes and I'm going to streamline my description of postmodernism as much as possible. I have to say that because if you've ever argued with a postmodernist, you know that one of the first things you'll do is criticize all your definitions. And so I just want to acknowledge that I don't pretend to be giving you a detailed or finely nuanced presentation of all the flavors of postmodernism.

I'm just trying to give you a broad survey of the postmodern panorama so that you have a working picture in your mind of what this perspective looks like so that you can recognize it when you see it. Now, what is postmodernism? It seems like we hear that word all the time. And it's a new one, really.

It came into vogue in the mid-1980s, less than 20 years ago. And the term has really gotten around. And you may have the vague notion that postmodernism involves a denial that absolute truth may be objectively known.

And that is the central idea that gave rise to postmodernism. According to the typical postmodernist, reality itself is not objective. It's an individual concept constructed by the subjective mind.

According to postmodernism, the subjectivity of the human mind makes it impossible to discover objective truth. The postmodernists would say objectivity is just an illusion. Now, perhaps when you think of postmodernism, you also think of tolerance and diversity, because those are the primary virtues postmodernism has elevated above every other kind of moral value.

That's another one of the hallmarks of postmodernist thinking. Another one of postmodernists other outstanding features is its suspicion of everything that every truth claim that is made with certainty or authority. And in fact, I would say the postmodernist really holds those sorts of truth claims in contempt.

And I'll have more to say about that as we go. But all of those things are classic characteristics of postmodern thought. Here's a couple more.

Postmodernism generally prefers subjectivity to objectivity and ambiguity over clarity. Postmodernists are skeptical of logic. They also distrust history.

They question every form of dogmatism. Postmodernists, as I said, they don't even like authoritative definitions. You try to define something clearly, and the average postmodernist will nitpick endlessly over every ambiguity, every exception to the rule, every supposed paradox that challenges your definition.

They will try to exploit every generalization you make to try to make it appear absurd. They like to blur the line over every dichotomy. And all of that is how postmodernism's essential relativism plays out in practical terms.

But most important, postmodernism is generally hostile to every worldview that makes any kind of universal truth claim. In fact, it's fair to say that the whole idea of a worldview or a comprehensive philosophy of life is about as un-postmodern as it's possible to be. Postmodernism might be defined in a nutshell as the belief that no single worldview offers a universally and objectively true perspective on all of life and reality.

So postmodernism is a kind of systematic skepticism. It's not a constructive way of thinking. It's always deconstructive.

And in fact, the postmodern hermeneutic on all of life and literature is known by that technical name, deconstructionism. And if you've taken a college course in literature at any point since 1985, you are undoubtedly familiar with that term, deconstructionism. It speaks of an approach to handling texts that aims at unraveling their objective meaning by exposing unquestioned assumptions, by attacking inconsistencies, by exploiting ambiguities and whatnot.

But in the process of deconstruction, the postmodernist isn't trying to express any clear viewpoint of his own. Nothing is ultimately denied or affirmed. No true postmodernist would ever deliberately argue that any given proposition is right or wrong.

That's not the point of the exercise. The only goal is to eliminate certainty, to question authority, to obliterate clarity, and to undermine the very notion of objectivity. And that, you could say, is the postmodernist agenda.

And I'll try to unpack all of that as we go. Now, you might be thinking, okay, if postmodernism canonizes tolerance above all other virtues, and they resist saying anything is wrong or right, how might a postmodernist make a negative critique of Phil Johnson's critique of postmodernism? And obviously, here's the answer. They would use the classic deconstructive technique.

They would probably call me irresponsible for even trying to simplify and explain something as complex as postmodernism. They would quibble about every sweeping statement I might make. They would use pedophogic arguments to try to overthrow every definition or every dichotomy I make.

And they would call me naive for even attempting to clarify what they insist cannot be objectively explained or understood. They would laugh at me for trying to explain postmodernism. And in all likelihood, an experienced postmodernist would not come out and say I'm wrong, unless he really lost his temper with me.

Obviously, if truth cannot be objectively known for certain, if reality and truth are whatever the individual imagines them to be, if each person determines what is true for himself, and if reality is merely a construct of the human mind, then one person's perspective on truth is ultimately just as good as another person's. And so they can't really say I'm wrong. And in fact, they would probably claim that the only reason I can say they are wrong is because I'm just an intolerant person clinging to outmoded modern ideas.

But their own postmodern tolerance makes it distasteful for them to have any kind of dialogue about who is right or who is wrong. Again, that's not the point of the exercise. And so even if they hated my critique of their philosophy, they probably wouldn't say my view is wrong.

Instead, they might say it's arrogant. They might say it's naive or outmoded or xenophobic or culturally biased. It marginalizes other people.

It's judgmental. I'm using obsolete paradigms or whatever, and I'm sure you've heard all of those things, or perhaps adjectives like those have even been applied to your sermons when you preach. Don't be intimidated by that kind of rhetoric, especially when it's utterly divorced from any kind of rational justification.

In fact, one of my greatest concerns about the brands of postmodernism that have infiltrated the evangelical movement is the way postmodernism deliberately undermines the authority and the clarity of evangelical preaching. You can probably already see why that would be the case. And yesterday, I think, in one of my seminars, I quoted from a postmodernist pastor who claims preaching is dead.

He said preaching is violence against the audience because it forces them to subject themselves to this thing that they don't even want to hear. That was his perspective on preaching. You see how that fits this postmodernist mindset.

And perhaps you recognize some of the typical dialogue of the postmodern culture in those expressions that I just used. Marginalizing people, naive judgmentalism, faulty paradigms, all those sort of catchphrases that you hear thrown around. What you are hearing is an echo of postmodernist thinking.

Postmodernism has become the dominant factor in the culture and the public discourse of our generation. Now, it might help us to understand postmodernism by seeing how it arose. It's possible to break down the course of Western thought and literature and art into three broad periods.

And what I want to do is help you make a chart that you can take with you to show some of the things that we're talking about. So if you got a piece of paper there, it doesn't need to be a big one. I want you to draw a grid with nine slots in it.

So draw like a tic-tac-toe grid on your paper. Or for you Brits, that would be knots and crosses. Draw like a tic-tac-toe grid there.

And be sure to make it big enough so you can write something in each box. So you have nine boxes, three columns with three rows. And each of the columns are going to represent one of the three periods of Western thought.

And the first we'll call pre-modern. You can write that above, not in the slot, but above the leftmost column on your grid. Label that column pre-modern.

And this era would extend from the birth of science and philosophy in the Greek culture until the age of the Enlightenment. So roughly from the time of Thales to the French Revolution. That's a long time.

And that would mean that the pre-modern era of Western intellectual history covers some 2,500 years. Now obviously, over that span of time, multitudes of human philosophies and various worldviews arose. Everything in the philosophical world from Plato's Republic to John Locke's empiricism would fall in the pre-modern era.

And everything in the religious world from Greek mythology to the paganism of the Druids and more. There were multitudes of philosophies and religions and worldviews that flourished in the pre-modern era. But they all had three important things in common.

First, they believed in objective ultimate truth. And so you can write that in the top left-hand corner of your grid. Objective ultimate truth.

Pre-modern people believed that whatever was ultimately true was objectively and transcendentally true. So that the same standard of ultimate truth was assumed to be true for everyone. They believed in an objective reality.

So there's a reality that's true of the whole universe. And that reality is in some sense capable of being known, apprehended, perceived. And virtually all pre-modern worldviews made that assumption.

Second, in the pre-modern world, virtually all belief systems made room for the supernatural. And so in the center row of the left-hand column, write the word supernatural. Supernatural.

Pre-modern people were certain that the limits of reality were not defined by the material visible world. There was an almost universal belief in the supernatural realm. And even though various belief systems didn't necessarily agree on what the supernatural realm was like, they almost universally accepted the realm of the supernatural, the reality of the supernatural.

Third, in the pre-modern world, it was normally assumed that the foundation for ultimate truth was itself supernatural. All authority derived from God or the gods or the spirit world. And so in the bottom row of

your left-hand column, write authority from God.

And another way of saying it is that along with the idea of ultimate truth, there was always an ultimate authority. Someone or something was perceived as the ultimate power in the universe. And that's why they saw the universe as a universe and not a multiverse.

That's why we use the word universe. And the ultimate authority in the universe was nearly always assumed to dwell in the supernatural realm. God, pagan gods, unseen spirits, or whatever.

Now that was how people in the pre-modern world saw things. They accepted without question the ideas of ultimate truth, supernaturalism, and a single central universal authority, supreme authority in the spiritual world. Those were non-negotiable and seldom challenged concepts in the pre-modern world.

They were virtually universal presuppositions. They were the very foundations of human thought. But at the dawn of the Enlightenment, about the same time as the French Revolution, there was a massive paradigm shift in Western thought, and the world entered the so-called modern era.

And so atop the center column on your chart, write the label modern, the modern era. You might call this era the Age of Reason after the title of the famous book Thomas Paine wrote in 1794. And that book more or less summed up the spirit of the modern era.

And Thomas Paine was kind of the midwife who helped birth modernity, modern thought. And the Age of Reason, both the book and the era, was an overt attack on biblical Christianity, and it elevated science and human reason to the position of highest authority. Now, on point one, modern thinkers were in complete agreement with pre-modern thinkers.

They assumed the necessity of objective, ultimate, universal truth, so you can write that in the top center box of your grid, objective, ultimate truth. There was no change in thinking there. Moderns agreed with pre-moderns that whatever was really true was true in an objective sense.

Ultimate truth was the same truth for everyone. Even though everyone didn't agree about what the ultimate truth was, they all agreed that whoever was right, that truth was true for everybody. Now, on point two, in stark contrast to pre-modern thought, this changes.

The modern mind became skeptical, dubious, cynical, unbelieving when it came to the supernatural. So you can write in the center box of your grid there, anti-supernatural. Anti-supernatural.

Modern philosophies did not necessarily deny everything supernatural, but they considered supernatural things irrelevant in the pursuit of truth. Modern thinkers said ultimate truth and knowledge are achieved only by scientific and rational means. And so belief in supernatural realities and divine revelation was viewed as outmoded and superstitious.

One author I read said this, while many Enlightenment thinkers did not completely reject belief in God, they banished God to the remotest realm of the transcendent. If God did exist, He was neither concerned nor involved with His creation. Now, maybe a better way to say it would be this.

Distrust in the Almighty was virtually the hallmark of modern thought. And so on that point, belief in the supernatural, modern thought departed dramatically from pre-modern thought. On point three, the issue of ultimate authority, the ground and foundation of truth, modern thought partly retained and partly departed

from pre-modern philosophy.

Remember, pre-moderns believed that truth is grounded in supernatural authority. Modern minds retained the notion of an absolute central authority, but obviously they denied that that absolute authority was God or anything supernatural. Modernity placed a moratorium on God as the foundation of knowledge.

And instead, science and human reason became the supreme authorities. And so in the bottom center box of your grid, write this, authority from science and human reason. Authority from science and human reason.

So the modern world retained the notion of objective universal truths, but they jettisoned the notion of supernatural reality and therefore said the only authoritative truths are those that can be established by science or reason. Now, obviously, much of the world does still operate on modern assumptions, but modernism failed badly. And frankly, people who have retained a modern mindset are philosophically behind the times.

They're just not with it philosophically. The age of reason, the modern era, is over, thankfully. The age of reason and the main results of modern thought were, if you think about it, what modern thought produced mostly were massive ideologies with centralized authoritarian control and utopian promises.

Fascism, communism, socialism, Marxism, Nazism, and similar 20th century social experiments all had their roots in modernism. We would include Darwinism in that list. All of them were fundamentally atheistic, humanistic, rationalistic systems.

All of them became tyrannical and oppressive. All of them failed, and they failed in dramatic ways. After two world wars and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the modern era was more or less declared dead by philosophers, by artists, by college professors, and by everyone.

The postmodern era had begun. So, above your right-hand column on your chart, write postmodern, postmodern. Now, as I said, the premodern era lasted some 2,500 years.

The modern era lasted less than 250 years. And if the pace of worldly paradigm shifts keeps up, and I believe it might, this postmodern era could last less than 25 years. It might be over less than a decade from now.

And I don't know what will replace it, but if evil men and seducers wax worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived, as we're told in 2 Timothy 3.13, secular philosophy is probably not going to get any better. But meanwhile, it behooves us to understand the times in which we live and do all we can to tear down the strongholds of false ideology. So we need to understand the postmodern moment and be aware of the dangers it poses.

Postmodernism is a radical reaction to the failure of modernism. It rejects virtually every distinctive of modernism, starting with the notion that truth can be objectively known. Now look at the chart you're making.

Remember, premoderns and modern thinkers both assumed that there is a single universal standard of ultimate truth that is objectively knowable. Postmodernists aren't too sure that objective truth even exists. But if it does exist, they are pretty sure it can't be known.

And so they reject the first distinctive of both premodern and modern thought. In the top right-hand corner of your grid, write objective ultimate truth is unknowable. Objective ultimate truth is unknowable.

Now as for point two, remember that premoderns assumed the existence of a supernatural reality, and moderns either rejected or ignored everything supernatural. Postmoderns are willing to accept supernaturalism, but they have stripped the supernatural of any idea of authority. The supernaturalism of postmodernism is a mystical supernaturalism, where every individual determines reality by what he perceives.

And so in the middle right-hand box of your grid, you can write mystical. Mystical. Postmodernists don't apprehend supernatural realities by authoritative revelation.

They do it by personal experience, feelings, and other subjective means. Think about it. If objective truth is unknowable, the only way to interpret any kind of reality, including God, is by personal experience.

In other words, since reality is ultimately a construct of the subjective mind, even God can be whatever you perceive Him to be. And so naturally, on the third point, the issue of authority, postmodernists disagree with both premodern and modern thought. The postmodernists would say that there is no single central authority, supernatural or otherwise, and in a world that is completely subjective, the idea of authority just doesn't fit.

So at the bottom right-hand box of your grid, you can write no ultimate authority. No ultimate authority. Postmodern religions are trying to construct a God without authority.

He's a soft, pliable, avuncular, friendly, tolerant being. Pure love without any real authority. And virtually all postmodern varieties of religion have this notion of God.

You can see, perhaps, why the climate of postmodernism is one of the main things that has made the rise of open theism popular. Open theism, a doctrine that strips God of His sovereignty and His authority, is perfectly suited to a postmodern age. And so there you have a chart that shows in broad terms how postmodernism compares to earlier ways of thinking.

That should give you a pretty good idea of where postmodernism collides with Christianity. And if you look at your chart, in each of the three areas we've listed, postmodernism is radically at odds with historic and biblical Christianity. And yet, there is no shortage of voices in the visible church today insisting that unless we as Christians devise a new form of Christianity that's more acceptable to the postmodern mind, we're going to lose this generation.

Now let me be clear. I do believe it is our duty as pastors to understand the spirit of the age in which we live and minister. Obviously, I disagree with those who are willing to hide their heads in the sand and ignore the spiritual and intellectual climate of our time, or I wouldn't even be doing this seminar.

But it's one thing to understand the spirit of the age and quite another to adapt to it. The truth is, Christianity is neither premodern, modern, nor postmodern. Biblical Christianity stood against both the superstitions and the human philosophies of the premodern era.

Authentic Christianity also opposed the rationalism and the humanism of the modern era. And we must also stand against the evils of postmodern thought. In the words of the Apostle Paul, beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy or vain deceit after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and

not after Christ.

Worldly philosophies have always been hostile to Christ and to the Christian faith. And the church is called to stand apart from them and to confront them, not embrace them and adapt our message to suit them. The gospel stands against every human worldview and every human philosophy.

And that's more true than ever today in the postmodern era. If you notice the trend in your chart, you can see that secular thought has become progressively more hostile to Christianity as time goes by. The world is not becoming more compatible with our faith.

And yet, as I said, there are Christians today, some even calling themselves evangelical, who are advocating the development of a uniquely postmodern version of the Christian faith. And Christianity today has from time to time acted as cheerleader to those efforts. As I said in a message recently, this is one more reason to write Christianity Today off as apostate.

C.T. did a major cover article on this very subject in November, just three months ago. It's on the emergent church. That's what this is all about.

Let me tell you about two books that explicitly make arguments in favor of postmodernizing evangelical Christianity. One was published in England, the other here in America. The book published in the U.K. is titled *The Post-Evangelical*.

It's by Dave Tomlinson. He's an Anglican who pastors in London. And on the one hand, Tomlinson claims that he has no agenda to move away from Christian orthodoxy or the evangelical faith.

Those are his exact words. He doesn't want to move away from Christianity, from orthodoxy or the evangelical faith. He says he merely wants to come to terms with our changing cultural context and find an authentic expression of Christianity that works in a postmodern paradigm.

On the other hand, he attacks evangelicals who are concerned with objective truth. Post-evangelicals, according to Dave Tomlinson, are those who don't like the old cut-and-dried approach to truth. And these are his words.

They find themselves instinctively drawn towards a more relative understanding of the truth. And so he immediately announces that he wants a relativistic approach to truth. And in fact, he says, and these are his precise words, quote, post-evangelicals are less inclined to look for truth and propositional statements in old moral certainties and more likely to seek truth in symbols, ambiguities, and situational judgment, unquote.

What about seeking truth in Scripture? Tomlinson says this, and again I'm quoting, quote, I think it's fair to say that post-evangelicals have mixed feelings about the Bible. On the one hand, they have immense respect for the Bible and are keen to rediscover its relevance for their life and their world. On the other hand, they have a negative backlog of feelings about the way they have seen the Bible used.

He goes on to flatly reject the concepts of biblical inerrancy and biblical authority, and he says we ought to stop thinking of biblical words and biblical propositions as true in and of themselves. And instead, he says, we ought to embrace the Bible as symbolic revelation, his words. The Bible, he says, ought to be read as a story, or rather a series of story.

These are his words again, relational stories about faith journeys rather than propositional expressions of faith. Again, those are his exact words. Now keep in mind that concept of the Bible as a collection of stories, and I'll show you in a moment that it's so important in postmodern thought.

This everything hinges on this. But for now, just flag it in your mind and understand that Dave Tomlinson is a postmodernist pastor calling for a postmodernist version of Christianity, one that rejects the absolute authority and the absolute truth of Scripture, one that thinks the idea of propositional truth is outmoded, one who argues for a subjective situational approach to truth, morality, and spiritual experience. The title of the book again is *The Post-Evangelical*, and in a recent review of this book, Al Mohler wryly remarked that the most honest aspect of this book is the post in post-evangelical.

The other book I want to mention is an American book that recently won the Award of Merit from Christianity Today. The book is titled *A New Kind of Christian* by Brian McLaren. I reviewed it last year at the Shepherds' Conference, and very few guys had ever even heard of it.

This year, everybody keeps asking me about it. This book is making the rounds. It's affecting people you minister to.

A New Kind of Christian, Brian McLaren. McLaren is the pastor of Cedar Ridge Community Church in the Washington, D.C. area, and he is an unabashed postmodernist. He has co-authored another book with Tony Campolo, who also writes with a decidedly postmodernist slant.

In fact, McLaren keeps coming out with books arguing in favor of postmodernist varieties of Christianity. This book, *A New Kind of Christian*, was hailed by Christianity Today as one of the most helpful resources available to help us understand the grand implications of the postmodern moment. The book is written in a fiction style.

I told you postmodernists like stories. It's a sort of extended dialogue between a burnt-out evangelical pastor and a postmodern science teacher who is himself a former pastor. McLaren's introduction to the book implies that the book is a largely autobiographical account of his own spiritual journey.

He says the book stemmed from his crisis of faith when, at the age of 38, he says he got sick of being a pastor. Frankly, he says, I was almost sick of being a Christian. But in the midst of his crisis he said he learned how to be a Christian in a whole new way.

That, he says, is the subject of this book. And so the dialogues in the book reflect Brian McLaren's own thinking. He is both characters.

This is a dialogue that originally took place in his mind with himself. And he's devised a new approach to Christianity that is thoroughly postmodern. As I said, his postmodern faith has received the stamp of approval from Christianity Today.

His book is very popular among evangelical students on college campuses. I have no doubt that many college students from your churches, the churches you pastor, are reading and absorbing the vision of a new kind of Christian Brian McLaren sets forth in this book. It's a view you need to be familiar with and you need to be able to respond to.

And so I want to draw a few examples from these two books as we talk further about postmodernism and how it is impacting evangelical young people and evangelical churches. And in order to organize my

thoughts for the remainder of our time together, I want to highlight for you four principles that I would deem essential to biblical Christianity. These four principles are all treated with great suspicion or outright hostility by postmodernism, and there are principles that so-called postmodern Christians say they are prepared to jettison.

And in fact, both of the books I have mentioned, the post evangelical by Dave Tomlinson and a new kind of Christian by Brian McLaren, expressly argue against all four of these essential biblical principles. Here are the four principles. I'll give you the complete list and then we'll talk about them one at a time.

So if you want to take them down, leave some space between them for your notes for essential characteristics of a truly Christian and biblical worldview. They are these objectivity. Clarity.

Authority. And certainty. Objectivity, clarity, authority and certainty, I'll give you those as we go.

So if you didn't get them all, you can get them as you listen. Objectivity, clarity, authority and certainty post postmodernism is hostile to all four. And I want to explain why.

So let's take them in order, starting with objectivity. Authentic Christianity has always been concerned with objective truth, propositional truth claims, history, facts, doctrine. You do away with the objective historic reality of the bodily resurrection of Christ, for example, and according to the Apostle Paul, you have destroyed the very heart of the Christian faith.

In fact, listen to how Paul frames his argument and note that he relies completely on propositions, historical fact and the objective reality of the resurrection. First Corinthians 15 verses 13 through 18. He says, if there be no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen.

And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching in vain and your faith is also vain. Yea, and we are found false witnesses of God because we have testified of God that he raised up Christ, whom he raised not up, if so be that the dead rise not. For if the dead rise not, then is not Christ raised.

And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain. You are yet in your sins. Then also they which are fallen asleep in Christ have perished.

Paul is saying that all of Christianity depends on the objective truth of the bodily resurrection of Christ, a historical fact, and he uses propositions and syllogisms. Reasoning logic to make the argument and notice Paul's repeated use of if then if then he's making a systematic argument. He is building proposition on proposition to show that Christianity depends completely on the truth of the historical fact of Christ's resurrection.

But remember, Dave Tomlinson says the post evangelicals he claims to represent feel uneasy with such a cut and dried approach, and they find themselves instinctively drawn towards a more relative understanding of truth. According to Tomlinson, again, using his words, post evangelicals are less inclined to look for truth in propositional statements and more likely to seek it in symbols, ambiguities and situational judgments. Now, he gives lip service to history.

But listen closely to what he says, quote, Rejecting naive realism doesn't mean one believes the Bible is devoid of historical content. However, it does mean that our faith need not hinge on everything in the Bible being historically factual. OK, in other words, the history in the Bible is not necessarily objective history or even factually true.

It's symbolic, subjective, a story. He's redefined what he means by history. Typical postmodern approach, redefine the term.

Brian McLaren's approach is only slightly more subtle, and he says essentially the same thing. He claims evangelicals err by making the Bible like a book of history or an encyclopedia of objective facts. Our mistake, he says, is that we read it as if it were a modern text.

And McLaren's fictional hero says this, quote, Sure, the Bible includes history, but not with all the modern trimmings, like a concern for factual accuracy, corroborating evidence or absolute objectivity, unquote. That's a shocking statement, isn't it? Yeah, the Bible contains history, but not with all the modern trimmings, like a concern for factual accuracy. He's saying it doesn't really matter if the history in Scripture is true or not.

Both of these books are taking a slap at objectivity. The objective truth of biblical propositions. And McLaren says the Bible is not meant to be an answer book, it's not a book of objective truth, but it's a story or better, better yet, a collection of stories.

In his words, quote, It tells the family story, the story of people who have been called by the true God to be his agents in the world, to be his servants to the rest of the world. Unquote. Later in the book, he says this, quote, What a relief to have this alternative, to read the Bible as a pre-modern text emerging from a people who believe that truth is best embodied in story and art and human flesh rather than abstraction or outline or moralism, unquote.

In fact, let me give you one more quotation in this same vein from Brian McLaren. He says this, and I'm quoting, According to the Bible, humans shall not live by systems and abstractions and principles alone, but also by stories and poetry and proverbs and mystery. And best of all, instead of lending us moralisms that we must try to impose on followers of different stories, it calls us to live as part of its own story.

And as we live by that story, we find followers of other stories interested in ours because our story, rightly understood, has plenty of room for them and their stories to unquote. Now, notice what McLaren has done. He denigrates the importance of objective truth at every opportunity, and he portrays the Bible as something completely subjective, a story, a story we ourselves are subjectively part of.

And not only that, but there's room in this story for other people. And by that, he means non-Christians and their stories, too, all fit into ours. And like virtually all postmodernists, McLaren goes on to argue for inclusivism, the notion that heaven will include people of all religions.

Now, if you are at all familiar with the jargon of postmodernism, you know that stories are what all postmodernists prefer to history and facts. And postmodernists especially hate the notion of one big story that authoritatively interprets all of reality, the big story, or they call it the meta narrative. That's the favorite postmodern expletive used to label every comprehensive worldview.

Meta narratives are evil, big worldviews, big stories. They are oppressive and inherently bigoted. They are used by narrow minded people to marginalize people with different stories.

Brian McLaren says this, quote, The word meta narratives implies domination, coercion, eradication of opponents, imposition of beliefs or behaviors on minorities against their will and the like, unquote. Just like preaching, it's violent against people's wills. Communism and fascism were big stories, meta narratives, and they were evil and they failed because they were tools of oppression.

And postmodernists say that all worldviews are like that big, authoritative stories that give just one narrow perspective and eliminate or oppress all the other perspectives. But Brian McLaren, Dave Tomlinson and other self-styled postmodern Christians insist that the Bible is not like that. It doesn't give a single worldview because that would be evil, narrow minded.

Oppressive, it's the kind of story the Bible is that accommodates everyone's story. And so the Bible is not a meta narrative, it's a wax narrative that you can shape in any way that suits you. It's not objective truth.

It's a subjective story. And you are part of the story. So you can tell the story from your own subjective point of view.

That's why in the quote I gave from the postmodern conference, the guy says that postmodernists prefer to have conversations rather than preaching. And that is what I mean when I say postmodernism is hostile to objectivity. This is the inevitable effect.

If you try to blend postmodernism and Christianity, it undermines the objectivity of biblical truth. All right. A second point.

Postmodernism is hostile to clarity. Clarity, I've already mentioned that postmodernists don't like definitions and dichotomies, because obviously if everything is subjective and relative, you can't make any clear dichotomies and your definitions ought to be as flexible as everything else. So for postmodernists, every text, every statement, every expression has an endless number of possible interpretations.

In the words of one secular advocate of postmodernism, he says this, quote, there is no final meaning for any particular sign, no notion of any unitary sense of text, no interpretation that can be regarded as superior to any other unquote. Ultimately, then, if you think about it, every interpretation is therefore false, too narrow, too restrictive. And interpretation is therefore always a work in progress.

You might say that the postmodernist story always lacks an ending and it never has any clear meaning. And the meaning is determined by the reader, not the author. And once you buy that idea, anything can mean everything up can mean down.

This could mean that. And everything suddenly means nothing. You see this very clearly in how postmodernism has influenced the secular and academic world.

This is why postmodernists have been able to rewrite history and turn values upside down. And suddenly homosexuality is no longer considered a disorder. Homophobia is.

Columbus is one of the biggest villains of Western society. Che Guevara is one of the greatest heroes. And in fact, history itself needs to be retold because it is too dominated by European white males.

So postmodernists rewrite history books and change the story and bring those who have been marginalized into the center of the narrative. And that sort of hermeneutic is being applied by postmodernist Christians to Scripture. And you can see the result if you start by rejecting objective meaning.

Clarity is automatically the first victim coherence becomes impossible. Nothing can ever really be clear. And of course, your theology will be as flexible as the meaning of any word.

Infinately flexible doctrinal precision, therefore, becomes impossible in the postmodern world. But as far as the postmodern Christian is concerned, that's OK. Doctrinal precision isn't even desirable.

And that point of view comes through clearly in Brian McLaren's book. McLaren thinks Christians should worry less about being right and worry more about being good. And he spends several pages arguing that syncretism, you know, the practice of merging and blending other religions with Christianity, he says, that's not that's not something we should fear.

It's something to be embraced. And he frankly doesn't says he doesn't see why it's not possible for someone to be both a Christian and a Buddhist. His approach from beginning to end is to systematically undermine clarity by challenging definitions and removing boundaries.

He spends pages having his characters muse about why they don't like the standard evangelical definitions of expressions like salvation, the new birth and righteousness. In other words, clarity is the mortal enemy of postmodernism because clarity requires definition and definitions imply authority. And in fact, authority is the next in our list of things postmodernism is hostile to.

If you've been taking notes, we've talked about postmodernism's dislike of objectivity and clarity. Now, here's the third great pillar of true Christian worldview, that postmodernists simply cannot stomach authority. And you can already tell from some of the quotations I've read, some of the descriptions I've given that postmodernists have a general distrust of and contempt for authority.

They despise dogmatism. They portray the notion of a comprehensive worldview as inherently oppressive. They invariably champion whatever is marginal and they want to dethrone whatever or whoever is in power at the moment.

That stems from the fact that postmodernism is inherently anti foundational. Foundationalism, in its simplest definition, is the view that knowledge must be constructed with a base of unshakable truth. You start with a foundation and you build from there.

The foundational truths are accepted without prior justification or argument, or to borrow the expression of Cornelius Van Til, the most basic truths of all are our presuppositions. Now, philosophical foundationalism is a notion that has its roots in the theories of Rene Descartes. In other words, it's a modern notion.

Descartes, of course, eliminated the Bible as a starting point and began with his own rational experience as a starting point. You may remember him for his famous line, I think, therefore, I am. That, he said, was the starting point for truth and rationality.

In other words, a subjective starting point. That was his foundation. It was subjective.

Now, let me make it clear that I am not defending Cartesian foundationalism. And the subject is really too technical and too time consuming to get into here. But let me just say this.

Postmodernism is such a radical reaction to Cartesian foundationalism that it rejects not only the philosophy of Descartes, but also what Descartes sought to establish, the ground of true knowledge. Descartes' error was not that he believed knowledge has sure foundations, but that he began with human experience and therefore he built his system on the wrong foundation. Postmodernism ends up with no foundation for anything and therefore no possibility of knowledge.

That's why uncertainty and skepticism are cardinal postmodern values. In the premodern and modern eras, virtually every worldview rested on some foundation. Different worldviews had different ideas about what the foundation of knowledge ought to be.

Some said it was common sense. Others said it was empirical data. Others made key philosophical or metaphysical propositions of their foundation.

But they all had foundations. And for biblical Christianity, Scripture is the foundation of authentic faith and true knowledge. Scripture stands above every other kind of truth.

So what the Bible teaches, it's more authoritative and more certain than any other source. It's more sure, according to 2 Peter 1:19. It's more sure than the data we gather firsthand through our own senses.

That's what Peter was saying. Jesus himself said in his high priestly prayer, John 17:17, Thy word is truth. John 10:35, the Scripture cannot be broken.

And 2 Timothy 3:16 calls Scripture the word of truth. In other words, Scripture is claiming to be infallible, inerrant truth, and therefore Christians who believe the Bible accept it as the only sure foundation and the final test of all truth. Scripture is the supreme authority in all matters of truth.

That is the foundation of the historic Christian worldview. Now, I already mentioned postmodernism's contempt for worldviews. Just another way of saying postmodernism is anti-foundational.

The two go hand in hand. In Brian McLaren's postmodern brand of Christianity, Scripture is explicitly eliminated as a foundation. On page 52 of his book, his main character, the guy who takes the mentoring role in McLaren's semi-fictional dialogue, says this, quote, The whole notion of authority as so many people conceive it is thoroughly modern.

And then he tells the other character, Relax, I'm only saying what the Bible itself says. That oft quoted passage in 2 Timothy doesn't say all Scripture is inspired by God and is authoritative. It says all Scripture is inspired and useful, unquote.

And then the other character protests. This is the guy who's contemplating leaving the ministry. He says, Well, but we need some rock solid answers, some hard facts to be the foundation for our Christian worldview.

Every building needs a foundation, right? The mentor character replies, The Bible never speaks of itself this way. And he goes on to explain his view of faith. He says it's not like a building constructed on a single foundation of truth.

He says it's more like a spider web anchored at many points. He says, and I quote, Those points might be spiritual experiences, exemplary people and institutions whom one has come to trust. That sort of things.

But where does the Bible fit in? The second character asks. Well, the mentor character replies, It could be seen as one of the anchor points. Or perhaps every passage in the Bible that has affected your life could be seen as an anchor point, or perhaps the Bible isn't only in the anchor points, maybe it's every part of the thread of the web, unquote.

Think about what he's saying here. What gets lost, obviously, is the uniqueness and the authority of Scripture. It's been removed as the foundation, and now it takes its place alongside exemplary people,

institutions and personal experiences as one of the anchor points for our faith.

Now, remember, Brian McLaren says he is more concerned about being good than about being right. His brand of Christianity wants to elevate orthopraxy over orthodoxy. The problem is that with no ultimate authority, the idea of being good is meaningless.

Who's to say what's good without a foundation of orthodoxy, orthopraxy becomes whatever you want it to be. Now, let's admit that orthodoxy without orthopraxy is worthless. Scripture itself says so.

James 2, 17. Faith, if it hath not works, is dead. Being alone.

But McLaren's answer to that problem is to jettison orthodoxy completely. That's no answer. You don't cure hypocrisy by eliminating truth.

Truth is ultimately the only remedy even for hypocrisy. What we need is the clarification of truth, not the elimination of it. But postmodernists want to reject orthodoxy, not really because they fear hypocrisy, but because they despise authority.

Remember, they despise the idea of a central narrative that speaks objectively, clearly and authoritatively, and isn't that essential to the Christian message? That scripture is true because it speaks with the authority of God himself. Psalm 138, verse two, thou hast magnified thy word above all thy name. In other words, God's word is in no sense inferior to his personal authority.

Rather, it is the expression of his personal authority. He has exalted above his name. In other words, he's placed it on a higher level than his own reputation.

He's made it the definitive, objective, authoritative expression of himself to us. And so when the scriptures speak, it's with God's personal authority. When they command us, we'd better obey.

When they rebuke us, we have no option but to reform. When they instruct us, we are obliged to hear their truth. And when they warn us, we must take heed when they speak to us.

It is our bounden duty to listen and submit. That is the historic Christian worldview. But it's totally unpostmodern.

So postmodernism is hostile to objectivity, clarity and authority. The final victim in the postmodern onslaught is one other pillar in the Christian worldview, and that is certainty. Certainty in both the premodern and the modern eras.

The debate was over which worldview was true. Christians argued that if the Bible was true, all of the worldviews were false. In the postmodern era, the argument has changed.

Postmodernists attack every worldview that claims to be true. There's no room for certainty. Dogmatism is a greater transgression in the postmodern era than either irrationality or incoherence.

And that's why secular postmodernists are equally hostile to dogmatic atheism and biblical Christianity. Theological modernism is no better and no worse than evangelicalism to a postmodernist. Both are oppressive because they claim to be right.

Certainty is what has become intolerable because postmodernists think certainty itself is a kind of intolerance. And that perspective comes through loud and clear in the opening pages of Brian McLaren's book. In the introduction, McLaren tears into preachers who have the audacity to think they know anything for certain.

This is McLaren speaking here. This is the introduction to his book. This is not just one of the characters in his books.

He says this. I drive my car and listen to the Christian radio station, something my wife tells me I should stop doing because it only gets me upset. And he says there I hear preacher after preacher be so absolutely sure of his bombproof answers and his foolproof biblical interpretations.

And the more sure he seems, the less I find myself wanting to be a Christian, because on this side of the microphone, antennas and speaker, life just isn't that simple. Answers just aren't that clear and nothing is that sure. A friend of mine, Reed Ferguson, who's a pastor in New England, I think he's in New York state, Reed wrote a review of Brian McLaren's book and he sent it to me and in it he says this, quote, The new kind of Christian would never contend earnestly for the faith, which was once for all handed down to the saints.

In the first place, he wouldn't contend against anyone except Christians who say they know something. Secondly, he knows it's far too arrogant to suppose anything like the faith exists. Our story may be the faith.

No. Third, Reed Ferguson writes, the faith once for all handed down contradicts the idea that we need to create a new reality, a new story once for all just doesn't fit the postmodern paradigm ever knew is the mantra. Being a defender is most certainly undesirable.

Only being a seeker is kosher. Once you begin to think you've actually found something to defend, you've crossed the line. That is the spirit of postmodernism, as I said earlier, it is inherently skeptical, cynical, suspicious of every truth claim, and so naturally postmodernism has no room for certainty, even on the things that really matter.

Brian McLaren recaps a sermon on death that was preached by his lead character in the sermon, the character says this, There are two dominant stories alive in our culture today. Story one goes like this. Once upon a time, the universe banged into being for no apparent reason, reason and with no apparent purpose.

Someday it will end and there will be no one left to remember it ever existed. In the meantime, we live and we die. And that's about it.

Now he's giving the he's giving the atheistic story. Story two, he says, begins with a creator who designed the universe to produce life and so on. And this character spends most of his sermon then musing about what if the second story is true? And then in his closing prayer, he says this, quote, God, although I can't be certain or prove it scientifically, the second story makes more sense to me, unquote.

Now, there's two things to notice here. First, Brian McLaren's hero has only one reason for believing in a creator over secular atheism, and it's totally subjective because it makes more sense to me. According to postmodernism, no value system is grounded in certainty, and so there would seem to be no valid reason other than personal preference to choose one set of values over the other.

And second, notice that this character says in a prayer addressed to his subjective God, I can't be certain whether this is true or not. Can't be certain, is that the message of Christianity? How about first John 510, he that believeth on the sun has the witness in himself, he that believeth not God has made him a liar because he believeth not the record God gave of his son. First Timothy 112, I know whom I've believed and I'm persuaded that he is able to keep that which I've committed unto him against that day.

First John 319, and we know that we are of the truth and shall assure our hearts before him and first John 513, these things I've written unto you that believe on the name of the son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life. And in fact, four times, five times in that one chapter alone, first John five, the apostle John writes this. We know we know he says it five times.

We know. First Corinthians two, verses nine and 10, I have not seen nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for them that love him, but God has revealed them to us by his spirit. There is a certainty and an assurance that stands against the postmodern skepticism of all objective truth and and divine revelation.

Verse 12, now we have received not the spirit of this world, but the spirit which is of God, that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. The confidence in that statement is an essential element of a truly biblical worldview, and it is an explicit repudiation of the postmodernist perspective. Brian McLaren's contempt for certainty like that undermines his whole approach to salvation of the doctrine of assurance.

He spends pages wringing his hands and bemoaning the tendency of Christians who, in his words, tend to ingroup and outgroup people who, according to who's going to heaven and who's going to hell. In fact, McLaren is completely unconcerned about who's going to hell and he thinks we should be, too. Chapter 14 of his book is titled It's none of your business who goes to hell.

Now, obviously, the apostle Paul had not read that chapter when he lamented the predicament of his unbelieving Jewish brethren at the beginning of Romans nine and then again at the beginning of Romans 10. But if your perspective is that nothing whatsoever is certain, it's hard to ward off that sort of blithe apathy. My friend Reed Ferguson wrapped up his review of Brian McLaren's book this way, and I got to read it to you because this is good.

He writes, So let's recap. The new kind of Christian has a good story. He refuses to consider that men might perish in a Christless hell.

He doesn't know if he's right about anything, especially about God, Christ, sin, salvation or hell. He excludes no other religions. He has no faith to defend and he's not concerned about being regenerate.

Reed Ferguson says this really is a new kind of Christian because it isn't a Christian at all. It's a good old fashioned pagan holding to a form of godliness, but having denied its power. Now, you might be thinking that the new kind of Christianity Brian McLaren advocates is no real threat in the circles where you minister.

And if that is what you think, you may be surprised. Brian McLaren spoke just last year at an event sponsored by Dallas Theological Seminary's Institute for Christian Leadership, and they billed him as and these are their words, quote, One of the leading voices in the development of innovative ministries for the postmodern context and a passionate proponent of communicating the gospel in ways that people can

understand, unquote. That's Dallas Seminary's evaluation of this guy.

Time magazine recently featured McLaren in their list of the top 25 most influential evangelicals in America. McLaren's approach has been endorsed by Rick Warren. Warren features material by McLaren on his website.

McLaren was featured in the cover article of Christianity Day just in in November. Christianity Today has been championing postmodern notions for years, and a couple of months ago they did this cover article on the Emergent Church, which that's the name of the movement Brian McLaren is trying to to lead to postmodernize the church. And the CT article was written with this tone of anxiety about how much out of step the mainstream of the church is with the times in which we live.

Listen, the Christian message has always been out of step with the times. That was true even before the modern era, the message of the cross is an offense. To the rationalistic Greeks who desire wisdom.

We have only one legitimate message to give and to them, it's foolishness to the mystical Jews who seek after a sign. Same message. It's the preached message of Christ crucified unto the Jews, a stumbling block and to the Greeks, foolishness.

Let's acknowledge that and embrace it. The gospel has always been out of step with the wisdom of this world. But the wisdom, the foolishness of God is wiser than men.

And the weakness of God is stronger than men. Let's have confidence in that truth and not be seduced by the subtle arguments of these people who are willing to give up everything that's true and clear and authoritative and certain. We have a more sure word of prophecy where unto you would do well to take heed as unto a light shining in a dark place.

That's my story and I'm sticking to it. We hope you've enjoyed this message from our pastor. We have a variety of sermon resources to help you grow in the knowledge of God's word.

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