

## **Module 2**

### **Post Modernism And “A Pain In The Mind”**







## Module 2: Post Modernism And “A Pain In The Mind”

*The world is changed.  
I feel it in the water;  
I feel it in the earth;  
I smell it in the air;  
Much that once was is lost,  
For none now live who remember it.  
(The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring)*

*“All thinking begins with a pain in the mind.”* Leslie Newbigin

*“Most Christians would rather die than think - in fact they do.”* Bertrand Russell

*“If you don’t get it, you don’t get it!”* Post Modern mantra

Those of us who grew up in the traditional institutional church (I earned my “God & Country” award in Scouting in the Methodist church where I grew up) can somewhat identify with the narrator of the above introduction to “The Lord of The Rings.” So could Leslie Newbigin. A product of the Student Christian Movement (a particularly evangelistic and missions oriented group) and Westminster College, Cambridge, Leslie Newbigin was ordained to ministry by the Presbyterian Church in 1936. He spent the next 38 years, until his retirement in 1974, as a missionary to India. By his own account he returned to his native England only to discover that the Christian culture which he had left some thirty-eight years before had all but disappeared. At the age of 65, he came home to England and found it foreign. As a result, ministry in England, he observed, *“is much harder than anything I met in India. There is a cold contempt for the Gospel which is harder to face than opposition . . . England is a pagan society and the development of a truly missionary encounter with this very tough form of paganism is the greatest intellectual and practical task facing the Church.”*<sup>24</sup>

*Welcome to our Post-Christian Post-Modern world.*

The greatest challenge to Christianity in the first 300 years of its existence didn't come from the Roman authorities (although their persecution certainly didn't help matters any). It came from a pseudo-Christian philosophy called "Gnosticism." And the greatest challenge to the church today isn't from secular authorities or out-right persecution.<sup>25</sup> It is coming from the philosophical phenomenon of Post Christian Post Modernism (and if it makes you feel any better, Gnosticism is also making a come back!). But few Christians at the grassroots level know what Post Modernism is, even though it is as prevalent today as the cultural air we breathe. And even fewer Christians understand what has been lost in the transition to this new paradigm. Like the prologue to the movie *“The Lord of Rings,”* much that once was in our Culture is now lost, for so few remember what went before. Let me illustrate.

### The World That Once Was

In the year 1904 a revival broke out in the tiny nation of Wales on the southwest coast of Great Britain. Within six months of its outbreak some 100,000 persons had professed Christ as Savior and joined the Church for the first time. By the time the revival had run its course roughly 5% of the population of Wales had done the same. When the revival spread to America the effect was profound and widespread. In Denver, the Mayor declared Friday, January 20, 1905 a day of prayer. At 11:30 nearly every business and every school in Denver was closed, and the Colorado Legislature voted to postpone business in order to attend city-wide prayer meetings. Similar scenes were repeated in Atlanta where, on November 2<sup>nd</sup> factories, stores and offices closed at mid-day for prayer and the Supreme Court of Georgia adjourned in order to attend prayer meetings. In Portland, Oregon some 241 businesses signed an agreement to close for three hours between 11 and 2 p.m. in order to allow their customers and employees to attend prayer meetings.

Can anyone imagine similar scenes today? Can anyone seriously imagine Michael Eisner closing down Disneyland so patrons and employees could go to Church? Not likely (although with God, all things are possible!). Businesses would be afraid to close for such “religious reasons” for fear of offending non-believing customers and employees. And cries of “separation of Church and State” would ring in the media if Legislatures and Courts were to close or postpone business because of a revival.

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<sup>24</sup>Leslie Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda: An Autobiography* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans publishing Company, 1985)

<sup>25</sup>Although, if you haven't yet read David Limbaugh's excellent book, *“Persecution: How Liberals Are Waging War Against Christianity,”* you really should!

## A Kingdom, A People & A River - Page 36

Growing up as a child in the American South (specifically, North Carolina) I spent my early childhood in a land of “blue laws.” This meant that commercial businesses were closed on Sundays. It was to be a day of rest, and it was culturally assumed that most people would be in Church. While you and I might argue the wisdom or acceptance of such notions today, to forget that they once existed is to fail to comprehend the massive philosophical, religious and cultural changes which have swept over us as a people in the span of my own generation. In the words of John Howard of the Rockford Institute, World War 2 is now “a half century and a whole civilization ago.”

*“Much that once was is lost, for none now live who remember it.”*

### A Post-Christian Post-Modern Quiz (For the Culturally Impaired)

Our topic in this Module is going to be the rise of Post Modernism and its impact upon our culture and the church.<sup>26</sup> So, why don’t we start this discussion with a Post Modern quiz. Let me throw you a “soft ball.” Which of the following questions is a Post Christian, Post Modern evangelism intro:

1. “Say, have you heard of the four spiritual laws?”
2. “Have you taken the red pill or the blue pill?”

That one got you stumped? The answer is Question #2. It comes from the movie, “*The Matrix*” where the character “Neo” must choose between taking the red pill, which would show him the truth about “the matrix” or the blue pill which will allow him to wake up in bed the next morning and for his life to continue as “normal.” Now, when I was in college (and then on Campus Crusade Staff) to ask someone if they had heard of “*The Four Spiritual Laws*” was radical stuff. In recent years, college ministries around America have held “Matrix” festivals and have challenged college students to “take the red pill.” Yep, things have changed a little.

### Post Modern Hemlines

Former presidential speech writer and syndicated columnist Peggy Noonan observed that, at some point, all of us must admit that something remarkable has happened to American culture. For her, this moment came during a high school graduation. A young girl walked across the stage to receive her diploma. The girl was obviously pregnant. Noonan recalls that her first impulse was admiration for the girl’s grit and determination against social disapproval. “*But,*” recognized Noonan, “*society wasn’t disapproving. It was applauding.*” As she reflected, “*Applause is a right and generous response for a young girl with grit and heart. And yet, in the sound of that applause I heard a wall falling, a thousand-year wall, a wall of sanctions that said: We as a society do not approve of teenaged unwed motherhood because it is not good for the child, not good for the mother, not good for us.*”<sup>27</sup>

When I was in high school the great debate involving the student dress code was over whether or not girls should be allowed to wear “pant suits” to school (at the time, only dresses were allowed for girls). Today, we’re just thankful that they come to school wearing clothes at all, sort of, and there in lies a Post Modern tale. I have a friend who is retiring after a career teaching Middle School students in the local public school system. In her last year of teaching she became grieved at the lack of enforcement of the standing dress code. What piqued her ire was the dress habit of middle school girls exposing an increasing amount of their “mid-rift,” to the point that many girls were wearing low-hugging pants with waists barely above the “hair line” (I’m being as tactful as I can at this point). This teacher expressed her growing concerns via e-mail to the other school faculty. The variety of responses she received were “enlightening.” There were a handful of other concerned faculty who agreed with her. Others, particularly male faculty, expressed concern about the possibility of losing their jobs over sexual harassment if they confronted the issue. A guidance counselor ridiculed the whole idea of an enforceable dress code as silly. And finally, one male faculty member responded by saying that he had simply learned to “enjoy the view” (No, I’m not making that up!).

Welcome to “grass roots Post Modernism,” the inability to find any common moral ground outside of one’s own personal opinion. For these Middle School children, Post Modernism isn’t a theoretical discussion. It is a practical issue of no

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<sup>26</sup>For a good general overview of Post Modernism from an evangelical perspective see *PostModernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, David S. Dockery, Editor, (Wheaton: Victor Books/SP Publications, Inc., 1995). One of the challenges of defining Post Modernism is the reality that there are several different “schools” of Post Modern thought. Leslie Newbigin, a missiologist, wonderfully articulates many of the challenges which Post Modernism presents to the church without ever referring to, or using the phrase, “Post Modernism.”


<sup>27</sup>My thanks to Dr. Albert Mohler, President of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary for this illustrative anecdote from his excellent article, “*Transforming Culture: Christian Truth Confronts Post-Christian America*” posted on his website at [www.albertmohler.com/article\\_read.php?cid=1](http://www.albertmohler.com/article_read.php?cid=1)


recognizable boundaries which parents, students and faculty can agree upon. All they (and we) have left is personal opinions which vary across a wide spectrum, ranging from conservative Christians concerned about modesty and morality to Post Modern faculty members who should be fired for leering at someone's 15-year old daughter. Welcome to the Post Modern wasteland, a philosophical, moral, spiritual, political and educational wasteland of our own creation.<sup>28</sup> Now, I understand that Post Modernism is much more profound and complex than a Middle School dress code, but in application it really isn't. You see, the philosophical musings of Post Modern philosophers and theologians will ALWAYS find eventual expression in the grass root issues of life. In the real world, it is but a short step from the philosopher or theologian who declares the impossibility of any ultimate moral truth and the Middle School teenager who agrees by lowering her waistline or engaging in casual oral sex (the latest sex-trend among Middle and High Schoolers. After all, didn't a President of the United States argue that oral sex wasn't really sex?).


### Post Cards From the Edge of A Post Christian Culture


Over the past year I have included, without much explanation, a section in my Weekly E-Letter Update entitled "*Post Cards From The Edge of a Post-Christian Culture*." In it I have sought to highlight stories which illustrate the "deconstruction" of the traditional institutional church and the waning influence of Christianity in general on Western Culture as we have traditionally known and experienced it. Here is a small sampling of things I've included:

 **God Kept Out of EU Constitution. France Leads Charge to Pander to Islamic Immigrant Populations.** The draft European Union's proposed constitution leaves out mention of God and Europe's Christian roots, despite strong pressure from conservatives and the Vatican, and amid fear of alienating Islamic immigrant populations, reports the Italian news agency ANSA. The long-awaited preamble to the document used the words "spiritual", "religious" and "humanistic" to describe Europe's heritage and references traditions in Europe "nourished by the Greek and Roman civilizations," but makes no reference to the deity. The question of whether to include God in the EU's first-ever constitution has been a subject of intense debate in recent months as drafters attempted to cobble the document. Its purpose is to build cohesion within the EU as it expands eastward and grows from 15 to 25 member countries next year. All current members are formally Christian states, but most make no reference to their Christian roots in their respective constitutions and keep church and state separate.

 **Guest Chaplain's Prayer Offends. Pastor Gives Invocation in House, Alludes to Social Issues.** A pastor who offered the opening prayer at a recent session of the U.S. House of Representatives is under fire for what some believe were veiled references to abortion and homosexuality, reports The Hill newspaper. The Rev. George Dillard III of Peachtree City Christian Church near Atlanta served as guest chaplain of the House on May 14, having been invited by Rep. Jack Kingston, R-Ga., according to the House chaplain's office. Kingston, however, told the paper he did not invite Dillard. According to the report, Dillard asked God for "leaders who will seek your truth ... who accept that a lie is a lie and not spin; that it is immorality and not an alternative lifestyle; that it is murder not a procedure; that it is stealing and not creative accounting; that rebellion is rebellion no matter what name we give it."

 **"No Doubt We're In The Last Days" Associated Press.** The Traditional Values Coalition is asking its 43,000 member churches to protest plans for a homosexual dating show called Boy Meets Boy on the Bravo cable network. The Coalition's executive director, Andrea Lafferty, says: "*Just when you think programming can't get any worse, it seems like it drops another 100 feet to an even darker place.*" She adds, "*What's next after Boy Meets Boy? Boy Meets Sheep?*" Bravo also is scheduling another summer series called "*Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*," in which five homosexual designers make over the wardrobe of a heterosexual man. (Author's Note: Notice how the outrageous quickly becomes the popular and trendy. The show "*Queer Eye*" became a smash hit and cultural phenom).

 **Minister: God doesn't exist. Suspended for remarks, but theologian finds claims 'refreshing'.** It's not unusual to hear of mainline Protestant clergy who reject fundamental Christian doctrines such as the deity of Jesus Christ, but a Lutheran minister is going a step further, claiming God does not exist. Danish pastor Thorkild Grosboel of Taarbaek, near Copenhagen, was suspended today by his bishop after stating in a recent interview "there is no heavenly God, there is no eternal life, there is no resurrection," the Associated Press reported. Bishop Lise-Lotte Rebel of the Helsingoer diocese, said Grosboel's comments "caused confusion" within the church.

 **The Importance of Being Apathetic. When the Faithful Just Don't Care. by Chuck Colson.** Columnist Jonathan Rauch believes that America has made "a major civilizational advance" in recent years. Rauch, a

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<sup>28</sup> Author and Christian convert T.S. Eliott saw and wrote about this in his classic poem, "The Wasteland" some thirty years before Post Modernism even had a name.

## A Kingdom, A People & A River - Page 38

longtime atheist, is thrilled about a phenomenon he calls "apathism." It's not that people don't believe in God anymore, Rauch writes in the Atlantic Monthly—the majority will still say they believe. But statistics show that they're going to church less, and when they do go, it's more to socialize or enjoy a familiar ritual than to worship. And as Rauch observes, they're refraining from sharing their faith with their friends and neighbors. On the whole, the people Rauch describes haven't been putting much thought or effort into their faith. They're looking for comfort and reassurance, not for a God who asks anything of them. Hence the rise of "apathies," which Rauch defines as "a disinclination to care all that much about one's own religion, and an even stronger disinclination to care about other people's."

I included these for a very simple reason. In order to minister effectively in our culture today, we need to understand the times in which we live. We need to understand why old institutions and old ways of operating are no longer effective. We need to understand the "cultural rot" that now pervades both the world and the church. We can no longer assume a certain level of Judeo-Christian heritage or Christian background as a jumping-off point for our presentation of the Gospel. To make such assumptions is to live in the world of the 1930s or '40s or '50s, a world that no longer exists, except in black & white T.V. shows, where Tennessee Ernie Ford ended his weekly television variety show with a hymn.

C. S. Lewis once observed that popular culture can be likened to "the road into Jerusalem" (what I like to refer to as the "suburbs of Jerusalem.")<sup>29</sup> In other words, a Judeo-Christian culture that resonates with biblical values, symbols and thought processes prepares the mind (if not the heart) to consider the claims of the Gospel. In the West, our Judeo-Christian "suburbs" are being quickly razed to the ground by the all-consuming fires of Post Christian Post Modernism. What does that mean in practical terms? It means that the 10 Commandments must be removed from public buildings, public nativity scenes must go, the Pledge of Allegiance must be attacked, the Boy Scouts must accept atheists (so much for my "God & Country Award") and Christian campus ministries (such as InterVarsity at Rutgers University) must sign agreements not to discriminate on the basis of religion when it comes to the leadership of their groups (!?) or lose their campus status (these are examples of what is known as "deconstructionist Post Modernism"). I could offer more examples (as I try to do each week in my "Post Cards"), but I think you get the point.

History records that in the years leading up to the Third Punic War (ca. 201-156 B.C., against the Carthaginians) the famous Roman orator Cato ended all of his speeches to the Roman Senate, regardless of the subject, with the words, *Ceterum censeo delendam esse Carthaginem* - "Besides, I think that Carthage must be destroyed." So too, in our Post Christian and Post Modern World the spirit of our age seems to end every public discourse with the words, "Besides, I think that the Judeo-Christian suburbs must be razed." Yes, burn the past, and all bridges which connect to it, lest some innocent passerby stop, notice and ask the question, "What do these religious things mean? Is there more to reality beyond what I see here?"

Or in Post Modern terms, "Take the blue pill, Neo. Go back to sleep. There is no matrix and there never was."

"Much that once was is lost, for none now live who remember it."

### The "First Age" of Man: Pre-Modernism

**Philosophy of The Age:** *Credo ut intelligam* ("I believe in order that I might understand")

**Working Assumption:** *Faith in God and His Revelation will explain life in this world.*

**Baseball Analogy Regarding Truth:** "There's balls and there's strikes, and I call 'em the way they are."<sup>80</sup>

In order to fully grasp what has occurred and how we have come to the Post Christian Post Modern world in which we now find ourselves it may be helpful to briefly review some history. Bear with me, and I will try to make this as painless (maybe even interesting?) as possible.<sup>31</sup> Post Modernism did not arrive on the scene full grown and without philosophical parents. Rather, it is the product of 200 years of western philosophical wanderings. In other words, we are the victims of our own

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<sup>29</sup>See "Christianity and Culture" in C.S. Lewis, **Christian Reflections** (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1967, 1995), pp. 12-36.

<sup>30</sup>This baseball analogy was first offered by Walter Truett Anderson, **Reality Isn't What It Used to Be** (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990), p. 75.

<sup>31</sup>It is impossible in such a short space to fully recount the history of the intellectual decline of the west which has found its current expression in Post Modernism. The best overall summary of this decline continues to be Francis Schaeffer's "**How Should We Then Live?**" along with his other books which preceded and led up to this seminal work. I would also highly recommend James Sire's excellent book "**The Universe Next Door**" (4<sup>th</sup> Edition), available from InterVarsity Press.

musings.

People who actually think about this stuff usually designate the period of European history prior to “the Enlightenment” (ca. 1700s) as “Pre-Modernism.” This is a somewhat artificial time-line since one could seriously argue that the artistic Renaissance in southern Europe (primarily Italy of the 1400s) and the Protestant Reformation in northern Europe (of the 1500s) provided the necessary transition period which led up to the Enlightenment. Indeed, I would argue that our current Post Modern culture is the product of 500 years of philosophical and cultural shift, a shift which simply accelerated during the past 200 years of “The Enlightenment Project”. This is important to understand because a cultural shift which has unfolded over 500 years is not going to be “undone” quickly. In Europe, Pre-Modernism was the age of Christendom (i.e., “the Kingdom of Christ”) when most of Europe was conquered by Christianity. It was the “Age of Faith” when common intellectual life could easily be summed up in the phrase *Credo ut intelligam*, “I believe in order that I might understand”<sup>82</sup> In this Pre-Modern Age, truth was regarded as “Objective,” a part of the Divinely created order which existed independent of the individual observer. This truth was regarded as “absolute” and unchanging, the same everywhere at all times for all men. The authority for this truth was 1) Revelation, specifically, the Bible; 2) The Church, which had the sole authority to interpret the Bible; 3) Ancient Authorities (such as the Church Fathers, and later, other ancient authorities); and 4) Scientific investigation (such as it existed) utilizing rational deduction and empirical investigation.

In other words, Christianity provided the “*meta-narrative*” or “all encompassing universal story,” what Francis Schaeffer called “the circle” which explained everything within the circle, and which enabled men to explain life and the world they lived in. But winds of change were blowing, the leading edge of an approaching storm which would soon break upon the western world. The Papal Schism of the late 14<sup>th</sup> and early 15<sup>th</sup> centuries had shaken the people’s faith in the authority of the Roman Church. How could you have 3 elected popes, each anathematizing the others and claiming to speak for God? The fall of Constantinople to the Moslem Turks in 1453 had sent scholars fleeing to Europe with manuscripts of ancient authors previously unknown to European scholars, giving birth to neo-classical studies. The classical world of Aristotle was re-discovered after centuries of neglect, and Arabic writings were translated into Latin. And the Renaissance in northern Europe had given birth to “Renaissance Humanism” and renewed interest in the study of the “humanities.”

### The “Second Age” of Man: Modernism

***Philosophy of The Age:*** *Cogito ergo sum* (“I think, therefore I am”)

***Working Assumption:*** *Man doesn’t need God or His revelation to make sense of the world we live in.*

***Baseball Analogy Regarding Truth:*** *“There’s balls and there’s strikes, and I call ‘em the way I see ‘em.”*

The winds of change blew over Europe for 200 years, picking up speed until they finally arrived with gale force in the “second age” of the West. This “second age” of western man is commonly designated as the “Modern” age or simply as “Modernism.” In terms of time and dates, it began, roughly, with the Enlightenment and ended (intellectually & philosophically) with the “death of God” movement. Someone has described Modernism as the 200 year period from the fall of the Bastille (1789) to the fall of the Berlin wall (1989). But during the time frame in question much more fell than simply an abandoned fortress and a despised wall. Modernism began with the “Enlightenment” and man’s confident quest for independent rational knowledge combined with the questioning of all things Christian, biblical or authoritative. When looked at from an historical perspective, it is nothing short of breath-taking to see what has transpired over these 200 years of Modernism. According to Newbigin, in his survey of these events, “. . . it is clear that by the middle of the eighteenth century there was a widespread feeling that Europe had reached a turning point. Developments which had been going on continuously for several centuries seemed to have reached a point of clarification such that people could only use the word ‘enlightenment’ to describe what had happened. Light had dawned. Darkness had passed away.”<sup>83</sup>

This “Enlightenment” was an exhilarating, semi-religious experience, as its name suggests, in which men saw life and the world differently. In his book ***The Seventeenth Century Background***, Basil Willey suggests that this feeling came from a belief that things which had previously been obscure were now being explained. In place of “Church Dogma” and “unscientific” explanations which no longer satisfied the mind, the “true explanation” of things was now coming to light (hence, “enlightenment”). Intellectual cultures change at the point where the “explanations” provided by the intellectual

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<sup>82</sup>Variously attributed to St. Augustine and St. Anselm.

<sup>83</sup>Newbigin, ***The Other Side of 1984***, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1983) p. 7

## A Kingdom, A People & A River - Page 40

paradigm of the previous age no longer answer the questions being asked in a way which satisfies the mind.<sup>34</sup> As Newbiggin so accurately observed, “All thinking begins with a pain in the mind.”<sup>35</sup> The earth-centered cosmology of Church dogma no longer explained what was being observed in the sky by Gallileo, Copernicus and others. Church dogma offered “*explanations which didn’t explain*” and that caused “*a pain in the mind*” which would not go away.

And so the “Age of Reason” (to borrow Will Durant’s historical title for this time period) was born. It became a period of intellectual life which could be summed up in the phrase *cogito ergo sum* “*I think, therefore, I am,*” the philosophical maxim of Renee Descartes which he arrived at after doubting everything except his own existence.<sup>36</sup> The Modern Age of man was born, founded upon radical doubt and skepticism. In this new Age of Man the very word “doubt,” which in the previous Age had summarized man’s sin of questioning God’s goodness and trustworthiness, was now elevated to a position of honor as the first principle of knowledge.

In this Modern Age, truth was still regarded as “Knowable” (as opposed to “objective”) and it was probably even a part of a Divinely created order which existed independent of the individual observer (although this would be increasingly called into question as the Modern Age proceeded). But the source of this truth now shifted from God’s revelation in Scripture to man’s rational & empirical inquiry independent of God, Scripture or Authority. The focus was now upon “natural law” as apprehended by men. Truth (moral or otherwise) might indeed be “absolute” and unchanging, the same everywhere at all times for all men, but it was now up to man to discover it for himself, without help from God, revelation or the Church. The “authority” for this truth was now Man and his scientific, rational (referring to the mind’s ability to reason) and empirical (referring to the input of man’s 5 senses) investigation. Revelation, the Bible, the Church, ancient authorities and other such appeals to sources of knowledge or authority beyond man himself were at best discounted, and as time went on, increasingly disregarded. And the Church found itself slowly being pushed out of the very cultural house it had worked so long and hard to build.

In the previous Pre-Modern Age, Christianity, Scripture and the Church provided the “meta-narrative” which enabled men to explain and make sense (individually and culturally) of life in this world. It was assumed in the Modern Age a new meta-narrative would eventually emerge from man’s rational and empirical investigation. The history of the 19<sup>th</sup> century became a series of proposed meta-narratives, often competing and contradictory.

Francis Schaeffer described it in terms of all encompassing philosophical “circles”:

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<sup>34</sup>Basil Willey, *The Seventeenth Century Background: Studies in the thought of the age in relation to poetry and religion* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1934), pp. 10f. Willey’s discourse on the nature of “explanations” and their role in intellectual transitions is worth hunting down the book.

<sup>35</sup>Quoted by Tim Stafford, “God’s Missionary To Us,” *Christianity Today*, 40 (14), December 9, 1996, p.26

<sup>36</sup>For a more complete discussion of “the cogito” and its long-term impact upon the Church see Robert C. Greer, *Mapping Postmodernism: A Survey of Christian Options*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

### A Rough Chronology Of Thought (And A Few Critical Definitions)

#### Pre-Modernism

Defined as everything prior to Modernism.  
Christianity Dominant  
**A.D. 1 - 1700**

#### Modernism/Enlightenment

Roughly defined as that two hundred year period of “The Enlightenment Experiment” in Europe & North America during which Christianity, faith & revelation were increasingly rejected in favor of Greek Categories of Rationalism, Empiricism & Radical Skepticism. I define “**modernity**” as the cultural products (medicine, science, art, technology, capitalist economics, democratic political structures, etc.) which arose during and from the Modernism/Enlightenment world view and will probably outlive the collapse of that worldview.

**1700-1900**

#### Post Christian Modernism

A brief period characterized by the conscious rejection of the need for Christianity & a Judeo-Christian worldview while still embracing Modernism/Enlightenment optimism. A brief time of transition, primarily in America

**First half of 1900s**

#### Post Christian Post Modernism

The period of time from World War 2 to the present characterized by a conscious rejection of both Christianity and Modernism/Enlightenment optimism regarding empirical and rational approaches to ultimate truth.

**Mid-1900s until now**

*"The history of this train of non-Christian philosophers could be pictured like this: One man would say, 'Here is a circle which will give the unified and true knowledge of what really is' . . . The next man would say, 'No!' and cross out the circle. Then he would say, 'Here is the circle.' A third would say, 'No!' cross out that circle and say, 'Here is the circle'. And so on through the centuries. Each one showed that the previous philosophers had failed and then tried to construct his answer, which future thinkers would again show to be inadequate to contain all of knowledge and all of like. The older philosophers did not find the circle, but they optimistically believed someone would. Then the line of crossed-out circles was broken, and a drastic shift came. It is this shift that causes modern man to be modern (i.e., read "Post Modern") man."<sup>37</sup>*

### The Impact of Ideas and Rain Drops

One of the problems was that the Church as a whole never really understood or appreciated the long-term impact of ideas. Ideas are like raindrops. Taken individually they appear insignificant and easy to ignore. But over time these raindrops collect and combine together to form streams of thought which in turn combine to form rivers of life and culture. During the 200 (or so) years of the Modern Age, Christianity and western culture were subjected to a constant rainfall of anti-Christian ideas which gained intellectual cultural acceptance. The following are but a few of the key intellects whose thoughts have deeply influenced western thought.

Voltaire, the French "father" of the Enlightenment ridiculed Christianity and introduced radical French skepticism to the colleges and social elite of America following the American Revolution.<sup>38</sup> British Deists philosophized about an impersonal Creator who was distant and uninvolved in the lives of men or nations, except for the "Natural Laws" which He left in place to govern the world.

- ❑ **Rene Descartes (1596 - 1650)** Regarded as the "father of modern philosophy," Descartes gave modern thought its skeptical foundation by doubting everything but his own existence. But beyond that he reduced God to an innate idea and began the separation of God, faith, theology and values into the realm of emotions and "non-reason" on the one hand, while placing philosophy, reason and empirical science in the realm of "fact" and "reason." Descartes expressed this separation best when he said, *"I am a Catholic, I wish to remain one, and I have faith in the teaching of the Church. But I simply bracket all that out: It is in the realm of religious sentiment and emotion, whereas my universal science is in the realm of reason and knowledge."*
- ❑ **David Hume (1711 - 1776)** The Scottish philosopher David Hume established the idea of radical empiricism, namely, that all truth and knowledge derives from the empirical experience of our senses. Because there can be no knowledge or "truth" beyond what our senses perceive, issues such as God's existence, the origin of the universe (i.e., creationism) are unverifiable and meaningless. He challenged the idea of causality (i.e., arguing from effects - such as an orderly universe - back to causes - such as an order-giving Creator), thereby undermining most classical arguments for the existence of God. And morality, Hume argued, is not a matter of fact or reason, but an emotional sentiment based upon feelings of approval or disapproval. Hume's empirical skepticism cast doubt upon the resurrection of Christ, along with all other miraculous phenomenon which could not be empirically verified.
- ❑ **Immanuel Kant (1724 - 1804)** Descartes began the modern separation of truth into "reason" versus "non-reason" with his radical rationalism. Hume accelerated this separation with his emphasis on radical empiricism. But it was Immanuel Kant who brought these two streams of radical skepticism together. By doing so he became the "God-father" of modern skepticism (Philosophers like to say that Hume gave Kant the problem of Knowledge and Kant gave it back as if it were the solution). Kant introduced subjectivism into human knowledge. He acknowledged the radical empiricism of Hume by limiting all human knowledge to the observable "phenomena" which can be apprehended by the 5 senses. But he also acknowledged the radical rationalism of Descartes by arguing that our sense perceptions are interpreted by the 7 Forms and Categories of the mind, leaving the "noumena" or "thing in itself" (including "God") unknowable in any absolute terms. God, truth, faith, morality (all assigned to the realm of the "noumena") could no longer be "disproved" by the "phenomena" of scientific investigation, but His existence couldn't be "proven" either. God, truth, faith, morality and "ultimate meaning" were thereby further separated into the realm of "non-reason."
- ❑ **Georg F. Hegel (1770 - 1831)** Hegel argued for a reality consisting of a pantheistic universal "spirit" which was moving and evolving through a "dialectic" process of two opposing arguments (a "thesis" and an "antithesis") which resolve into a "synthesis." In Hegel's view, all "truth" is simply the current product ("synthesis") of this dialectic

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<sup>37</sup>Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live*, p. 151-152.

<sup>38</sup>Timothy Dwight, the President of Yale University, preached against this Radical French skepticism among the student body of Yale University for seven years beginning in 1795 until a revival broke out among the students in 1802 and resulted in over half the student body professing Christ as Savior.

## A Kingdom, A People & A River - Page 42

process. This philosophy of “dialectic” (which is very much alive in Post Modernism’s view of “truth” today) was “turned on its head” in the dialectical materialism of Karl Marx which challenged and questioned classic Christian economics for nearly 100 years (and counting in some places). Utilizing the evolving dialectic philosophy of Hegel, the evolutionary theorizing of a Charles Darwin provided the theoretical basis for rejecting Classical “creationism” and for explaining the natural order without God, revelation or creation.<sup>39</sup>

- **Soren Kierkegaard (1813 - 1855)** Danish Philosopher Soren Kierkegaard reacted against the impersonal universal spirit of Hegel’s dialectic by arguing for personal choice. Contrary to Hegel, Kierkegaard argued that the individual human will and ability to choose are paramount. They represent an affirmation of one’s own individuality, culminating in a “leap of faith” that elevates the individual above Hegel’s impersonal “universal.” From his journal, Kierkegaard describes this completely subjective personal choice, “*The thing is to find a truth which is true for me, to find the idea for which I can live and die.*” Faith in God becomes both a valid expression of one’s will and ability to choose and an “irrational” leap of faith. Kierkegaard became the “God-father” of the existential school of religious thought. Utilizing Kierkegaard and his predecessors, skeptics of the Bible realized that if God has been relegated to the realm of “non-reason” where His existence can be neither proven nor disproved by critical investigation, then there is no harm in “biblical criticism” which undermines the historic authenticity and accuracy of Scripture.

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century western Christianity (primarily Europe and North America) was ceaselessly pummeled by a constant rain of anti-biblical ideas (I have given only a few of the more prominent ones) which combined to form a river of doubt and skepticism directed at the heart of Christianity. By the opening of the 20<sup>th</sup> century this river of doubt, skepticism and rebellion filled the wells from which Western Civilization drew its drinking water. In many ways, America was spared from the full effects of this deluge for much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. I believe that this was the result of several powerful nationwide spiritual revivals which swept America during the 1800s. But by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century this tide had become inescapable. I was privileged to spend a summer term during my seminary days studying under the late Dr. Carl F. H. Henry, the founding editor of *Christianity Today* magazine and a brilliant Christian apologist. According to Dr. Henry, the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the most radical reversal of ideas and ideals in human history. Dr. Henry observed that at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century textbooks referred to the God of the Bible, and the 10 commandments. There was an emphasis upon revealed values, upon the need for an internal change within man in order to achieve “Utopia.” But by World War 2 something had happened (*Note: The World Wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were as violent philosophically as they were militarily. They shattered the last vestiges of liberal Enlightenment optimism and hastened the conclusion of meaninglessness*). Following WW 2, references suddenly changed from the God of the Bible to “Nature’s God” or “God” in general. Rather than revealed values, the new emphasis was upon shared values. And rather than a change needed in man, the emphasis was placed upon change through education. Finally, in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century all theistic aspects and references to God had been eliminated. God now counted for nothing in education or in public life. Instead of shared values, the emphasis of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century was upon the tolerance of diverse values. Instead of change by education and legislation, the emphasis was upon change through revolution and violence. The optimistic Modernism of 200 years earlier had now become a brief interlude of skeptical Post Christian Modernism. This shift from a Judeo-Christian understanding of the world to an essentially pagan one, a shift from a Judeo-Christian worldview to a “*Post Christian Modern*” one (see box on this page above), which became the dominating characteristic of the Modernism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was relatively swift (particularly in America where much of the change has occurred in the 20<sup>th</sup> century). But it did not arrive unannounced.

This philosophical shift found expression in the writings of the French Calvinist and existentialist theologian from Syracuse, Gabriel Vahanian, who summarized it well in his book, ***The Death of God: The Culture of our Post-Christian Era***. He declared, “*The fundamentals of modern culture are neither non-Christian nor anti-Christian; they are post-Christian. They are derived from Christianity, yet in them Christianity suffers ‘not a torture death but a quiet euthanasia.’ It may be that our age still is religious. But it is certainly post-Christian.*”<sup>40</sup> In his “Introduction” to Vahanian’s work, Professor Paul Ramsey of Princeton boldly announced, “*Ours is the first attempt in recorded history to build a culture upon the premise that God is dead. Dr. Ramsey went on to say, “The period post mortem Dei divides into two distinct eras, roughly at some point between the World Wars. Until that time, the cultural death of God meant something anti-Christian; after it and until now, the death of God means something entirely post-Christian.*” Vahanian emphasized three essential points. He argued that ours is a post-Christian world where (1) “*Christianity has sunk into religiosity,*” (2) “*modern culture is gradually losing the marks of that Christianity which brought it into being and shaped it,*” and (3) “*tolerance has become religious syncretism.*” (sort of hard to argue against those, isn’t it?!). In a subsequent work (“***Wait Without Idols***”) Vahanian explained further, “*This does not mean, obviously, that God Himself no longer is but that, regardless of whether he is or not, his reality, as the*

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<sup>39</sup>According to Roman observers of early Christianity, the doctrine of *ex nihilo* creation (creation of the world from nothing) was one of the cardinal doctrines of the early church and one of the unique contributions of Christianity to the worldview of the ancient world. See Robert L. Wilken, ***The Christians As The Romans Saw Them*** (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

<sup>40</sup>Gabriel Vahanian, ***The Death of God: The Culture of our Post Christian Era*** (New York: George Braziller, 1961) p. xxxiii.

*Christian tradition has presented it, has become culturally irrelevant: God is de trop, as Sarte would say.*<sup>41</sup> Vahanian was not the first philosopher to speak of God's demise or "death." Fredrich Nietzsche had proposed the notion of God's death in his work *"Thus Spake Zarathustra"* a half century earlier. But Vahanian was able to formalize and popularize these thoughts and apply them to the demise of Christianity's influence in western culture. With a stroke of the writer's pen and a wave of the philosopher's wand Vahanian officially ushered in a Post-Christian era. God was now dead. But if God was indeed dead then so was everything to which God gave meaning, including man himself. When God died, modern man died with Him.

### Post Modernism, The Circle and The Line

It cannot be emphasized enough at this point, as we transition in our discussion from the Modern Age to the Post Christian Post Modern Age, that it is impossible to understand our Post Christian Post Modern culture if we do not understand the "circle of life" and the "line of despair". Let's begin by imagining or drawing a circle. That circle represents the totality of our reality - the universe in a circle. If anything exists, it exists within that circle. God, the supernatural realm, the created order and mankind are all included in the circle. In Pre-Modernism all of these things were regarded, for the most part, as both co-existing in the universe and as knowable by man (theology was even regarded as the "Queen of the Sciences"! ). But during Modernism and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Age of Man, this began to change. As men began to reject revelation in favor of radical empiricism and rationalism, men began to draw a line (very faint at first) across the "Circle of Life." It was the line between "reason," which filled the bottom portion of the circle, and "non-reason," which filled the upper portion of the circle. Slowly but steadily, following the march of one modern philosopher/scientist after another, such concepts as God, theology, faith & moral absolutes became increasingly relegated to the upper portion of the Circle of Life, the realm of "non-reason".

This was the warning message trumpeted by Dr. Francis Schaeffer in his many works (see particularly his excellent book **"Escape From Reason"**). Dr. Schaeffer explained the issue by following Kant's division of reality into the "phenomenal" world of science and the "noumenal" world of God, meaning, value, etc. Reality, Dr. Schaeffer explained, had become a two-story house. God dwelt in the "upper" story (the "noumenal") where He was immune from being either proven or disproved. Man, however, dwelt in the "lower" story of scientifically observable "phenomena." The line which had begun very faintly with a Descartes, grew darker and more pronounced as time progressed. Increasingly, as time went on, these two "stories" (or two halves of the "Circle of Life" in our illustration) became separated by an impenetrable "line of despair," below which men "despaired" of every achieving any meaningful knowledge of God. Not only could man not know God (or meaning or absolutes or values), but God could no longer affect man in any practical and meaningful way. God, for all practical purposes, had died (hence, the "Death of God" school of thought). But so had everything to which God's existence had given meaning. When God died, modern man, values, meaning and Judeo-Christian culture (this is Vahanian's argument) died with Him. In his often overlooked but important book, ***Death In The City***, written ten years before the declaration of the "Moral Majority," Dr. Schaeffer warned us that there was no Moral Majority, *"Ours is a post-Christian world in which Christianity, not only in the number of Christians but in cultural emphasis and cultural result, is now in the absolute minority. To ask young people to maintain the status quo is folly. The status quo is no longer ours."*<sup>42</sup>

Our Post Christian Post Modern culture represents the cultural expression of a people and civilization who now live their collective lives beneath this "line of despair." This dividing line may be invisible to the naked eye, but is the very real "brass heaven" that dictates the terms of life for our Post Modern culture. If God does exist (they will grudgingly allow for this "non-rational" possibility) on the other side of this "brass heaven" there is no rational or empirical way to know him in any meaningful (i.e., "reasonable") way, nor can God affect life on this side of the "line of despair" in any meaningful way. We are reduced to nothing more than verbal religious chattering about our personal subjective experience of and opinions about God. Creationism, prayer, traditional biblical morality and other Judeo-Christian values cannot be taught, practiced, recognized or enforced because, being religious in nature, they are BY DEFINITION issues and items of a non-rational faith and matters of strictly individual personal opinion. In our Post Christian Post Modern culture, any appeal to Judeo-Christian values (even on the basis of appealing to our historic heritage as a "once-Christian Civilization") is regarded as an appeal to "non-reason" that cannot rise above the intellectual level of emotional sentiment.

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<sup>41</sup>Gabriel Vahanian, ***Wait Without Idols*** (New York: George Braziller, 1964) p. 31-32. Vahanian initiated the "Death of God" debates, but he was quickly regarded as too "conservative." He was quickly overshadowed by more radical "theathanatologists" such as Harvey Cox of Harvard, Thomas J.J. Altizer and Rabbi Richard L. Rubenstein, the Jewish "death of God" theologian who wrote ***After Auschwitz***. I personally heard Rabbi Rubenstein lecture on the topic of *"After Auschwitz: God is Dead"* when I was a student at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill in the 1970s. These were then followed by Joseph Fletcher and the "situational ethics" debates of the 1960s and 70s, which were the precursors of and laid the foundation for the "Values Clarification" debacle which made it into the public educational system in the 1980s and 90s. For an excellent treatment of the "death of God" movement and its implications for the Church see John Warwick Montgomery, ***The Suicide of Christian Theology*** (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1970).

<sup>42</sup>Francis A. Schaeffer, ***Death In The City*** (Chicago: Inter-Varsity Press, 1969), p. 14

### The “Third Age of Man”: Post Christian Post Modernism

*Philosophy of The Age: Copula ergo sum (“I have sex, therefore I am”)*

**Working Assumption:** *There is no “ultimate truth,” so each of us must find what is true for us personally.*

**Baseball Analogy Regarding Truth:** *“There may be balls and strikes, but they ain’t nothin’ til I call ‘em.”*

There is an unavoidable irony to be grasped in the death of Modernism and the birth of Post Modernism. As we observed earlier, Modernism, The “Second Age” of Man, was born because of a *“pain in the mind”* created by Pre-Modernism’s inability to provide *“explanations which explained.”* Ironically, Modernism died at the hands of the same fate which destroyed the Pre-Modern Age. After more than two centuries of empirical investigation and rational skepticism, of observations and doubts, Modernism was unable to provide *“explanations which explained”* those questions which most plague the human heart and cause *“a pain in the mind”*: What is the meaning of life? Why am I here? What is truth? Am I alone in the Universe, or is there something more? These were the questions which Modernism could not answer and did not dare to address. Modernism’s inability to answer or even address these questions created *“a pain in the mind”* which could not be ignored.

In another irony, we observed that Modernism was also *“the Age of Reason,”* founded upon the concept of radical doubt and skepticism. But as Newbigin observed in his critique of western thought, *“It is impossible to doubt all one’s beliefs at the same time without falling into imbecility.”*<sup>43</sup> Modernism, the Age of Reason, the Second Age of Man, had indeed *“fallen into imbecility,”* a victim of its own unique form of *“cultural cannibalism,”* the consumption of everything, including faith, and the production of nothing but doubt. By doubting everything, it produced nothing worthy of *“belief,”* and in the end, consumed the very values it had set out to affirm. Even the value of doubt. Michael Polanyi summarized it best:

*“The critical movement which seems to be nearing the end of its course today was perhaps the most fruitful effort ever sustained by the human mind. The past four or five centuries, which have gradually destroyed or overshadowed the whole mediaeval cosmos, have enriched us mentally and morally to an extent unrivaled by any period of similar duration. But its incandescence has fed on the combustion of the Christian heritage in the oxygen of Greek rationalism, and when the fuel was exhausted, the critical framework itself burnt away.”*<sup>44</sup>

### A Post Christian Post Modern Quiz - Reprise

Are you starting to get the picture now? O.K. Let’s try this Post Christian Post Modern quiz thing one more time. Here’s the question. It’s a matching question: Which one of the following two TV programs was *“Modern & Post Christian”* and which one was *“Post Christian and Post Modern”*: **“Star Trek”** (the original series) and **“Star Trek: The Next Generation.”** Still stumped? Hang on. The epitome of Post Christian Modernism finally arrived, not in Woodstock, but in **“Star Trek”** (the original series) and its *“prophet,”* Mr. Spock, for whom truth was determined through empirical scientific observation combined with ruthless incisive rational logic (for a Vulcan, Spock was very *“Greek”*). *“Where the laws of logic do not work,”* he once declared, *“there can be no reality.”* (O.K., I don’t remember the episode number, but if you insist I can look it up!).

Post Christian Modernism ended with the death of God and with the death of man’s ability to rationally discover or know any absolute truth or the ultimate nature of reality. Modernism had begun with the belief that rational man, independent of God or divine revelation, could discover the unifying truth, the *“meta-narrative,”* the *“big story”* that would explain the universe and provide the basis for meaning and morality. Modernism died a Post-Christian death when it finally realized that there was no unified field, no meta-narrative, no *“ultimate truth”* and, ultimately, no basis for a universally binding morality. The all encompassing *“meta-narratives”* of Modernism (Darwinism, dialectical materialism, communism, et. al.) lay tattered and discredited in the ash-bin of history. The optimistic rationalism of the enlightenment had failed to discover the truth of the universe and was being replaced with the black holes of personal narcissism, nihilism, existentialism, drug induced spirituality, new age spirituality and worse. According to Post Christian Post Modern thought there are no universal truths which are universally binding on all men everywhere. There are only facts to be discovered and personal *“stories”* or opinions as to what those facts might mean to me. Modernism’s failed search for *“Universal”* or *“Ultimate”* truth had been replaced with Post Modernism’s search for *“personal truth.”*

So, when the star ship Enterprise sailed again in **“Star Trek: The Next Generation”** the rational empiricism and incisive logic of Mr. Spock had been replaced with Lt. Commander *“Data,”* an android. The incisive modern logic of Spock had found

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<sup>43</sup>Newbigin, *The Other Side 1984*, p. 20

<sup>44</sup>Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards A Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1958) pp. 265ff.

its ultimate expression in a walking, talking computer which looked human but wasn't. It was Modernism's fascination with science taken to its logical de-humanizing conclusion (But a fascinating sub-theme throughout the series was Data's relentless desire to become "human"). But there was also a new crew-member: Counselor Deana Troi, a half-human female "Betazoid" who discerned truth via telepathy, empathy and feelings. She represented the epitome of Post Christian Post Modernism's reach into subjectivity in search of "truth." So, in Post Modernism, you could still be religious or "spiritual" (it is interesting that themes of "religion" and "spirituality" were worked into the plot of the "Star Trek" spin-off series "Deep Space Nine") but that was your personal story, meaningful to you, but having no universal appeal or significance. There is no absolute or universally binding truth, whether in morality, spirituality, politics, sociology or any other field of human endeavor. There are merely facts, experiences and our personal, subjective interpretation of and feelings about those facts and experiences. *In Post Christian Post Modernism, in a very real sense, it really is "all about me, my experiences and how I feel."*

### Post Modernism Versus Theological Bellbottoms

Certainly the Church was not completely silent or inactive while Post Modernism was "coming into its own," but often the response of the Church was late in coming. In the words of Charles Colson, too many contemporary churchmen sport "theological bellbottoms." The late 1970s witnessed the formation of the "Moral Majority" and the rise of the "conservative religious right" in an attempt to rally the Church both to engage the political process and to stem the tide of moral decay that was now apparent. In other words, it was a declaration that the Church and its "allies" (i.e., those individuals who were "conservative" in their morals, even if they were not "Christian" in their convictions) were prepared to wage a cultural "war of attrition" against the rising neo-paganism of contemporary American culture.

The pinnacle of the response was reached in the election of Ronald Reagan in what was hailed as the "conservative revolution." But shortly after the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan for his first term as President, Dr. Francis Schaeffer wrote a book entitled ***A Christian Manifesto***. In this much-neglected book Dr. Schaeffer, reflecting on the "conservative landslide" which ushered Reagan into office, warned that, in reality, the landslide was probably a vote for better economic numbers, not a vote for Christian values or conservative policies. In the event those better economic numbers should fail to materialize, Dr. Schaeffer warned that we could see a dramatic reversal in voter attitudes. Dr. Schaeffer's prophetic warning was realized in the 1992 election of Bill Clinton.

The intellectual father of the Moral Majority, and a "founding father" of the "conservative religious right," was a man by the name of Paul Weyrich, now President of the Free Congress Foundation. In February of 1999, shortly after the United States Senate failed to convict and impeach President Bill Clinton, Weyrich sent an open letter to his constituents

### Eight (8) Critical Post Modern Premises

***The Deconstruction of Truth*** - According to Post Modern philosopher Richard Rorty, Truth is made (socially constructed), not found (objective and discoverable). Social groups (such as Christians) construct their own "truth" to serve their own interests, which usually involves exercising power over other people. Hence, *"The Jesus Project"* which views the "divine Jesus" as a something constructed by Paul and the early church.

***The Death of the Meta-Narrative*** - Because all "truths" are only "social constructs" there can be no universal truths or "metanarratives" which are true and binding on all men everywhere. There are only "personal narratives."

***The Demise of the Text*** - If the Metanarrative is dead, then the great texts (i.e., the Bible) behind the metanarrative must also be dead. All texts must now be "deconstructed" to reveal the author's oppressive intentions and allow the text to live as a liberated and liberating word. Texts now mean whatever we want them to mean, not limited by the author's intent, the ordinary and contextual definition of words or other principles of interpretation.

***The Dominion of Therapy*** - "When truth is denied, therapy remains." The crucial question is no longer "Is it true?" but "Does it make me feel good?". All issues eventually revolve around the self. Categories such as "sin" and "repentance" are rejected as "oppressive" and "harmful" to self-esteem. Even theology is reduced to therapy, as we seek a "God" who will make us happy and fulfilled.

***The Decline of Authority*** - All authorities (church, state, school, etc.) are, by nature, oppressive and must be overthrown, or at least resisted, in the quest for personal liberation, except the authority of the Post Modern theorists themselves, who are somehow above it all.

***The Displacement of Morality*** - As Ivan, in Dostoyevsky's *"The Brothers Karamazov"* observed, if God is dead, everything is permitted. Post Modern philosopher Michel Foucault argued that all sexual morality is an abuse of power and personally lived a lifestyle of "polymorphous perversity."

***The Triumph of Subjectivity*** - In true Post-Kantian fashion Post Modernism has moved the focus of "truth" from the "object" (i.e., the Bible and what it teaches) to the "subject" (i.e., what I feel about the Bible and what I have personally experienced). In our Post Modern culture, everything really is "all about me." As a result we hear people say, "Christianity is true for you, but not for me" Or as Oprah Winfrey open declares, *"The secret to life is discovering your personal truth and living it out."*

***The Return of Doubt*** - We have gone from the "I think, therefore I am" of the Enlightenment, to a new "I doubt, there I'm going to a therapist" of Post Modern "endarkenment".

**Footnote:** My thanks, again to Dr. Albert Mohler and his excellent article "Ministry Is Stranger Than It Used To Be: The Challenge of Postmodernism" (posted at [www.albertmohler.com](http://www.albertmohler.com)) for the first 6 premises. The last two are my own, so blame me if

## A Kingdom, A People & A River - Page 46

announcing that, in his opinion, cultural conservatives (including many Evangelical Christians) had lost their “cultural war of attrition” which he had helped launch some twenty years earlier:

*“In looking at the long history of conservative politics, from the defeat of Robert Taft in 1952, to the nomination of Barry Goldwater, to the takeover of the Republican Party in 1994, I think it is fair to say that conservatives have learned to succeed in politics. That is, we got our people elected. But that did not result in the adoption of our agenda. The reason, I think, is that politics itself has failed. And politics has failed because of the collapse of the culture. The culture we are living in becomes an ever-wider sewer. In truth, I think we are **caught up in a cultural collapse of historic proportions, a collapse so great that it simply overwhelms politics.**”<sup>45</sup>*




### Post Modernism And The Land Without Boundaries

The shift from Post Christian Modernism to Post Christian Post Modernism, which Dr. Henry described and which we witnessed in America during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, represents a cultural collapse of historic proportions which has simply overwhelmed everything in its path. Enlightenment-based Modernism had argued that “ultimate truth” could indeed exist, but our knowledge of it was problematic. Post Christian Post Modernism took the next “logical” step by declaring that there is no ultimate or universal truth, no universal values or morality, no “big stories” to explain life and the universe (Although environmentalism seems to be becoming our “post modern meta-narrative”). Post Modernism represents not simply the loss of the knowledge of absolute truth in our culture; **it represents the loss of the possibility and the hope for any universal or ultimate truth.**

Today, some 40 years after the announcement of “the Death of God”, the Church is still reeling from the impact of these ideas. The Death of God announced in the previous generation has resulted in the death of ultimate truth or moral absolutes in the present generation. Gone is the Judeo-Christian commitment to Universal, Ultimate truth which once provided the moral compass for an entire culture, and gone is the Enlightenment optimism that such ultimate truth and meaning will be found apart from God. For if God is truly dead, then the heavens are silent and there is no divine voice to tell man what is morally right or morally wrong.

Now, because all morals are relative and none are absolute, all arguments and discussions regarding right versus wrong (ranging from such “mundane” issues as school dress codes to such issues as homosexuality, abortion, pornography, pedophilia, human stem cell research, euthanasia, race relations, etc.) are matters of individual opinion (“I have a right to . . .”). And all opinions become equally valid, since the passionate holding and voicing of an opinion on any topic is a self-validating act. Because there is no “Ultimate” truth by which to demonstrate that one moral opinion is valid over another, the result is the current “politically correct” philosophy of “tolerance.” **Tolerance is the admission that there is no Ultimate truth by which arguments and differences of opinion can be resolved.** The Ultimate or Universal truth of God’s moral requirements and expectations has been replaced by the new personal and relative truth of “tolerance.” And those dissenting voices who proclaim ultimate truth and the need for personal repentance and internal change (such as homosexuals repenting of their sin and experiencing a new birth) are regarded as “intolerant.” Intolerance has become the new “cardinal sin” of our politically correct Post Christian Post Modern Age.

Like those Churchmen who sport theological bellbottoms in an age of Italian silk suits, much of the evangelical Church has discovered itself to be out of touch with a generation that has drunk deeply at tainted wells, polluted by a river of moral doubt and skepticism born of intellectual rainstorms from decades past. In a Christian version of Rip van Winkle, we fell asleep in Church and awoke one day to find ourselves in a Post Christian Post Modern culture that no longer recognizes the values and principles that we were taught to live by. The Church has belatedly discovered that the tainted wells of our Post Christian Post Modern culture have had a dramatic effect upon the Church itself.

-  Today only 32% of born again adults (and 9% of born again teenagers) claim to be certain of absolute moral truth(!?). Read that again! That’s like saying only one-in-three born again Christians believe the Bible to be ultimately and universally true!
-  Not surprisingly in the light of this collapse of moral absolutes, born again adults are **more** likely to experience a divorce (27%) than are non-born again adults (24%).
-  In a nationwide survey of born again adults, **none** of those interviewed said that the single most important goal in their life is to be a committed follower of Jesus Christ (because such a commitment would require

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<sup>45</sup>The September 6, 1999 issue of **Christianity Today** magazine reprinted Mr. Weyrich’s letter, along with responses by six leading evangelicals, including Ralph Reed, Cal Thomas, Jerry Falwell, Don Eberly (his response is particularly good), James Dobson and Charles Colson. These are a “must read.”

an unshakeable conviction that the Bible is ultimate and universal truth!).

- ✎ 68% believe the Bible teaches that God helps those who help themselves (it doesn't!).
- ✎ 25% believe that Jesus committed sins while on earth (He didn't!).
- ✎ 30% believe Jesus was not physically resurrected (He was, or our faith is in vain!).
- ✎ 30% believe all religions teach the same basic truths (no, they don't).

**Gene Veith, dean of the School of Arts and Sciences at Concordia University,** tells of a young man who claimed to be a Christian and professed belief in Christ and love for the Bible, but also believed in reincarnation. His pastor confronted this belief in reincarnation by directing the young man to Hebrews 9:27. The text was read: *"It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment."* The young man looked back at his pastor and replied, *"Well, that's your interpretation."*

*Dr. Albert Mohler, "Ministry is Stranger Than It Used To Be: The Challenge of Postmodernism" posted at [www.albertmohler.com](http://www.albertmohler.com).*

Based on these research results it should come as no surprise that authors Hatch and Barna conclude that *"the church is rotting from the inside out, crippled by a-biblical theology"* (perhaps because more people get their "Post Modern theology" from Oprah Winfrey or Rush Limbaugh than from their pastor). In a separate study of "born again" Christians sociologist Wade Clark Roof<sup>46</sup> confirms that many people who describe themselves as "born again Christians" actually hold beliefs that are in conflict with historic, biblical Christianity. According to Roof, roughly 25% of his respondents believed in the possibility of communicating with the dead; some 30% believed in reincarnation and astrology; 50% said they believed in psychic powers, and mirroring Barna & Hatch's research, some 50% believed that the various religions of the world are "equally good and true" (a "consistent" conclusion if you don't believe the Bible is ultimately and universally true).

In short, while 4 out of 10 adults (or 41%) in our Post-Christian culture profess to be born-again, and while many of these claim to be conservative, they are not walking it out in any way that meaningfully affects the surrounding society. For example, in a recent story on pop stars and their faith, "The St. Petersburg Times" noted that in their sexually suggestive videos and latest single, "Bootylicious," popular R&B trio Destiny's Child, who declare their Christianity in nearly every interview, contradict all the talk about God. *"Christians who happen to be bootylicious,"* the newspaper observed. *"Nope. No matter how you work it, these two words don't sound right together."* Besides Destiny's Child, Lauryn Hill, R. Kelly, Britney Spears, DMX and Sean "P. Diddy" Combs are other secular artists who frequently voice their religious convictions in public. But the "Times" observed that *"their lyrics and public lifestyles don't always jibe with traditional religious beliefs of right and wrong."*

Commenting on the apparent inability of contemporary Christians to meaningfully affect their culture, Christian trend watcher George Barna recently observed, *"believers think of themselves as individuals first, Americans second, and Christians third. Until that prioritization is rearranged, the Church will continue to lose influence, and biblical principles will represent simply one more option among the numerous worldviews that Americans may choose from."*

This is what it means to live in a Post Christian Post Modern culture. ***It is to live in a land with no recognizable boundaries!***

### Post Modernism And The Mission of The Church

There is a fair degree of uncertainty among various ministry practitioners regarding how to respond to the challenge of Post Modernism. This uncertainty can be seen in two of the articles I have referenced in this section by Dr. Albert Mohler of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Dr. Mohler's analysis of Post Modern is incisive and helpful. But they lack anything approaching a practical response. Dr. Mohler resorts to such evangelical rhetorical "truisms" as declaring that Christians need *"to proclaim the truth and reach out to the casualties."* Yes, BUT HOW?! Again Dr. Mohler offers more "Christian catch phrases" when he observes that we are called *"to stand against the stream and to press against the grain,"* and that *"Our challenge is to match truth to compassion, and mercy to confrontation."*<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>Wade Clark Roof, ***Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*** (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>47</sup>Dr. R. Albert Mohler, *"Transforming Culture: Christian Truth Confronts Post-Christian America"* posted at [www.albertmohler.com](http://www.albertmohler.com).

## A Kingdom, A People & A River - Page 48

And Dr. Mohler isn't alone. In recent years, a steady stream of articles and books have flowed from such sources as **Christianity Today** and **Youthworker** magazine (a "postmodernism" search on either of their websites will yield numerous hits). Complete websites such as [www.leonardsweet.com](http://www.leonardsweet.com) or [www.theooze.com](http://www.theooze.com) or [tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com](http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com) (just to name three among MANY) are dedicated to discussing Post Modernism and how we as believers and as churches should respond. Writing in **Youthworker** magazine, Andy Harrington summed up the present Post Modern situation well in an article entitled "*Who Stole My Rule Book?: How the World Evolved When No One Was Looking.*"<sup>48</sup> Here is how he described the current environment in which the church finds itself today:

*"To some it seems like a world gone crazy - a world where truth doesn't mean what it use to and values are judged on the basis of the latest trend. It's a society where individualism is idealized, where it's okay to be what you want to be, and where the only unforgivable sin is to be intolerant of somebody's else's beliefs. There are no big stories that explain the meaning of life anymore. Anyone who tries to tell the Christian one is dismissed as irrelevant and bigoted, part of a world that should be consigned to the recycle bin, just like the 100 Hotmail spam letters that we delete every day without reading."*

By this point in this discussion you may feel like Jay Risner, also writing in Youthworker Magazine, "*Did you ever play that gave with your students where you have a relay race with watermelons covered in Crisco? Slippery. It seems I just can't hold onto it; I can't get my arms around it. This whole postmodern thing is just so obtuse and heady at times, and as with all of our modern paradigms for the most part, postmodernism can be like a greasy melon - slippery.*"

Yep. Sometimes you get that feeling. Risner goes on to say, "*As youth workers, it's important that we see what the secular culture and the academy are saying and forecasting, but it doesn't mean the gospel has to fit perfectly within the new philosophy. If there's anything true of the gospel through the ages, it's that it certainly transcends philosophy.*"<sup>49</sup> Risner makes an important point here. The gospel (and the Kingdom of God) transcends philosophy. Since the early days of Modernism's attack on Christianity, Christians have made the repeated mistake of hitching their intellectual wagon to a particular school of philosophy which (they thought) promised to establish the validity of the gospel beyond dispute, or at least make it acceptable to the prevailing philosophical culture. The Presbyterian adoption of "Scottish Common Sense Realism" or the Barthian/Neo-Orthodox flirtation with continental existentialism are just two examples which pop to mind. Any attempt to produce a "Post Modern Christianity" would be another such ill-conceived example. As Christians we must remember that, at the end of the debates and discussions of Post Modernism, the gospel and the Kingdom transcend any earthly philosophy. It is important that we understand them. It is equally important that we not become like them. Our goal is to communicate, not to emulate.

But for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christian working to come to terms with his or her cultural environment, it's like waking up in the middle of a game of baseball and discovering that all the rules have been changed. The game still resembles baseball, but that resemblance ends when the next pitch across the plate (high, wide and outside the strike zone) is greeted with the cry of "Good try - maybe a personal best!" from someone pretending to be an umpire. So, exactly what are the "rules" of this new "Post Modern" game and how do they affect the mission and work of the Church? The following is a basic overview (for a more detailed comparison see "**A Post Modern Comparison**" at the end of this Module):

Let's be clear now that there is no such thing as a "Post Modern Church." The idea of a "Post Modern Church" is an oxymoron on the same level as a "Christian heavy metal band" or a "death of God theologian." There is only the New Testament Church seeking to find a means of expressing authentic biblical truth in a form that is relevant to the Post Modern culture of which we are a part.

Our Post Modern culture presents a host of spiritual challenges to the church, challenges which I believe God intends to answer with a new paradigm of "churches without walls" including house churches, marketplace gatherings and more (we will examine the DNA of this new paradigm in Module 4).



**Cross-Cultural Outreach** - Because of the rise of our Post Christian Post Modern culture, **all** Christian outreach today, even if it is simply reaching out to neighbors across the street, is now cross-cultural because ours is no longer a shared, common, "Christian" culture. According to Newbigin there are two pitfalls of cross-cultural missions which we must work to avoid:

□ **Irrelevance** - This means we so fail to understand the nature of our Post Christian Post Modern culture that our message appears irrelevant and is ignored;

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<sup>48</sup>Andy Harrington, "*Who Stole My Rule Book,*" **Youthworker**, Nov/Dec 2003, posted on the internet at [www.youthspecialties.com/articles/topics/postmodernism/rule\\_book.php](http://www.youthspecialties.com/articles/topics/postmodernism/rule_book.php)?

<sup>49</sup>Jay Risner, "*Having a (Purpose Driven, Seeker Sensitive, Family Based,) Postmodern Ministry,*" **Youthworker**, Nov/Dec 2003, posted on the internet at [www.youthspecialties.com/articles/topics/postmodernism/having\\_postmodern.php](http://www.youthspecialties.com/articles/topics/postmodernism/having_postmodern.php)?

## Module 2: Post-Modernism & A Pain In The Mind - Page 49

❑ Syncretism - This means we embrace our Post Modern culture in such an uncritical way that our message is simply absorbed without posing a radical challenge to our culture. This is called “syncretism” and much of organized Christianity in America and the West is in an advanced state of syncretism. Our culture, for the most part, has absorbed our Christian “sub-culture” and now simply ignores our message.

✍ Experiential Truth - For a Post Modern, truth is what you see. It’s what *works*, not what can be *proved*. A true Post Modern wants an “experience of the truth” before considering “the truth of the experience.” They want to “eat the bread.” Let me illustrate. For just a moment, think of the Church as a “bakery” with a sign out front which invites passer-bys to stop in saying, “*Fresh bread served every Sunday.*” A hungry and curious Post Modern responds and comes in (as they did after 9/11) asking, “*Where’s the bread?*” A very polite, even friendly greeter explains that he is welcome (visitors are always welcome) to attend a Sunday School class with other Post Moderns where there will be an in-depth study of bread recipes along with skits (very “avant garde”) acting out the meaning of those recipes. Afterwards, he is invited to discuss the recipes over an espresso in the fellowship hall (recently remodeled for this very purpose). Then, in the morning’s main message, the Praise Band is going to teach some new contemporary songs about bread and recipes, and the Pastor is going to preach a message about the importance of bread (even examining bread recipes written in Greek and Hebrew!). The poor bewildered Post Modern soon discovers that this group is very knowledgeable about bread and its various recipes, but few people there have actually baked, and even fewer have ever eaten, any actual fresh bread. There is no actual fresh warm bread to be consumed. Only recipes to be endlessly discussed. And the bewildered Post Modern moves on, saying to himself, “*I hear the HaraKrishna’s have bread. Maybe I’ll check them out next.*” The challenge to the church is that we need to be able to personally model experiential Biblical truth and to be able to offer it to others in a way they can both understand and experience.

✍ Dialogue vs. Preaching - Post Moderns don’t want to be talked down to by someone in a pulpit standing “four feet above contradiction.” They want to be part of something, part of a dialogue about life and truth. Unfortunately, many Christians today do not know how to carry on a genuine dialogue about what they believe. We’re generally too busy trying to make our next point, rather than actually listening to what the other person has to say. The New Testament has much to say about dialogue (the Greek word is *dialegomai*) and we will examine it further in Module 7)

✍ Relationships & Community - Post Moderns are looking for genuine relationships. They are increasingly searching for authentic relationships and for experiencing truth as part of a community. In New Testament terms this is called *koinonia*, and we will examine it more closely in Module 4 when we examine the DNA of Kingdom House Church ministry.

✍ Personal Stories - Post Modern people want to be heard. They want to be able to tell their own personal life stories and to express their opinions. This desire of our Post Modern culture to be heard has given rise to the internet phenomenon known as “the blog,” the epitome of our Post Modern culture’s turn toward subjectivity. The “blogosphere” (as it has come to be known) consists of countless on-line journals in which people express their “self-validating” opinions on life, politics, sex, church, spirituality and everything imaginable. After all, for a Post Modern there are no “big stories” which give life meaning. There is only their personal story which they are trying to work out through the expression of self-validating opinions which then constitute their “personal truth.” For our part, as Christians we must be willing to listen non-judgmentally and with genuine compassion, while seeking to demonstrate how their personal stories relate to God’s unfolding meta-story of love, sin and redemption.

✍ Spirituality As A Journey - For the past 150 years or so American Christianity has emphasized spirituality as a “decision” followed by a membership (i.e., someone makes a “decision” for Christ and is then encouraged to “join” the church), whereas, Scripture regards spirituality as a “journey” into the Kingdom of God which combines ongoing faith with ongoing obedience. Post Modernism may yet challenge the Church to recover its own spiritual heritage of understanding true spirituality as a journey of faith and obedience into the heart of God.

### Whence? Where? Whither? Post Modernism and The Winter of Our Collective Discontent

America and Western Civilization have now entered into the winter of our collective discontent. Gone are the carefully crafted categories of inquisitive rational Enlightenment thinking which promised that truth (i.e., about God, the Bible, life, morals, society, etc.) was something available to those who are willing to work hard to find it, something that would always give itself “to diligent study, methodical inquiry, unbiased interrogation;” something that “responds to scientific methods of discovery.”

## A Kingdom, A People & A River - Page 50

And Christian Apologetics, epitomized by such people as Josh McDowell, which has prided itself in its ability to use Enlightenment categories to demonstrate the truthfulness of the Gospel, is now finding itself tossed out by our Post Modern audience like the proverbial baby in a tub of rational and empirical Enlightenment bath water.

But Post Modernism itself is not a permanent state of affairs. Neither a person nor a culture can live in an on-going state of moral and spiritual imbecility (to revisit Newbigin's observation) without falling into complete ruin at some unpredictable point. For this reason alone, Post Modernism must be viewed not as a destination, but as a wayfarer's station. It's like the international transit lounge of a large airport. It isn't a destination; it's merely a temporary place where you can wait for your connecting flight. Your destination lies somewhere else. So, as author Andrew Jones observes, we are in a time of transition. Post Modernism isn't a destination but merely a transition time between the old paradigm that has been dying a slow death and the new emerging paradigm that is yet to be born. Here is how Jones sees it: *"Cultures do not shift immediately from one major paradigm to the next. There is a transitional period that includes a rethinking of the previous paradigm, an acknowledgment of its limitations, a deconstruction, an exploration of new thinking to explain a new reality, an adoption of new ideas, a re-mixing of multiple viewpoints, and eventually a radically different group consensus. This transition period could last a hundred years before the majority of people hold it to be the new dominant paradigm. I believe we are in such a time as this. Possibly half way through, if this change started in the 1960's. Paul Ray believes that in the early 1960's, only 4% held to the value system of the Cultural Creatives. Today a quarter of Americans would hold to that paradigm and no doubt the number would be much higher among youth, artists, and media influencers. Brian MacLaren says that 80% of young people have already transitioned into a postmodern mind set and 20% of older people. Postmodernity is the water we swim in. It is not a case of whether we like or not. Or agree with it or not. It is here. It exists. It just IS."*<sup>50</sup>

In a commentary entitled *"The Postmodern Crackup,"* published in **Christianity Today**, Chuck Colson has argued that cracks may have appeared in the Postmodern facade. *"September 11, theologian Michael Novak says, was the beginning of the end for Postmodern preeminence. People are beginning to realize postmodern presuppositions simply don't work. And what are those presuppositions? Postmodernists claim we can have no "grand metanarrative" that makes sense of reality. Since there's no such thing as truth, all principles are merely personal preferences. As professor Ed Veith explains, the postmodernist claims that all you can do is try to impose your preferences on others before they impose theirs on you. But then came September 11, the day terrorists imposed their preferences, murdering 3,000 innocent Americans. If one's worldview is true, it has to conform to reality - to our real-life experiences. Post 9/11, few Americans could continue believing that there's no such thing as moral truth, no such thing as good and evil."*<sup>51</sup>

Is Colson right? Only time will tell, but the crowds which came to church following 9/11 soon left, and the lasting impact of 9/11 on our Post Christian Post Modern culture is yet to be fully understood. But Colson's observation provides us with a good reason for a Post Modern reality check. Much of our Post Christian Post Modern world has looked at Christianity (as they perceive it) and has walked away disillusioned. Episcopal scholar Os Guinness relates his conversation with a well-known network news anchor who described how, when he was personally searching for spiritual truth, he was turned off to Christianity by . . . the hate mail he had received . . . from professing Christians. When the experience of our lifestyle doesn't live up to our explanation of the Gospel, the disconnect can be devastating to a Post Modern audience for whom a genuine experience of truth is at least as important as a clear explanation of truth. If the Post Modern House Church movement is to have a future as a genuine new wineskin in our Post Modern world, then it must become a place where genuine Christianity, what Francis Schaeffer called "True Spirituality," is authentically lived out in the lives of believers. Our House Churches must become places where the genuine experience of God's Kingdom Presence (EXPERIENCE) combines with the absolute truth of God's Word (TRUTH), resulting in genuine personal transformation that overflows into our neighborhoods and our communities. Community transformation will never occur apart from the transformation of individual believers, our homes and the churches which gather there.

### Augustine, "Plausibility Structures" & The Kingdom of God

*"All thinking begins with a pain in the mind."* For the Roman Empire that pain climaxed in the year A.D. 410. In August of the year A.D. 410 the city of Rome was besieged and sacked by Alaric I, King of the Visigoths. A disgruntled slave opened the gate of the ancient city, the Goths poured in, and for the first time in 800 years the great city was taken by an enemy. Rome's fall had a devastating effect upon Roman Christians and non-believers alike. Why, they asked, should the city whose beauty and power men had built and admired through the many centuries, and which was now the center of Christendom (i.e., the "kingdom of Christ." Remember, Constantine had legalized and adopted Christianity almost 100 years earlier) be ravaged by the barbarians? Many Christians were shaken in their faith. They had come to equate the stability of Christianity

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<sup>50</sup>Andrew's excellent four-part series of articles on Post Modernism (*"The Skinny on Postmodernity Series"*) can still be fairly easily found at [www.theooze.com](http://www.theooze.com), and I would recommend his blog (website) [www.tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com](http://www.tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com). Enjoy the rabbit hole, Alice!

<sup>51</sup>Charles Colson, *"The Postmodern Crackup,"* in **Christianity Today**, December 2003, Vol. 47, No. 12, page 72. Posted on the internet at [www.Christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/012/24.72.html](http://www.Christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/012/24.72.html)

## Module 2: Post-Modernism & A Pain In The Mind - Page 51

with the stability of Rome (or America?). The pagans attributed the disaster to the Christians (hmm, nothing really changes does it?!), claiming that the ancient gods had withdrawn their ancient, thousand-year protection from Rome.

When the news of Alaric's sack of Rome reached North Africa, Carthage to be precise, followed by thousands of despairing refugees, Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, was moved to respond to this *"pain in the mind."* Augustine labored for 13 years to produce an *"explanation which explained,"* which he titled *Civitas Dei, The City of God*. Rome had been punished, argued Augustine, not for abandoning her traditional gods in favor of her new religion (Christianity) but for her continued sins. Augustine went on to argue that, rather than looking for and pursuing an earthly city (*civitas terrena*, for you Latin buffs), Christians should be pursuing the city of God, *"Mankind is divided into two sorts: such as live according to man, and such as live according to God. These we mystically call the 'two cities' or societies, the one predestined to reign eternally with God, the other condemned to perpetual torment with the Devil."*

We have much in common with Augustine. The ancient world of Augustine (the predecessor of the Pre-Modern Age) was collapsing under internal and external pressures it had no means of resisting. The worldviews and philosophies of the Classical world had run their courses and come to a point of exhaustion, no longer able to offer "explanations which explained." This in turn left a "pain in the mind" of the collapsing ancient world which Augustine addressed with biblical answers which would stand for a thousand years. It is ironic that the world of Augustine's day abandoned the bankrupt paradigms of the ancient classical world for the new paradigm of Christianity. A thousand years later the Enlightenment abandoned the Pre-Modern world of Christianity in order to return to the classical world (launching the philosophical and artistic schools of "neo-classicism"). After 200 years of attempting to restore a classical world view, built on Greek categories of thought and reasoning, Modernism discovered what Augustine had declared a thousand years before - that the Classical world of Greek rationalism and empiricism was as bankrupt of ultimate spiritual and moral truth in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as it had been in the 5<sup>th</sup>. Just as Augustine had brought classical philosophy to a close, so too Post Modernism has now brought neo-classical Enlightenment philosophy to a close. All that remains are explanations which do not explain, and a pain in the mind which will not go away. Like Augustine of 1600 years ago, the Church today stands in the gap of a cultural paradigm shift of historic proportions, a shift which cries out for new paradigms, new "plausibility structures," for presenting the gospel in an authentic manner to generations of unbelievers who have no Christian heritage to draw on or any *"plausibility structure"* which will allow them to evaluate what we are communicating.

Newbigin observes that *"No coherent thought is possible without presuppositions."*<sup>52</sup> This is true, he argues, because *"Every kind of systematic thought has to begin from some starting point. It has to begin by taking some things for granted."* These presuppositions then combine to create *"plausibility structures,"* or *"patterns of belief and practice accepted within a given society, which determine which beliefs are plausible to its members and which are not . . . . Thus when, in any society, a belief is held to be 'reasonable,' this is a judgment made on the basis of the reigning plausibility structure."*

Newbigin continues: *"Reason does not operate in a vacuum. The power of a human mind to think rationally is only developed in a tradition which itself depends on the experience of previous generations. This is obviously true of the vast edifice of modern science sustained by the scientific community. The definition of what is reasonable and what is not will be conditioned by the tradition within which the matter is being discussed. Within an intellectual tradition dominated by the methods of natural science it will appear unreasonable to explain things in terms of a personal will and purpose. But if God exists and he is capable of revealing his purpose to human beings, then the human reason will be summoned to understand and respond to this revelation and to relate it to all other experience."*

Why is this meaningful for the Church and its message? Newbigin explains: *"It is no secret, indeed it has been affirmed from the beginning, that **the gospel gives rise to a new plausibility structure, a radically different vision of things from those that shape all human cultures apart from the gospel.** The Church, therefore, as the bearer of the gospel, inhabits a plausibility structure which is at variance with, and which calls in question, those that govern all human cultures without exception. The tension which this challenge creates has been present throughout the history of Western civilization."*

As Newbigin observed regarding the person who doubts everything, our Post Modern culture has succeeded in rationally and empirically arguing itself into a state of practical imbecility. At the grassroots level this means that our Middle School children don't know the moral difference between a kiss on the cheek and oral sex. Martin Luther once described the history of mankind as a drunk riding a horse. When he starts to fall off one side of the horse he rights himself only to fall off the horse on the other side. The calling of the Church in our Post Modern culture is not to help the drunk right himself on the horse (i.e., to repair his faltering plausibility structure). Rather, our calling is to challenge the whole reigning plausibility structure which suggests that drunk men should be riding horses in the first place, and in the process to deliver and heal the man from his drunken condition (not to mention liberating the poor long-suffering horse!). Augustine's response to the collapsing *"plausibility structure"* of the 5<sup>th</sup> Century was **the proclamation of a new plausibility structure**, one based upon a call to

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<sup>52</sup>The following discussion regarding "plausibility structures" comes from Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel In A Pluralist Society*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1992) pp. 8-9

## A Kingdom, A People & A River - Page 52

faith, in contrast to the philosophical “fatalism” of the ancient world: *“Believe and you will understand.”* To those disillusioned by the collapsing plausibility structure of the 5<sup>th</sup> century Augustine offered “the City of God.” ***To a Post Modern culture which has argued itself into practical imbecility, we must proclaim a new (but old) plausibility structure: The Kingdom of God.***

This can only be done through the “true spirituality” of believers authentically living out and proclaiming the message of The Kingdom of God as a transformational message which radically challenges, confronts, judges and transforms the reigning Post Modern plausibility structure of our day, just as Augustine challenged the collapsing plausibility structure of the ancient world. Our message must be biblically authentic, Kingdom oriented, power driven and personally transforming. As authentic believers living in our Post Christian Post Modern culture, our calling is to challenge the “plausibility structure” of our enlightenment-tainted Post Modern culture with the “trans-rational” (i.e., it transcends our Greek/Enlightenment rationalism) plausibility structure of the Kingdom of God, one in which God exists and speaks authentic truth to men who are called upon to listen and believe. It is a plausibility structure in which faith is the essence of things hoped for and the substance of things not seen, not the product of Greek rationalism or Enlightenment skepticism. It is a plausibility structure where the power to transform the human condition is more important than empirical observations about the human condition, where the sick can be healed, the dead can be raised, the unclean leper cleansed, the demonized delivered and the human heart transformed by faith, hope and love. It is a plausibility structure which may indeed be foolishness to Greek, Enlightenment and Post Modern thinkers who have argued themselves into moral and spiritual imbecility. But the Kingdom of God is (and has always been) a supernatural, trans-rational place where things impossible with men (i.e., impossible under their existing plausibility structure) are possible with God.

***“The Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the good news!”*** (Mark 1:14)



*Let the River flow!*

## Questions For Reflection And Discussion

⇒ Describe how you have witnessed the change in moral and spiritual values in our Post Christian culture in your lifetime. Do you regard these changes as good or bad? How have these changes affected the way you live out your faith?

⇒ How have changes in the moral and spiritual climate of our Post Christian Post Modern culture affected or changed the way you as a Christian relate to unbelievers?

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<b>A Post Modern Comparison</b>	
<b>Our Post Modern Culture</b> Post Modernism is all about "self-awareness." <i>"Life really is all about me and my personal journey."</i>	<b>A Christian Response</b> Authentic Christianity is all about "Christ Awareness" <i>"Christianity is all about a journey into the Kingdom of God"</i>
<b>Truth is Relative &amp; Subjective.</b> Truth is "made" (socially constructed), not "found" (objective and discoverable). Social groups (such as Christians) construct their own "truth" to serve their own interests, which usually involves exercising power over other people. We are all shaped by our cultural context. We may have "objectivity" by our cultural standards, but there is no universal, trans-cultural standard of objectivity. As a result, truth is subjective and life really is "all about me." Truth is also "dialectic," the result of opposing viewpoints which come together in conflict to form a new "synthesis" resulting in "truth by consensus".	<b>Truth Is Constant (as opposed to "Absolute"), Objective in nature, but subjectively appropriated.</b> The laws of physics haven't changed. A post-modern architect must objectively calculate the weight-bearing load characteristics of a span when building a structure. They are constant. But that post-modern architect can subjectively appropriate those laws with unique designs. The truth of the Kingdom of God truth is constant, universal and trans-cultural, a reflection of the unchanging nature of God as expressed in the written word of God. <i>"Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever."</i> (Hebrews 13:8)
<b>Suspicion Regarding "Meta-Narratives."</b> According to Jean-Francois Lyotard, Post Modernism is <i>"incredulity toward meta-narratives."</i> If there is no "ultimate truth" then there can be no "big stories" which explain life and demand our allegiance. But people can't live without meta-narratives and long to be part of something greater than themselves. So our Post Modern culture has created "pseudo-meta-narratives" in politics, environmentalism, feminism, the war on terrorism or the struggle for Middle East or World peace.	<b>Belief In "Meta-Narratives."</b> Scripture teaches a "big story" of man's creation, fall and God's plan for redemption and the final consummation of all things. We call that "meta-Narrative" the story of The Kingdom Of God. <i>"The Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the good news!"</i> (Mark 1:14)
<b>Deconstruction &amp; the Demise of the Text.</b> Because "meta-narratives" have been used to oppress others, <i>"Deconstruction is justice"</i> claimed Derrida. The texts behind those metanarratives must be "deconstructed" to disprove their validity and demonstrating the absence of any comprehensive or universally compelling meta-narrative.	<b>Reconstruction.</b> The Kingdom of God presents a radical critique of all existing meta-narratives, worldviews or "plausibility structures" in order to call men everywhere to consider the Kingdom of God. While sinful or misguided men may have used Scripture or the Kingdom of God to oppress others, this is not its true purpose. <i>"You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free."</i> (John 8:32)
<b>Emphasis upon "Personal Narratives."</b> In the absence of Meta-Narratives, all that remains are "personal narratives." "Personal truth" replaces "universal truth." Truth is now personal, subjective and self-validating. "It's true because I experienced it." My personal story is all that matters.	<b>Emphasis upon Personal Testimonies.</b> As Christians we believe in "personal truth," the subjective experience of objective truth which informs our "personal narratives." The Kingdom of God is a call into a personal relationship with and submission to God as King. (Acts 22:1-21 or 24:10-21)
<b>No Universally Binding Morals or Ethics.</b> Ethical and moral claims represent only personal sentiment and opinion, which may inform your personal narrative, but have no universal appeal. As a result there can be no neutral moral grounds on which to condemn other cultures or even such events as the Holocaust.	<b>Morals are Universally Binding.</b> Because God is the Creator His moral Laws are universally applicable to all men everywhere, regardless of culture. American Associate Supreme Court Justice Robert Jackson appealed to such higher moral law in his prosecution of war crimes during the Nuremberg War Crimes Trials following World War 2.
<b>Triumph of Rhetoric.</b> There is no ultimate truth, so the person with the most compelling story or the loudest argument "wins."	<b>Rhetoric (Preaching) as Vehicle for Truth.</b> The goal of preaching (rhetoric) is to communicate truth in such a convincing manner that people believe. (Acts 28:23-24)
<b>Truth Is Experience &amp; Experience Is Truth.</b> "When truth is denied, therapy remains." This isn't an epistemology based upon experience so much as experience substituting for an epistemology. Post Modernism has found itself at an epistemological "dead end."	<b>Truth Can Be Authentically Experienced, but experience must be clarified with propositional truth.</b> Jesus answered him, <i>"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the Kingdom of God."</i> (John 3:3)
<b>Truth Known Through Community.</b> Communities "create" truth which they live out in a common experience. The New Testament story of a divine Christ was created by the early church community and became their "truth."	<b>Truth Is Lived Out In Community.</b> Truth exists independent of the community, but is to be experienced and authentically lived out by Christians in genuine community (koinonia) with one another. (Acts 2:44-46)
<b>Community Determines Word Meanings.</b> Words and the texts they create now mean only what the social community of people creating them want them to mean.	<b>Truth Is Propositional With Consistent Word Meanings.</b> A common language has common words with commonly accepted meanings, which makes meaningful communication between differing communities possible.