

# An Historical Overview

A pastor, in criticism of my stubborn insistence that the first priority of the church is to be the ‘pillar and support of the truth’, wrote, ‘The Bible does not place a great priority on being right. We are to be holy and righteous, pure and just. We are to believe, understand and proclaim the truth. But that is not the same as being right.’ Welcome to the world of postmodernism, where words don’t mean what they mean, truth is subjective and contradictions in logic are perfectly acceptable. Until we understand that our philosophical climate in the Western world has changed, we are going to be both frustrated and confused attempting to fulfil the truth mandate as given to the church (1 Tim. 3:15). It is therefore of vital importance that we understand the times in which we live.

## **The changing times**

We must begin with a broad overview of history and a look at the three philosophical and religious eras that have dominated Western civilization.

### *Premodern*

During the premodern era, which extended from medieval times until the French Revolution of 1789, the Western world believed in the supernatural. No one doubted the existence of God (or gods).

Spirits, demons and other beings existed beyond the realm of the senses; and this spiritual world somehow controlled and dominated life in the physical world. Of course there were many worldviews thriving under premodernism. Animism, mythology, Greek philosophy and Christianity all flourished and battled during the premodern era, but as diverse as they were all held firmly to a belief in some form of a supernatural spirit-world.

Biblical Christianity is obviously premodern in this sense. When presenting the gospel it was not necessary to convince people that spiritual beings or gods existed — everyone believed this. The challenge was to persuade individuals that there was only one true God, who sent his Son into the world as the God-man to die for their sins. In many ways the premodern worldview (which still exists in numerous places throughout the world) was a more fertile environment for the spread of the gospel than either modernism or postmodernism. One of the criticisms levelled at Christianity during the last three centuries is that since it is steeped in premodernity it is primitive and foolish. The supernatural carries no regard in modern thought; therefore, the supernatural had to be jettisoned by the liberal church to gain respectability in Western society. But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

### *Modernism*

The foundations of premodernism began to shake a bit with the arrival of first the Renaissance and then the Reformation, but it was the Enlightenment that proved to be its undoing. Influential philosophers such as Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) began questioning not only the dogmas of the past but also all sources of authority. By this time the Western world's authority was to be found primarily either in the church (Roman Catholicism) or in the Scriptures (Protestantism), or in the case of Islam in the Koran. The architects of the Enlightenment challenged these authorities, including the beliefs founded upon them, and offered in their place human reasoning. "The goal of the "Enlightenment project" ... was to free humanity from superstition and found a philosophy and civilization on rational inquiry, empirical evidence and scientific discovery. The term "modernism" is often identified with this

overall project. The modernist vision presupposed the power of rationality to discover truth.<sup>1</sup>

The Enlightenment would usher in the age of modernity. Michael Kruger writes, ‘With the rise of the Enlightenment there came a new guardian of truth to replace the church: science. No longer would human beings stand for the irrational musings and archaic dogmatism of religion — science (with reason as the foundation) was the new god, and all intellectual theories had to bow and pay homage in order to be seriously considered. Science viewed Christians as being naively committed to ancient myths, unable to see past their bias and to take an objective and neutral look at the world. So modernity proffers the idea that mankind, armed with rationalism and science, is able to access absolute truth and make unlimited progress toward a better life for itself. Therefore, at its core, modernity is a celebration of human autonomy.’<sup>2</sup> Deism would emerge for those wishing to be both enlightened and religious. The deist, which many of America’s founding fathers claimed to be, believed in a God who created the universe and then walked away. Therefore a God could exist, even be worshipped, and at the same time human reason would become the final authority.

Some have conjectured that while the roots of modernity were evident many years before, the actual birth of modernism was in 1789 at the fall of the Bastille in France during the French Revolution. Gene Edward Veith reasons, ‘The French Revolution exemplifies the triumph of the Enlightenment. With the destruction of the Bastille, the prison in which the monarchy jailed its political prisoners, the pre-modern world with its feudal loyalties and spiritual hierarchies was guillotined. The revolutionaries exalted the Rights of Man. They dismissed Christianity as a relic of the past. During the course of the revolution, they installed the Goddess of Reason in Notre Dame Cathedral.’<sup>3</sup>

As with all worldviews, except the biblical one, modernity would ultimately disappoint. People became disenchanted with reason and science, as neither was able to deliver on their promises to solve all human problems and reshape society into utopia. So disappointed did the Western world become with modernism that it finally breathed its last and has been pronounced dead. The

date of modernity's death has been a matter of much speculation. Some believe it was at the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 (exactly 200 years after its birth) since, of all social experiments, Marxism most fully attempted to implement the concepts of the Enlightenment. When Communism crumbled so did the last vestiges of the optimism in human ability that for so long propelled modernity. Others believe that, at least in America, modernity died on 15 July 1973, with the demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe housing projects in St. Louis. It was at that moment that Americans threw in the towel on their own utopian experiments, recognizing that reason, science, and technology had failed to enhance the lives of the poor and had actually brought more misery.

Whether modernity died in 1973 or 1989 may be debatable, but that it is dead is not. That is not to deny that many aspects of our society still operate under the vestiges of modernistic principles (and premodern for that matter), but an obvious shift has taken place in the mindset and worldview of the Western civilization. The new worldview is called postmodernism.

### *Postmodernism*

Postmodernism was born out of the ashes of the failure of modernity. It is the reaction of the disillusioned. If the optimistic projections of the last two hundred years of the best efforts of reason, science and technology have failed; and if the tenets of premodernism with its foundation of revelatory truth are preposterous, then all that is left is the pessimism of nothingness, emptiness and uncertainty. Perhaps never has the book of Ecclesiastes been more relevant than now.

Postmodernity is relatively complicated, so it is necessary to probe carefully its worldview and its effect on cultures as well as the church. At this point we simply want to recognize that at the hub of this philosophy, as well as all philosophies, is the issue of truth. To the premodernist, truth is found in revelation. To the modernist, truth can be found in reason and science. To the postmodernist truth is not found (indeed it is not capable of being found), it is created. Absolute truth is a fable. It is possible for me to create my own truth, and for cultures and subcultures to create their truth,

but it is not possible to find universal truth that is applicable to all people. Such truth does not exist and should not be sought. Those who claim to possess absolute truth only do so in order to assert power over others.

Kruger explains,

Postmodernity, in contrast to modernity, rejects any notion of objective truth and insists that the only absolute in the universe is that there are no absolutes. Tolerance is the supreme virtue and exclusivity the supreme vice. Truth is not grounded in reality or in any sort of authoritative “text”, but is simply constructed by the mind of the individual [or socially constructed].<sup>4</sup>

Groothuis elaborates, ‘For these postmodernist thinkers, the very idea of truth has decayed and disintegrated. It is no longer something knowable... At the end of the day, truth is simply what we, as individuals and as communities, make it to be — and nothing more.’<sup>5</sup> If this is so, then how do people make decisions and develop values, or even create their own truth? Kruger answers, ‘What are the postmodernists’ criteria for “truth”? Simply what works. The postmodernist is not concerned about absolute truth like the modernist; he defines his “truth” by more pragmatic concerns: What makes me feel good? What solves my problems? What is attractive to me?’<sup>6</sup> This concept of truth will be important to keep in mind as we study this worldview in more detail.

The reader may properly wonder, is not all of this postmodern philosophy a mere intellectual football being tossed about by the elite? Has this mentality really trickled down to masses? Unfortunately, surveys confirm that while the majority may be unable to define postmodernity they are increasingly becoming products of it. For a number of years Barna Research Group has been telling us that belief in absolute truth hovered at around 38% in America. That means that almost two out of every three adults in America deny the existence of absolute truth. But things have gotten worse. At the end of 2001, just a few months after the infamous 9/11 attacks, an alarming survey was conducted by Barna that found confidence in absolute moral truth had dropped to a mere 22%.<sup>7</sup> Bare-

ly one in five Americans claim to believe in absolute truth, which is amazing considering, that according to Barna's research, one out of every three Americans claim to be an *evangelical* Christian. And America seems to fare better than many other countries. Take Europe for example. While 53% of Americans consider religion to be very important in their lives, only 16% of the British, 14% of the French and 13% of Germans do.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the citizens of the United Kingdom are less likely to believe in God than those in most countries. A survey conducted by the BBC in January of 2004 discovered that 67% believed in a Higher Being (vs. 91% of those in the U.S.), but only 31% (compared to 51% in the U.S.) agreed that their God was the only true God.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, we not only live in a postmodern era (we can't help that) but most of us have become postmodernist — even many who claim to be Christians. If this is not recognized and confronted we will inevitably interact with a world and church that we presume to be modernistic in thinking when they are not. We then run the danger of driving in one ditch or the other. In the first ditch are those who accommodate the spirit of the age. The liberals did this in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by accepting modernism and denying the supernatural, including the cardinal doctrines of the faith. Unfortunately, those within the Christian community who have been on the cutting edge of watching the shift to postmodernism are wandering down the same pathway taken by the liberals of one hundred years ago. The market-driven, or seeker-sensitive, church leaders understand that the 'consumer' now thinks like postmoderns. These leaders have decided that the only way to win postmoderns is to give them what they think they need in hope of giving them what they really need. This approach of accommodation has been tried before with disastrous and predictable results. In the other ditch run those who refuse to recognize that the world has changed. They run the risk of obsolescence. But there is an approach, a biblical one, in which we can remain faithful to the Word and yet speak to our age.