

Critical Book Review of
“Truth is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age”
Written by J. Richard Middleton & Brian J. Walsh

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Overview

Middleton and Walsh give a very good overview of what constitutes both modernity and postmodernity and explain the differences in attitudes that come with each of these worldviews. They explain how these systems of thought came to exist and how they affect the way in which people think and perceive the meaning of their life and how to interpret events that take place around them. They make clear how these systems of thought actually constitute worldviews and as such, either explicitly or implicitly, seek to answer such questions as, “How did we get here?”, “Where are we going?”, and “What is the meaning of our human life?” They say that these views even cause people to re-interpret past historical events in light of their point of reference.

The authors explain the criticisms that some forms of postmodernism make of the ‘modern period’ in describing Christianity as a ‘metanarrative’ that is inherently violent and played a large part in the suppression of other people. They also show how science, technology, and economic advantage have been the foundation of the modern world, which Christianity has too often embraced to the extent of taking advantage of other peoples. These criticisms are addressed in defense of Christianity, first by explaining the kind of God that is portrayed in the Bible and showing by various Biblical examples that the Creator God does not condone the suppression of other peoples but rather helps those who are oppressed by others. They make clear that a proper Christian worldview actually uplifts the responsibility of those that claim to follow the gospel and that Christians should realize that God created differences in the world, among individuals and among cultures. Christians should also recognize that peace is only created and maintained by respecting the differences inherent in creation and not trying to impose homogeneity on other people.

Pitfalls of Postmodernism

At the same time Middleton and Walsh are clear to point out the pitfalls and weaknesses of postmodernism. The postmodern worldview can leave people hopeless. Without a meaningful tradition or foundation to rest on, postmodernism leaves people with a sense of disorientation and meaninglessness that comes from the deconstructionist angle of postmodernism.

Yet they also present what they feel to be a viable Christian theological response to postmodernism and state that, in order to be effective in addressing the needs of this current postmodern culture, Christians should pay attention to some of the criticisms that the postmodern view presents and not fall into the trap of defending science, technology, and economic advantage which have so much characterized the modern age. In fact, the subtitle to the book is 'Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age.' The authors state at one point that, in order for Christians to be effective in this postmodern culture, they should not have an attitude of judgment as if to stand over against the culture. Whatever claims to uniqueness Christians like to make, the authors propose that everyone is implicated in the predicament of modernity and everyone needs healing, which only comes by understanding the current culture. Only by listening sensitively and empathically to the cry of the age will the Christian be able to discern the contours of the emerging postmodern worldview.

Implications of Postmodernism for Present Day Christians

An interesting thought that the authors introduce near the end of the book is to assert that the Bible is not a finished book of rules and regulations, but was written mainly as a history of what happened in the early days of the Christian church. Just as the Christians at that time were forced to address the issues and problems that arose in their culture, so must modern (or postmodern) Christians address the issues that are in the forefront of the culture at this time. The last chapters describe how the Bible portrays the history of a different cultural setting with its

own set of needs. Although Christians should be thoroughly saturated with the truth and thought contained in the pages of the Bible, the Bible is not a rule-book, but a history-book that provides Christians with principles by which to live, rather than laws which should be strictly applied in the present cultural setting. Christians today have the Holy Spirit living in them as a guide to help address current cultural needs and struggles that are not explicitly addressed or exemplified in the pages of the Bible. They say that according to the model that has been dominant for centuries, it was the task of the interpreter to correlate the essential message of the Bible with the contemporary cultural situation in which he or she lived. They assert that Christians require a more honest and postmodern understanding of what it means to live out the Christian faith with authenticity in their contemporary culture. Christians need a way of thinking about the practical implications of their faith that is consonant with the Bible itself.

Authors' Viewpoint

The authors' Christian faith and commitment to the Bible as the Christian's underpinning is evident and clearly stated throughout the book. In fact, in answering postmodernism, they state that, as Christians, the first and indispensable step we need to take is to immerse ourselves in the Bible as the nonnegotiable, canonical foundation of our faith.

In making their arguments and drawing their conclusions, Middleton and Walsh have drawn heavily from two other writers. First of all, they adopt the "social construct" view of reality from Peter Berger. They make the statement that reality is not only a human construct, it is more particularly a social construct. They say that it is always someone's or some group's construction of reality that ends up being the dominant construction that guides social life. These kinds of statements seem to mirror Peter Berger's theory of social construct. In criticizing the affects of deconstruction found in postmodernism, Middleton and Walsh say that Berger "understood well" the consequences of the loss of this view of social construct (which Berger

called the “sacred canopy”) and quote from his material to make their point. They share this thought not only with Peter Berger, but also with Lesslie Newbigin, who writes about it in his book “The Gospel in a Pluralist Society”. Both the authors and Newbigin say that we should recognize the social constructs that have created our view of reality and thus be able to sympathize with the people we converse with in this postmodern culture. In that way we as Christians can have a proper voice in this pluralistic society.

They also share Newbigin’s conviction of understanding the Bible as a universal truth that we need to know, understand, and embody. In explaining this view, they draw directly on material from Newbigin and quote him often. They say that instead of standing outside the biblical story in order to interpret and apply it to our lives, we need to ‘indwell’ or inhabit’ this story in such a way that it becomes our normative ‘plausibility structure’.” (A term that they tell us Newbigin has borrowed from Peter Berger.) They state that they have benefited tremendously from many of Newbigin’s insights.

Critical Discussion

It seems that many works written from a Biblical (or Christian) viewpoint concerning postmodernism tend to criticize the affects that postmodernism has had on the American culture and point out its negative aspects. Although Middleton and Walsh offer a fair critique of postmodernism, not hesitating to mention its pitfalls, one significant impact of this work is that they offer an alternative to merely criticizing the effects of postmodernism. They discuss the ways in which Christianity could benefit from seriously considering the critique that postmodernism offers to Christianity and allowing that to be a positive influence for change. They offer some real insight when they propose that Christians should not dismiss the whole of postmodern thought and call it a liberal attack on Biblical Christianity, but rather empathetically listen to its critique both of Christianity and of the modern world.

In a many ways I tend to agree with their analysis and conclusions. I lean toward the view of apologetic theology, both ideologically and in method, as opposed to a strictly kerygmatic approach. In general I feel that, as Christians, our interaction with the people in society around us should seek to be sympathetic to the thoughts they hold and struggles with which they contend. I agree with Middleton and Walsh that the gospel we preach should not be so postmodern or “contextual” that we lose the essential message and truth contained in the Scriptures. It is important for Christians to view the Bible as truth and contend for the fact that it indeed embodies the truth relevant for all peoples. However, this does not mean that we should force on others a Christian rationality or narrow-mindedness.

Thus I feel that their point regarding the method of applying Biblical truth in our current society is a very valid position. We first of all must internalize the principles of the Bible and understand how the Christians of the early centuries applied the truths of the gospel to the issues and problems that confronted them in their culture. We need to do the same with the current issues that face us, and society in which we live. We must seek the leading of the Holy Spirit to apply the biblical principles that we have internalized. We should not just indiscriminately and legalistically apply antiquated principles and formulas that are not relevant to the issues of our society. However we need to be balanced and not throw out the foundational truths of the gospel because they are not popular in today’s society where anything goes and there seems to be very liberal standards when it comes to morality. As always, the contextual preaching of apologetic theology needs to be balanced with the foundational truths of the Bible and with speaking in a kerygmatic way at the appropriate times.

I support the suggestion that Christianity should take some of the criticisms of postmodernism seriously. We should not be confused about the goal of the gospel. It is not to further a lifestyle of comfort and wealth that furthers our scientific knowledge, pursues

technological advances, and fights for economic advantages in total disregard to other peoples of the world. The gospel has the universal good of people in view. However, in listening carefully to some of the postmodern criticisms, I do appreciate the authors' warning, and agree with them, that we should not embrace postmodernism to the degree that we wander into the territory of nihilism or deconstructionism.

I feel that we as Christians should not try to defend the "modernist" paradigm. There have been things done in the name of Christianity that have been oppressive and unbiblical. Surely the "modern" period has not been a very good "friend" to Christianity. It has put forth quite an intellectual attack on the Christian faith in general and challenged the foundational tenants of Christianity in particular. It doesn't seem that the modern worldview is any more of a "Christian worldview" than the postmodern worldview is. Postmodernism is a view being held by more and more people in our society; we must learn from the mistakes of the past, rather than try to defend history's actions, and learn to appropriately respond to the society in which we now find ourselves.