

A BATTLE AMONG INCURABLE WORSHIPERS

Are you trying to listen to too many voices?

The Athenians achieved a higher level of culture than their countrymen. Athens became the literary and artistic center of Greece. Yet Athens' "great age" lasted only 50 years. Why? Who brought an end to this mother of arts and invention? "It was the Sophists who popularized Protagoras's phrase Man is the measure of all things and translated it to mean that individuals are not responsible to any transcendent moral authority for their actions."¹

The Sophists were not concerned with "reaching the truth. Some even denied that there was any truth at

all. They said that all knowledge is relative, and that things are correct or incorrect only as people consider them so. So many voices were the problem. Each person's view had equal value at the table. . . . The Sophists also claimed that there are no absolute standards of morality."²

As Russell Kirk observed, "It was the clear relativism of the Sophists, not the mystical insights of Plato, nor Aristotle's aspiration after the

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The battle today is between the internal interpretive role of Scripture versus the external interpreters who reject Scripture's self-interpretive role. Experience, reason, and tradition are not the interpreters of Scripture. Neither do they share the interpretive role with the Bible's self-interpretation (though we would be naive to claim we do not use them as tools or aids as we search for Scripture's self-interpretation).

Supreme God, which dominated the thinking of the classical Greeks in their decadence.”³ No ancient Greek philosopher defended Protagorean relativity. Socrates and Plato taught that truth was absolute.

The problem today is even more disturbing. The Sophists promoted relativism from outside, but now relativism thrives within Christianity itself—and even in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Pilate's question, “What is truth?” (John 18:38, NKJV) must burn deep within every Adventist conscience. Do we know the truth? We are told that “none but those who have fortified the mind with the truths of the Bible will stand through the last great conflict” (*The Great Controversy*, pp. 593, 594). We are told that the coming sealing work of the latter rain Holy Spirit is a “settling into the truth, both intellectually and spiritually” (Ellen G. White Comments, *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 4, p.

1161). Those sealed will be the ones who hear the voice of God above the multiplied voices of humankind.

The Fall of Babylon

We live in the time of the fall of Babylon. The term *Babylon* recalls the tower of Babel, where confusion resulted from multiplied voices. Modern Babylon is confusion resulting from multiplied human ideas about divine truth. This is why Babylon is fallen (Rev. 14:8; 18:2, 3). Scripture never calls people to relativism, to pluralism, or to secularism. It calls people to Christ (Matt. 11:28), the One who is the Truth (John 14:6), and it therefore calls people out of Babylon, as seen in the final end-time invitation, “Come out of her, my people” (Rev. 18:4, NKJV).

It was the Babylonian-like confusion over truth that led to the demise of Athens, and it is this same confusion over truth that is leading to the rapid collapse of much of Christen-

dom. Scripture warns, “Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings” (Heb. 13:9, NIV), for “The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons” (1 Tim. 4:1, NIV). Babylon is confusion because conflicting human voices drown out the voice of God. Allowing the Bible to interpret itself is dragged in the dust as human interpreters scramble to push their views at the table.

The Catholic Church believes the canon of Scripture is the product of the church, rather than the church being the product of the biblical canon. This positions the church above Scripture: “For all of what has been said about the way of interpreting Scripture is subject finally to the judgment of the Church, which carries out the divine commission and ministry of guarding and interpreting the word of God.”⁴

This has been the consistent teaching of the Catholic Church throughout history, and it is the basis of all the false doctrines espoused by Roman Catholicism. The Reformers revolted against this error with the cry *sola Scriptura* (*scriptura sui ipsius intepres; scripturam ex scriptura explicandam esse*). This means that the

Bible is capable of interpreting itself and does not need tradition, philosophy, church, or any other human experience to interpret it. It is the sole interpreter of itself. The word *sole* is vital; the erosion of this word has led to pluralism and relativism that constitutes the fall of Babylon. Today's landscape is crawling with external interpreters, all claiming to be the authoritative interpreter of Scripture.

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internal interpretive role of Scripture versus the external interpreters who reject Scripture's self-interpretive role. Experience, reason, and tradition are not the interpreters of Scripture. Neither do they share the interpretive role with the Bible's self-interpretation (though we would be naive to claim we do not use them as tools or aids as we search for Scripture's self-interpretation). Scripture is not just the primary interpreter, but the *only* interpreter. The written Word of God does not share its interpretive role with other contenders any more

than the Living Word of God shares His salvation mission with others. The fall of prophetic Babylon results from failure to hold to this Reformation Scripture principle of *sola Scriptura*.

This failure was dramatically demonstrated on March 29, 1994, when 13 persons, Catholic and evangelicals, issued a document entitled “Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the third Millennium.” Endorsed by 25 well-known Catholic and evangelical leaders, the document caused a furor in Catholic and evangelical circles. Dave Hunt wrote, “The document, in effect, overturned the Reformation and will unquestionably have far reaching repercussions throughout the Christian world for years to come.”⁵

One of the key differences between Catholic and evangelical theology has to do with justification by faith alone through Christ alone. Martin Luther discovered in the Book of Romans that, “The just shall live by faith” (Rom. 1:17, NKJV). This was the heart of the Reformation. It countered the Catholic notion that justification is through faith *plus* works. Any human works detract from the one saving work of Jesus Christ. “The doctrine of Justification,” wrote John Calvin, “is the principal ground on which religion must be supported.”⁶

Justification by faith, however, is

understood differently by Catholics and evangelicals. The key word *alone* is missing throughout Catholic thinking. Evangelicals believe the gospel is justification through faith alone by Christ alone found in Scripture alone. By contrast, Catholics see faith as a human work, so there is no faith alone, Christ alone, or Scripture alone. Human penance is added to justification and to Christ’s work, and the tradition of the Magisterium is added to Scripture.

Any placing of human experience, reason, or tradition as interpretive tools above Scripture’s self-interpretation rejects the important distinction between Catholic thinking and that of the Reformers. Whether people know it or not, anyone who places outside authorities above or equal to scriptural authority has a Catholic view of Scripture.

“Despite all the recent dialogue among those desiring to reunite Rome and Protestantism,” writes John MacArthur, “there has been no suggestion that Rome will ever repudiate its stance against justification by faith. For that reason, the trend toward tolerance and cooperation is a destructive one because it blurs the distinction between biblical truth and a system of falsehood.”⁷

Postmodernism

Today we’re in the midst of a profound transition from modernism

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to postmodernism. The human race has entered a new era that presents unprecedented challenges and opportunities to Seventh-day Adventists’ mission.

Postmodernism Defined. Postmodernism follows modernism. Modernism was launched by the 17th century Enlightenment, which dominated human quest for knowledge and understanding for 200 years. Scientific method brought multiplied technological benefits to human living, but it also brought a negative impact on global ecology, as well as bringing the race to the brink of a nuclear holocaust. In this way, belief in knowledge as good came to a shattering end. Thus, in the last half of the 20th century, the modern worldview was challenged and continues to be questioned.

Postmodernism is also antimodernism. The modern worldview included the acceptance of inevitable human progress based on evolutionary theory. We have now come to a generation that, for the first time,

does not see any future. The optimism of the Enlightenment, with its vaunted belief in human reason and evolution, has given way to pessimism and meaninglessness. It’s as if the world has suddenly awakened to a reality check. Whereas the modern worldview was influenced by scientific method, reason, and universal objectivity, postmodernism rejects scientific method, reason, and universal objectivity. The collapse of a unified, rational, and meaningful worldview has thrown the human race into a period of unprecedented pluralism in which personal perspective dominates. Each person comes to reality from his or her own presuppositions and assumptions.

Differences Between Modernism and Postmodernism. When it comes to comparing modernism and postmodernism, there’s some continuity between the two, but also a radical discontinuity. The modern antipathy to metaphysics and the transcendental is continued in postmod-

Postmodernism's rejection of a center in theory cannot be lived in practice. If God is not the center of a person's life, then someone or something else will be. Idolatry was a recurring problem throughout the Old Testament. The Ten Commandments deal with the problem up front. . . "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20:2, 3, NIV).

ernism. "While modernism categorically denies the transcendent and spends a great deal of time and effort attempting to prove that the transcendent does not exist," says William E. Brown, "Postmodernism confronts the transcendent with a yawn."⁸

In this confined context, postmodernism champions liberation causes. If there's no transcendent God, then humans are left to be revolutionaries, to bring change in their own strength, in their own way. Yet this is the time when "religion is marginalized and trivialized," and "Postmodernists have genuinely given up on the idea of absolute truth."¹⁰ What a paradox: They have an absolute mission or right (to liberate) without absolute mandate or truth, which leaves one wondering how even liberation can be an absolute truth for them!

In modernism, God was shut out of this part of His universe. This closed continuum worldview re-

jected any inbreaking of the supernatural within the natural nexus of cause and effect on planet Earth. Huston Smith suggests that the modern mind thought that "seeing further in a horizontal direction would compensate for loss of the vertical."¹¹ But modernism failed to realize that vision on the horizontal plane is still confined within a closed universe, and therefore shut up to its own subjectivity. Smith illustrates this vision with a line silhouetting the Himalayan range. Modernism grabbed both ends and pulled it into a straight line.

Modernism flaunted human reason as the savior of all human problems. This extreme rationalism was not enlightened, although a product of the Enlightenment. Postmodernists rightly call into question this arrogance, but go too far by rejecting reason altogether. The solution lies between the two extremes, where a proper use of reason under Scripture is necessary to arrive at solutions.

For the God of all truth invited humankind: "Come now, and let us reason together" (Isa. 1:18, NKJV).

Difficulties in Postmodernism for the Presentation of Truth. Postmoderns accept a number of voices (ideas) that are only theoretically relevant, but which cannot be sustained at the level of living. This makes postmoderns vulnerable to the certain voice of Truth.

There are major difficulties, however, for the presentation of biblical truths to postmodernism. Biblical truths need to be thought through for this generation—not for a generation that has gone. This does not change the content but may involve a change in communication techniques. We must understand postmoderns before we attempt to speak to them. The following characteristics give us insight to their thinking:

1. *Opposed to system.* How can one present a systematic understanding of biblical truth when such systems are irrelevant to postmoderns? It's one thing to reject a system, and another thing to live a muddled life. Often the very ones rejecting systems organize their day, plan their vacations, and work in a routine manner, arriving at appointments on time. Modern life demands schedules, whether for travel, business, or the time to listen to the evening news.

Opposition to systems takes place only on the theoretical level, not

where life is lived. Yet there's no advantage in rejecting something at the theoretical level that proves eminently workable at the everyday level. Rejection of the strictures of modernism, the science that led to ecological and nuclear threats to the planet, is understandable and worthy; but there's more to modernism than that. There's a good side to modernism that lives on in postmodernism because life is more orderly than the theory of postmodernism allows.

2. *Opposed to a center.* Postmodernism's rejection of a center in theory cannot be lived in practice. If God is not the center of a person's life, then someone or something else will be. Idolatry was a recurring problem throughout the Old Testament. The Ten Commandments deal with the problem up front. The very first commandment says, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20:2, 3, NIV).

Humans are incurable worshipers. This is true of postmoderns as well. The end-time confrontation will involve worship, and all humanity will participate (Rev. 13:3, 4, 12). The fact that humans are worshipers stems from their creation by God (Gen. 1:26-31; 2:7, 20-25). They were made for God. If they do not worship God, they will worship some other god or gods. This is why

religion is found in every culture, however primitive or advanced. Humans are programmed through creation to seek a center to their life, to give it meaning and security. Postmodernism has not decreased the number of sports fans. Hollywood stars are still sought after. Work is often central to those wanting to get ahead. Workaholism hasn't receded with the advent of postmodernism. The effects of creation and modernism still live on in spite of the decentering theory of postmodernism.

3. *Opposed to any worldview.* There is no overarching worldview for postmodernism as there has been for all prior ages. Yet it is not possible to live up to this theoretical position. Postmodernism is a revolt expressed in many ways. One way is through liberation theology. It's a quest for political power, influenced by Marxism. Liberation theology has a worldview: God is in the business of liberating marginalized people. This is one example of how a movement within postmodernism does have a worldview in practice.

Modernity had a center and a worldview; postmodernism has neither. Yet, paradoxically, postmodernism finds itself in a shrinking world that thinks more in global terms, from economy to ecology. At the very time when order has been thrown to the winds, a global village has emerged. To this extent, in many

areas of life, a worldview has been thrust upon the very revolution that abandoned all worldviews.

With the rejection of any system, center, or worldview, the only option left to postmodernism was relativism. But relativism means that every individual has a right to his or her own view. Perspectival thinking replaced worldviews, the local situation replaced the broader context, situation ethics replaced the moral code, and personal preference replaced values. "If it feels good" replaced an objective norm. Order gives way to chaos, hope to nihilism, and the future to the ever present. There is no goal, purpose, or fulfillment. Humanity has become less than human. Thus, postmoderns have no protection from the eschatological and universal delusion of Spiritualism (Rev. 16:12-16, 13:12-17).

Such dysfunction cannot sustain viable human existence. Postmoderns are desperate for meaning and a future. More than ever, they need to know the good news of the gospel. They are vulnerable to a certain voice of truth. They need to hear the voice of God in Scripture.

How to Reach Postmoderns With Biblical Truth

The gospel is everlasting (Rev. 14:6), first given to humanity after the Fall (Gen. 3:15), and consistently the same throughout Scripture. It's this gospel that Christ commis-

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sioned to be taken "to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people" (Rev. 14:6, NKJV) to "the end of the world" (Matt. 28:20, KJV)—which includes postmodernism. It's the good news about salvation that every human needs to hear. This presupposes that it's possible to be heard by all, whatever their culture or experience.

Scripture states that "since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse" (Rom. 1:20, NIV). Paul speaks of the Gentiles having the law "written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness" (2:15, NIV). This includes postmoderns.

Humans were made in the image of God (Gen.1:26, 27) with a point of contact for God to communicate. Although this image has been defaced through the Fall (3:1-7) and subsequent sins, it's not destroyed.

This is why Christ is still the light that lightens everyone coming into the world (John 1:9). The fact of the image in no way discounts or detracts from Christ as the light to the world. Christ as Creator (John 1:1, 2; Heb. 1:1, 2) chose to make humanity in such a way that after the Fall, it would be possible to reach humanity in its fallen condition and bring enlightenment, even to postmoderns. It is also vital to recognize the function of the Holy Spirit in this process. For two things are crucial: not to underestimate the longing in the hearts of postmoderns and not to underestimate the power of the Holy Spirit to satisfy that longing.

If Christ made all humankind in His image, this includes postmoderns. If Christ put within the human mind a longing for Himself, this includes postmoderns. If conscience is the location where God speaks and His voice is heard, then this includes the consciences of those who espouse postmodernism. Yes,

It's true that for some the new science has contributed to the insecurity in postmodernism. But far more than a new way to look at reality (for example, light as a particle or wave) is the insecurity produced by nuclear science. Postmoderns believe the world began with a Big Bang and wonder if it will end that way.

postmoderns have overthrown the unified worldview of modernism. Yes, they are awash in a seemingly meaningless sea of pluralism without chart or compass. Yes, their lives are hectic, stress-filled, and often dysfunctional. Yet still they bear the image of God and have a receiver on board to hear the good news of the gospel. Their case may seem hopeless, but their very hopelessness makes them long for hope, and open to the only One who can bring them meaning out of chaos. As Augustine of Hippo said, "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee."

Generation X is a product of postmodernism. The question, How do we reach postmoderns with biblical truth, must also be asked of the Xers. In their book *A Generation Alone: Xers Making a Place in the World*, William Mahedy and Janet Bernardi (an Xer) explain what the X generation is like. The X generation were born between 1961-1981. It was called the X generation because it was perceived that they

stood for nothing and believed in nothing.¹² It's a generation dominated by technology. Half of them are divorced, one in three were abused. Born in the time of President Nixon, they have never known trust in leadership. For the first time in American history, this is the generation, for the most part, who will not have it better than their parents.¹³

Mahedy and Bernardi claim, "Einstein's relativity theories along with quantum mechanics and recent discoveries in astronomy have rendered all previously held positions obsolete. Reality is far more complex than we had imagined it to be."¹⁴ It's true that for some the new science has contributed to the insecurity in postmodernism. But far more than a new way to look at reality (for example, light as a particle or wave) is the insecurity produced by nuclear science. Postmoderns believe the world began with a Big Bang and wonder if it will end that way. The Xers have had a rough life and find themselves in a rough environment. Aloneness

defines the generation. This is not loneliness, rather it is a life of activity without family and friends. Postmoderns struggle with issues of abandonment, alienation and aloneness. Their greatest need is for a cohesive family unit.¹⁵ This is where we must begin. Not with Daniel 2. But with their needs and attempts to meet them.

In fact, "Generation X has been spiritually starved, emotionally traumatized, educationally deprived, condemned to a bleak economic future and robbed of the hope that should characterize youth." Those in Generation X live in a time when the world has become a "global village," when the major problems halfway around the world are graphically displayed on the nightly news. In such a time "a great spiritual hunger has arisen around the world as we repudiate the moral and intellectual emptiness of modern life and resist the impersonal forces of vast and dehumanizing systems."¹⁶

We must not underestimate this genuine spiritual hunger. The emotionally wounded and spiritually empty postmoderns face an end of their civilization very much like the ancient Athenians. They lack security. In spite of all the relativism, pluralism, lack of worldview, center, with dislike of systems, objectivity, absolutes, and the transcendent, the needs of postmoderns cry out for the very things they have rejected.

This is crucial. They cannot live their own theories.

Perhaps the best way to help postmoderns is to come close to them and share with them what Christ has done for us and offer them a relationship with a personal and present God who loves them. Tell them they belong to His family. Christ lived and died for them. There is a certain future for them so much better than the present. Christ is coming for them, to give them that which they do not have and cannot get from the relativism and confusion of postmodernism. Christ's presence with them now and His coming for them soon can give them the security that propositional truths bring, and set them free from the meaninglessness that comes from the many voices.

For after all, postmoderns were made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26, 27), and though that image is ever so damaged, it still provides a point of contact for the Holy Spirit to enlighten them (John 1:9). It is to postmoderns that the final cry will go forth: "Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great! . . . Come out of her, my people" (Rev. 18:2, 4, NIV). It will be an authoritative, certain, and welcome voice to free postmoderns from the Babylonian confusion of pluralistic voices.

Like ancient Athens, modern Babylon crumbles. It has nothing lasting to offer. The invitation to

come out of her goes forth under the Latter Rain (Joel 2:28, 29) “Spirit of Truth” (John 14:16, 17) who authored the Scriptures (1 Peter 1:10, 11; 2 Peter 1:21). He will come to “guide . . . into all truth” (John 16:13, NIV). Christ the Living Word and Scripture the written Word, with its *sola Scriptura*, are the only hope for postmoderns. The Savior and Scripture provide the only optimistic worldview, with glorious love, purpose, peace, security, and hope that negate the meaninglessness, purposelessness, pluralism, relativism, and confusion of postmodern life.

Postmoderns are open to all voices and thus open to the voice of God. Many postmodern theories cannot be lived. Postmoderns are vulnerable because of disappointed relationships and disappointed theories. These make them vulnerable for a certain voice. We must not underestimate their need or the ability of the Holy Spirit to meet it as we mingle among them as their friends. □

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