

## Postmodernism and Current Theological Trends (Progressive Christianity)

### I. Introduction

- A. The postmodern paradigm has spawned many new philosophical and theological trends that affect orthodox, evangelical theology. The purpose of this briefing outline is twofold: For readers to be aware of these trends, and to be able to discern if any of these changes might be taking place in their own churches.
- B. A reminder of the definition of postmodernism: PM in many ways is a reaction against modernism that has been brewing since the late 19th Century. *In postmodernism the intellect is replaced by will, reason by emotion, and morality by relativism.* Reality is nothing more than a social construct. Your identity comes from a group. Postmodernism is characterized by fragmentation, indeterminacy, and a distrust of all universalizing (worldviews) and power structures (the establishment). It is a worldview that denies all worldviews (metanarratives). *In a nutshell, postmodernism says there are no transcendent, universal truths valid for all people.* Instead, individuals are locked into the limited perspective of their own race, gender or ethnic group. (For more information on PM see Briefing Outlines: #54, #58, #62, and #69).
- C. It is because of PM that we currently see such insanely and idiotic trends where people can reinvent their own identity despite their natural endowment, such as changing your gender, or race or whatever. It is because of PM that we are no longer governed by law but by the will of the strongest group. What is true, what the facts are, is not important. With PM, all cultures, no matter how barbaric they might seem in our eyes, have equal standing.
- D. Contemporary theological trends showing definite influence of PM have many appellatives. Some of them are: Post-liberal Theology, Narrative Theology, Storied Theology, Post-conservative Theology, Woke Theology, Progressive Evangelical Theology, and The Emergent Church. These groups, though having different names, have more in common than ideas that are distinct. I am also going to do the unthinkable and refer to the above-named groups under the umbrella of *Progressive Christianity*.
- E. The Theology of these groups represents a significant move away from a biblical worldview and reformation theology.

### II. Distinguishing Characteristics of These Groups

Each group noted above has certain defining features, but as we are going to try and demonstrate, they all have a common core as a result of PM influence.

- A. Post Liberal Theology is a movement occurring near the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century mostly in the old mainline denominational churches. This school of thought believed that *all thought and experience was socially mediated*. It's main leaders were deeply influenced by the neo-orthodoxy of Karl Barth. They believe the main emphasis in theology should not be on doctrine, but rather on experience, tradition, and narrative, i.e., piety is more important than doctrine. PLT is sometimes referred to as *narrative theology* (See the following).
- B. Narrative, or, Storied Theology developed late in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and it was proposed that the Bible be taught as narrative (stories) rather than in a systematic way (read *doctrine*). This way the people will decide what the bible teaches rather than the professionals. Theological systems, they say, *become a source of power for controlling the church*. It does not wish to proceed beyond the stories. NT is more content to ignore seeming contradictions and trying to harmonize stories. NT claims revelation does not consist of a theological or philosophical system, but instead comes as a narrative. This usually means that there can be multiple right interpretations of a story (passage). NT as in appears within Evangelicalism, is neither all good nor all bad (the Bible does consist of stories or narratives). What bears watching is the trend. Hear for example what one

proponent says: *Narrative theology, because it functions in the realm of story rather than system, has more breadth for multiple right answers, or multiple interpretations...* J.R. Daniel Kirk. As in PM, interpretation does not consist in trying to find the exact thoughts of the author of a text, but instead relies more on the subjective interpretation of the reader.

- C. Post-conservative Theology, or, Progressive Evangelical Theology (also called *The Evangelical Left, The Religious Left, Progressive Christianity*, or the *Christian Left*) is very similar in its belief structure as the above, but its major emphasis is on political reform and social justice, so much so, that it clearly resembles the Liberation Theology so popular in the Catholic Church and found largely in South America (to be discussed later).
- D. Woke Theology is a movement pretty much confined to Black churches. It is a movement away from what they would characterize as *White Evangelicalism*. As noted in the previous movement, it emphasizes political activism toward social justice, and again bears a strong resemblance to the Marxist-leaning Liberation Theology.
- E. The Emergent Church, or, The Emerging Church's main characteristic is reactionary. It is a movement against the old traditions and the inauthentic worship trends that seemed too canned and based on slick marketing (not all of their reactions are bad!). Perhaps it's greatest departure is its move away from objective truth, the authority of Scripture, and sound doctrine. In many of these churches even traditional preaching has been eliminated. It consists primarily of millennials and younger. Like all of the above, they eschew doctrinal statements as divisive.

### III. Critique

In this brief critique I wish to show how each of the above groups collectively departs from a biblical worldview indicating the influence of PM. I do not mean that every group shows all these characteristics with the same consistency or intensity, but in general, they do.

- A. Their view of Scripture: Overall there is a lowered view of Scripture and a definite movement away from the objective truth of Scripture to a more mystical view (almost Barthian). One writer (Kirk) insists that Jesus is his ultimate authority and not the Bible!! PCs have high regard for the stories or narrative literature of Scripture, and it is not necessarily important that they are true history (for example: Gen. 1-11). In some circles there is a real hostility to interpreting the Scriptures in a literal, normal manner. Even some passages are overtly rejected: Here is what one leader said about the biblical flood in Genesis: *a god who mandates an intentional supernatural disaster leading to unparalleled genocide is hardly worthy of belief.* (Brian McLaren).
- B. The Gospel: As a whole, there is a movement away from the biblical teaching of vicarious atonement (that Jesus' death was to atone for our sins). Since being inclusive is seen as a very high value, their doctrine of atonement in many cases equals universalism. Some progressive Christians even refer to the Biblical doctrine of atonement as *cosmic child abuse; why would God kill his own son? He is God; he can just forgive if he wants to!* Any thing having to do with Christ's shed blood is generally avoided. Instead of preaching the biblical gospel you might hear this: *We just need to preach God's love and bring justice to the oppressed.*
- C. Sexual Ethics: With regards to homosexuality and same sex marriage these groups are very ambiguous about their views, and in many cases very affirming of LGBT issues in their attempt to be inclusive. On the subject of abortion you will usually note silence, but in a few cases, some progressive Christians will speak out however so timidly against the practice.
- D. Women: Progressive Christians would totally defer from Paul's teaching about male leadership in the church. Female elders and preachers would come under their belief about inclusion. Rather than a complementarian view they would teach egalitarianism. Paul was simply reflecting his patriarchal culture.

- E. Hell: Perish the thought! God is a loving god and would never *torture* (the word they like to use) people for eternity. Again, they pick and choose what they want to believe. That God is Holy is a totally ignored teaching. You will never hear of God's anger or wrath. Listen: *It is never our job to confront people with their sin; it's our job to just to love them.*
- F. Politics: One of the characteristics universally found in these progressive groups is that they are very active politically, and almost entirely (I know of no exceptions) on the left-wing of the perspective. The philosophy of Hegel and Marx is not a problem for a church that is progressive. Progressive churches, or, those moving in that direction will be very *lefty friendly*. In some churches, especially those that advance leftist views, you will find their political beliefs are indistinguishable from Liberation Theology.

Progressives see the state (a strong central government) as a Messianic and benevolent entity that can bring about social justice and true equality. It was Hegel who said: *The state is the march of God through the world.* Passages on charity in Scripture are generally taken not as personal commands to redistribute their own wealth, but as the task of government which redistributes the wealth forcibly. Jesus never called for the state to redistribute the wealth. Progressive Christianity is rooted in Hegel's idea that humanity is perfectible. The Biblical view teaches that man is fallen and Utopian visions are doomed to failure.

Social Justice as understood by PCs is state redistribution of wealth and equality of outcomes, a collectivist idea of the common good, freeing the oppressed, all of which requires a strong central government. It is about a powerful state doing *good things* (who decides that?) A Biblical view of justice involves equal treatment under the law and makes provision for individual rights. With PCs you will often hear: *Vote for so and so, he's a real social justice warrior.*

- G. Progressives insist and believe every local church must be multi-cultural. *To be a Biblical church it must be multi-racial and multi-ethnic*, to this we agree. But, a multi-cultural church is another matter. A culture is the embodiment of a worldview. Some cultures have worldviews contradictory to a biblical worldview. However, in a progressive church with PM mentality, you cannot discriminate or even evaluate another culture in light of a biblical worldview. What actually happens in practice is an emphasis on differences which in the culture at large results in tribalism and identity politics.
- H. In progressivism there is a great emphasis on community which is a good thing, however, a Biblical worldview, affirms *both* the individual and the group. In the PM culture community or group is what makes you! Your choices and behavior are socially determined.

IV. Liberation Theology argues that the Bible reveals Jesus not as savior of the world, *but as the Liberator of the oppressed. He's the God who takes the side of the poor and calls for their liberation through corporate action. Instead of giving people their just due, justice, in the liberal understanding, is giving people what they need from the civitas under compulsion of the state.* (Regis Nicoll). Rather than saving individuals, God wants to save whole societies and cultures. LT is an unholy union of Marxism and Christianity with a lot of Marx and very little of Jesus. It arose in the turbulent 60's and rapidly spread throughout Latin America. Pope Francis and former President Obama, are two famous advocates of LT.

V. What to look for in your church

Currently, Progressive Christianity is going through a major growth spurt for a variety of reasons due to the PM cultural influence. Therefore, it is not too hard to say: *Coming to a church near you!* What are the signs I should be looking for? Listen for certain phrases, words and ideas to be bandied about from the pulpit and in the congregation.

- A. Watch for these kinds of comments about the Bible: *The Bible is just a human book* (yes, but it is also divine and inspired by God); *The Bible contains the Word of God* (No, it is the Word of God); *I think the Apostle Paul got that wrong* (No, what he wrote is also God's Word)

- B. Traditional Christian doctrine, or what the Holy Spirit has taught the Church for over 2000 years is open to re-interpretation in the light of contemporary culture and scientific achievement. How I feel, or my opinion is the ultimate authority. Watch for complicated new interpretations of the Genesis Creation account to accommodate modern science. Watch for very creative new teaching on issues like homosexuality, marriage, and abortion. You might hear something like this: *I thought homosexuality was a sin till I met some really nice homosexual Christians*. A literal hell is offensive to postmodern mentality, and will sometimes be denounced as *archaic teaching* (more likely the subject will never be mentioned except to criticize fundamentalists). Do you ever hear someone say: *That passage of Scripture just doesn't resonate with me*. About the issue of women in the church (being elders and preachers) listen for someone to say: *Paul was just accommodating his patristic culture*.
- C. Watch how age-old theological terms are defined. I'm referring to such terms as *biblical inspiration, biblical inerrancy, the gospel, Adam in the OT*, etc. Be very wary; these terms are currently going through some very cagy redefinition. I recently read a very good defense of the historicity of Adam in Genesis. However, some who take this position that Adam was a real historical character also believe he evolved from ape-like hominids, and that at some point, God breathed into him and he became human.
- D. Watch how the Gospel is preached and presented. Is the emphasis entirely on *God's inescapable and remarkable love* (which is true). Is there ever any mention of man's sinful state. While you might find this hard to believe, the teaching of universalism among those who call themselves evangelical is happening now. (See the book: *God's Inescapable Love*, by Tom Talbott). There will be great emphasis on the fact that God is inclusive, and won't reject anyone who might not have all the correct beliefs.

## VI. Conclusion and Summary

If religion is tantamount to a worldview then *religion and politics do mix!* Every area of life including political and economic theory must come under the Lordship of Christ. Ever notice how emotional and serious people become when discussing their political views? Of course you have, and I have speculated about this for years. Why this is so? I believe sincerely, the reason is: because what they believe politically, is their real worldview. Progressive Christianity with political ideas borrowed from Hegel, Darwin, and Marx cannot be harmonized with a biblical worldview. Because PC has succumbed to the ideas of the political left it has seriously compromised in other areas of traditional Christian beliefs. The Biblical worldview must inform politics not politics inform theology.

*We have a generation that is less interested in cerebral arguments, linear thinking, theological systems, and more interested in encountering the supernatural. Consequently, churchgoers operate with a different paradigm of spirituality. The old paradigm taught that if you have the right teaching, you will experience God. The new paradigm says that if you experience God, you will have the right teaching.* Leith Andersen, *A Church For The Twenty-First Century*, p. 20,21.)

### For Further Study:

- Davis, John Jefferson. *Your Wealth in God's World*.  
 Erickson, Millard J. *The Evangelical Left: Encountering Postconservative Evangelical Theology*.  
 Gibbs, Eddie, and Bolger, Ryan. *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures*.  
 Grudem, Wayne. *Politics According to the Bible*.  
 Mattson, Brian G. *Politics & Evangelical Theology*.  
 McDermott, Gerald R. *The Emerging Divide in Evangelical Theology*. (Journal article available online).  
 Nash Ronald H. editor. *Liberation Theology*.  
 Nash, Ronald H. *Social Justice and the Christian Church*.  
 Phillips, Thomas R., and , Okholm, Dennis L. *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation*.