

Feature Article: DP331

THE GREAT DIVIDE: THE CHURCH AND THE POSTMODERNIST CHALLENGE

by Donald T. Williams

This article first appeared in the *Christian Research Journal*, volume 26, number 2 (2003). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: <http://www.equip.org>

MENDING WALL

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun,
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
The work of hunters is another thing:
I have come after them and made repair
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.
We keep the wall between us as we go.
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
We have to use a spell to make them balance:
"Stay where you are until our backs are turned!"
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
Oh, just another kind of out-door game,
One on a side. It comes to little more:
There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, "Good fences make good neighbors."
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
"Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down." I could say "Elves" to him,
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
He said it for himself. I see him there
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors."

Robert Frost

SYNOPSIS

The greatest challenge facing the church today is postmodernism. What is at stake is not just Christian truth but whether any assertion can be regarded as truth. Postmodernism questions the very framework of shared experiences and the categories of thought (what can be called “the tradition”) that make possible any rational communication between the church and the world.

By questioning all shared experiences and categories, postmodernism obscures all distinctions, including distinctions between true and false, right and wrong, heaven and hell. Questioning is intellectually useful. It is a means of refining our thoughts, but it is not an end in itself. If logical thought and objective facts no longer limit questioning, then all distinctions are erased, and all walls are torn down.

Having erased all distinctions and standards, postmodernists argue that no one can objectively judge Western civilization, which the tradition has shaped, to be superior to any other civilization. The church and the West are not identical, but they do share a tradition of thought that has shaped both. The church, therefore, as the bearer of truth to the world, must be concerned with answering postmodernism’s assault on the very basis for understanding truth.

Today the church faces a challenge far greater than the Renaissance, potentially more divisive than the Reformation, and more insidious in its inroads into the life of the church itself than the secularist rationalism of the Enlightenment. I am referring to postmodernism.

If this sounds alarmist, well, I am alarmed. As both a college professor and a pastor, I have watched this new threat grow in the academy, and I now see it becoming firmly planted in the lives of Christian young people who love Jesus, go to Bible studies, and sing all the right choruses. Their thinking is increasingly structured and controlled by a postmodern paradigm that is in deadly conflict with the Christian worldview and the Christian tradition as understood by Christians of all types — Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, Reformed, Dispensationalist, and Arminian. They are unaware of the contradiction between this new paradigm and the Christian worldview; indeed, pointing out that there *is* a contradiction is likely to have little meaning to them.

What is at stake is not just Christian truth but *whether any assertion can be regarded as truth*; in other words, what is at stake is not just the Christian message but the very framework of shared experience and categories that makes possible any communication between the church and the world it was sent to reach, and even between members of the church. Postmodernism is hostile not only to the Christian faith but also to anything we in the West have ever recognized as rational thought. Since the academy is still the primary spring from which postmodernism flows, I shall describe it as I have encountered it there. It is important that we not simply condemn and reject postmodernism, but that we first understand it so that we have a basis for making a judgment about it and can effectively minister to those bamboozled by it.

QUESTIONING THE SAYINGS

Christian professors face a challenge. Many of our students come to us like the farmer/neighbor in Robert Frost’s “Mending Wall.” They will not go behind their fathers’ sayings, but they like having thought of them so well that they say them again, “Good fences make good neighbors.” In other words, they don’t really question what is behind their cherished beliefs. Some professors have a little mischief in them that wants to put an idea into their students’ heads: “Why do fences make good neighbors?” Another type of professor, however, often styled a “postmodernist,” wants to go further. This type questions not only why fences make good neighbors or even whether they make good neighbors (which might be questions

worth asking), but also whether fences are nothing more than arbitrary social constructs that provide no true basis for distinguishing one neighbor from another, or a good neighbor from a bad neighbor — “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.” This obscuring of all distinctions gives their more traditional colleagues pause, who fear that civilization will be destroyed and the barbarians will return when all fences have been knocked down.

By “postmodernist” I do not mean all people who have adopted that label or had it applied to them; neither am I defending modernism (the attempt, since the Enlightenment, to subsume all reality and all knowledge under the rubric of rationalistic scientific objectivity); nor am I implying that having gone beyond modernism is necessarily bad. Christians were pointing out the limitations of modernism long before it was fashionable to do so, but they did not do so by throwing the rational baby out with the rationalist bath water. If we are going to leave one error behind, it behooves us not to exchange it for a worse error.

Postmodernism, as I will use the term, means precisely that style of disillusionment with modernity that is too sophisticated to clearly distinguish between babies and bath water because it rejects all distinctions as arbitrary impositions upon a reality too complex to be categorized. Angry at themselves for having trusted in scientific rationalism’s promise to deliver absolute truth with absolute objectivity, postmodernists cynically reject all truth claims as equally empty promises. Having been disappointed, they start from the conviction that *anyone* peddling truth claims is selling snake oil. Believing that truth is an illusion, they see all attempts at analysis or even definition as thin disguises for the imposition of power. Postmodernism, therefore, manifests itself in literary study that ignores (or “deconstructs”) meaning or even aesthetics. It concentrates, instead, on the ways that texts advance the agendas of various groups, usually defined in terms of race, class, or gender. In this article I will contrast postmodernism not with modernism but with something far older, which I call “the tradition.”

By “postmodernist” I do not mean every scholar who has looked at race or gender issues in literature; neither do I mean only the hard-core followers of postmodern thinkers, such as Jacques Derrida and Stanley Fish; rather, I am including scholars (and their students — even their Christian students) who have adopted the methods of these thinkers. These scholars and students may not have thought through the epistemological and ethical implications of these methods, but their analyses are nonetheless affected by them.

By “traditionalist” I do not strictly mean conservative Christians. I am referring, rather, to thinkers as diverse as Socrates, Erasmus, and Aquinas, as well as the great Protestant Reformers, Edmund Burke and Samuel Johnson, Thomas Jefferson and Russell Kirk, C. S. Lewis and T. S. Eliot, Dorothy L. Sayers and Flannery O’Connor. These intellects are held together by a tradition that makes them all, despite their differences, part of a single conversation taking place in the same universe of discourse. Some of these people found themselves on different sides of various philosophical and theological fences, some were outside the church, but they were still able to cooperate in examining and repairing these fences — “to each the boulders that had fallen to each” — because the fences were something objective that both sides had in common. They differed from the type of postmodernist thinker I am describing because they believed that, while the usefulness or proper location of any given fence might be an open question, there *is* a difference between one field and another, between one belief or statement and another; and, unlike the postmodernist, they did not want to tear down (deconstruct) all the fences they inherited from their ancestors.

The Value of Questioning

Questioning is intellectually useful. By it the mixture of truth and error, gold and dross, that constitutes our thoughts is refined. For the traditionalist, questioning is not an end in itself; it has value in so far as it aids us in refining our thoughts. If, however, as postmodernists would have it, questioning is made the end in itself rather than refined thoughts, then the process of refining our thoughts grinds to a halt, and truth and error, gold and dross, remain mixed. According to postmodernism, what was once a commonly valued intellectual currency — truth — becomes indistinguishable from error.

The traditionalist, furthermore, questions and distinguishes between truth and error, gold and dross, using two tools: the first principles of logic and objective facts. First principles of logic are the universal basis of logical thought, such as the law of noncontradiction, which says something cannot be both true and false at the same time and in the same sense. The postmodernist thinks these laws are just arbitrary social conventions. Facts, furthermore, to the postmodernist, are not objective; rather, they are endlessly receding, changing, arbitrarily selected bits of experience. If questioning is no longer limited either by first principles of logic or objective facts, then not one stone is left upon a stone in any wall; truth becomes the same as error, gold becomes the same as dross, heaven becomes the same as hell. When the mind becomes its own place in which there are no distinctions, where both fields are the same, then indeed Frost's apple trees do get over and eat the cones under his neighbor's pines; chaos has come again.

Questioning the Questions

The believing church is the most forthright denier that the mind is its own place and is the strongest contender for the existence of objective truth outside the mind. It, therefore, bears the brunt of the attack. What is under attack, however, is something even more basic: the very legitimacy of the larger human conversation of which the church has been a part. What is questioned is *anyone's* right to assert that *anything* is true. Any "totalizing" or "centering" discourse — that is, any claim to have a viewpoint that is more than rationalized self-interest — is also denied as illegitimate at the outset.

This is more than the old modernist relativism: truth is not only denied as *illusory*, but it is also indistinguishable from *evil*. Truth for the postmodernist is and can be nothing more than a disguise for the exercise of raw power, for if there is no truth or value, then all that is left is power. Only an infinite series of questions, never leading to answers, is allowed. Postmodernists therefore question everything and affirm nothing — except that all affirmations are illegitimate! Not only is this self-contradictory (how can they legitimately affirm that all affirmations are illegitimate?), but it is also really the ultimate form of intellectual rebellion against authority, especially the authority of God, who is the source of all truth. Christian civilization in general and the church in particular are singled out for special attention in the application of this intellectual acid that eats away at the foundations of all claims to truth, meaning, and authority.

Questioning the Western Tradition

One of the things that postmodernist scholars love to question is the unique value, the superiority, and hence the authority of our Western civilization. They question the legitimacy of giving its history, its philosophy, its literary canon a "privileged" place in the academy. We have traditionally viewed Western civilization to be the result of a blending of elements from Greek, Roman, Jewish, and Christian sources that produced a unique and precious set of values: the primacy of truth, the rule of law rather than of men, the worth of the individual and his or her liberty, freedom of speech and religion, democracy — treasures that have arisen and been sustainable only in those societies nurtured by this tradition. The seeds of these treasures were planted at least as early as Plato's "Apology of Socrates" (ca. 400 B.C.) and found in Christendom the providentially prepared soil in which alone they could truly flourish. They emerged only gradually even there, and never perfectly. The impetus for these treasures, however, was inevitably part of the tradition, which reached its greatest political fulfillment in the British common law and the American Declaration of Independence and Constitution. These values are precious and fragile, hard won by the blood of our ancestors; and because of the evil that lies hidden in even the best of human hearts, they are in need of constant defense if they are to be preserved. Traditionalists readily admit that the Mosaic law, Socratic inquiry, Roman law, and Christian love were not at all points compatible. Still, they think that the ways they have interacted within Western history have produced a set of ideals that are consistent at their core and provide a foundation for building a better world.

A postmodernist thinker, however, looks at this set of ideals and sees nothing but a cloud of vapors. Choosing to focus on the tensions rather than the harmony in the complex ways these four strands of thought have interacted, the postmodernist naturally sees nothing but chaos. Choosing to focus on the

West's failures to live up to its own ideals, the postmodernist is blinded to the ways in which these ideals have nevertheless liberated the human spirit to an extent found nowhere else. Reading history through the lens of jaded cynicism, the postmodernist sees nothing but power being exercised for its own self-preservation. The ideals for which America's founding fathers pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor are nothing but excuses for the wealthy to hang on to position and power and deny them to everyone else. Christianity is just the white man's religion, reason is just the white man's way of thinking, and lofty ideals are just the white man's smokescreen for his real agenda: keeping women and minorities in perpetual subjection.

To the traditionalist, the view that Western civilization is the great oppressor of women and minorities, and exists only by systematically excluding them, is a curious construct. Indeed, this view ignores the fact that this civilization, even given its imperfect record on human rights, has never permitted such non-Western "enlightened" customs as foot-binding, female genital mutilation, the veil, or suttee (the practice of burning a man's wife on his grave after he dies); indeed, it stands out among human civilizations by condemning them as barbaric. To cast this sort of judgment that Western civilization is somehow superior, however, would be to imply that there is some absolute standard by which all societies, including our own, can be measured — and that idea, being a particularly Western idea, must itself be a "tool of the oppressor." When a universal perspective from which to make these kinds of judgments is denied, the mind becomes its own place and perception becomes reality. Many women and members of minorities perceive themselves as being oppressed by this Western tradition. This is understandable, given the mistreatment to which they have been, and are still being, subjected, but their perception that this is the fault of the tradition itself does not necessarily make it so.

The postmodernist might ask "How can black persons, who feel marginalized and excluded by a society still dominated by white Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs),¹ consider the heritage of Western civilization as *their* heritage?" Perhaps by considering that there could have been no "Letter from Birmingham Jail" by Martin Luther King, Jr., if there had not first been David Thoreau's "Essay on Civil Disobedience"; and there could have been no "Essay on Civil Disobedience" unless there had first been John Milton's "Areopagetica"; and there could have been no "Areopagetica" unless there had first been Plato's "Apology of Socrates." They might come to see certain dead white European males as their potential liberators rather than as the engineers of white male dominance and discrimination, and they might come to see Dr. King as a fruition of the Western tradition, not its negation. They might also realize that, if they do value equal protection under the law and at least the chance to be judged by the content of their character rather than the color of their skin, it is precisely Western civilization, that "horrible American WASP phenomenon," that needs to be defended, protected, and transmitted to the next generation.

Traditionalists thus rest their case. The postmodernists, however, are still unimpressed. To the postmodernists, the mere presence of slavery, segregation, Jim Crow, racism, and sexual harassment in the past and in the present of the West reduces the traditionalists' case to a set of self-serving rationalizations. When the postmodernists look at the church, they see only its complicity in these evils. They shove detailed analyses of these phenomena at the traditionalists, who simply shrug their shoulders and say they have never denied them. Flawed human nature produces them everywhere, they remind the postmodernists. Their point is not that the West is immune to human flaws but that it alone holds out the promise of something better. To the postmodernists, however, that promise, like all human words, is empty air.

Questioning Truth Itself

The traditionalist and the postmodernist stand and stare at each other across a huge chasm of misunderstanding. Each grows increasingly frustrated with the other, for they are constantly tossing facts and arguments at one another to no avail. Their words fall unheeded into the abyss that divides them. Unlike Frost and his neighbor, they cannot even cooperate to repair the boundary about whose rationale they disagree, for they are looking at the world through two different sets of presuppositional glasses, which cause everything they see to look different. If objective truth has indeed been exploded, then truth

claims are *truly* (!) nothing more than power plays. Philosophy and literature are nothing but class warfare conducted by other means, and the postmodernist is just more honest about the situation. If, however, objective truth has not been exploded, then false sophistication has marked the postmodernist analyses of the situation — analyses that are both morally and intellectually perverse, for these scholars are working constantly to undermine the foundations of the very civilization that makes possible their freedom to examine, express, and promote ideas.

WHICH VIEW IS RIGHT?

The difficulty in discovering whether traditionalism or postmodernism has the correct view is the fact that any analysis one might offer is already committed to one of the two paradigms at the outset; fortunately, only traditionalism makes real analysis possible. If we point out that postmodernists are constantly trying to convince us that their insights are *true* as opposed to *false* (which is something they ought not to do since they deny this distinction), or if we notice their dependence on the all-or-nothing fallacy (e.g., any influence resulting from race, class, gender, etc., is taken as proof of determinism²), or if we call attention to their addiction to reductionism (e.g., their tendency to reduce the universal human experience to nothing but issues of race, class, gender, etc.), they will, in keeping with their theory, respond that these critiques have validity only within the traditionalist paradigm, which is the very thing that they are questioning. That, however, is precisely the point. The very logical distinctions that we have always thought intrinsic to the universe, which make reality intelligible to the human mind, are dismissed by the postmodernist as arbitrary social constructs — “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, that wants it down.” Can the postmodernist really escape these distinctions and really live without them?

Perhaps we can answer this question by asking whether even questioning itself — of anything, including the tradition — has any meaning in a paradigm from which all answers are rigorously excluded. The traditionalist does not mind being questioned; tradition demands self-criticism. Before a man builds a wall, he wants to know what he is walling in or walling out, and to whom he is likely to give offense. He wants to go behind his father’s sayings (though, if he is a Christian, he is willing to stop at *the Father’s*). Having done so, however, he still finds himself helping his neighbor repair the wall, for he knows that one thing is not another, that A is not non-A, that some things are really right and others wrong, and that therefore some boundaries necessarily exist. The postmodernist knows these things too, though he (or she) does not want to admit it. He must live according to the tradition every time he pulls up to a stop light, or types a letter, or orders a pizza. Why? Because reality refuses to cooperate with the theory that there is no distinction between a red light and a green light (that A is in fact non-A), or that words have no meaning that connects with the real world outside the mind. If a postmodernist sends back an anchovy pizza on the grounds that he had really ordered pepperoni, he destroys his own position. He shows that, whatever he may say when he is theorizing, he actually does expect his words to connect with objective realities in the external world. The traditionalist, however, does not follow a line of questioning in which all answers and all legitimate boundaries are excluded from the outset and in which all fences are, by definition, arbitrary exercises of power. He (or she) sees no point in *that* kind of “outdoor game” — a game that can be played only on the protected field of academic theory, but which *cannot* be applied to real life. Reality constantly forces the postmodernist, unintentionally, unwillingly, and unavoidably, to admit that the tradition is right.

Perhaps a second way to answer this question is to ask what it is that we human beings really value: goodness, truth, and beauty (for Christians, they are the manifestations of God’s character, His Word, and His glory), or “the endless free play of the mind in the text”? That, indeed, is the question. Paths sunder, paradigms are committed to, and interpretive communities are formed at precisely this point. The postmodernist may answer that any value judgment is also a product of the traditionalist view, but he cannot avoid making them himself; indeed, he surreptitiously sneaks back onto traditionalist ground here as well. He thinks that the free play of the mind is *good*, that it is *true* that there is no truth, that his opinion is *more than* a self-serving rationalization. He really tries to have it both ways, but he cannot have

it both ways. Either truth exists and can be known or it does not. Either words have a meaning that can be discerned in context or they do not. Good and evil are either objective realities accessible to the human mind or they can be no more than subjective preferences. Reality entails these distinctions, and they are inseparable, for *both* the traditionalist and the postmodernist. They are walls we all have in common.

THE FUTURE OF THE TRADITION

With these matters the church must be fundamentally concerned. The church is not identical to the Western tradition and indeed must sometimes stand against it, but it has contributed a great deal to that tradition. Were the tradition to topple entirely under postmodernism's assault against the possibility of truth claims, the church would topple with it (at least in the West). Making a particular set of truth claims is the essence of its mission, and any assault against the possibility of truth claims is an assault against its mission. If the church survives intact, the Western tradition will survive with it, as the best of classical Greece and Rome did when it preserved them in monastery libraries during the Middle Ages. If the church acquiesces and adopts the postmodern view that there are no walls at all, it will be transformed into something that can no longer be called "the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15 NASB).

God, of course, will not allow that ultimate acquiescence and transformation to happen, for He always preserves a faithful remnant. Much damage, nevertheless, will be done unless we are vigilant. Some damage has already been done because of our failure to sufficiently prepare our young people to recognize and to defend themselves against this new threat, and because of our slowness to realize the need to supplement our old apologetic that has focused on answering modernism, which has long been passé. There is reason to hope, however, that such vigilance may be fruitful.

If there is no objective difference between true and false and good and evil, people are not going to commit themselves to examining the most important questions of life. I have a sneaking suspicion that with no walls whatsoever, all the pointless activity that remains, all the endless free play of the mind in open fields, will quickly produce a disillusionment more deep than any we have seen since the collapse of Rome. Boredom and barbarism may then seem to be the only options available. We may, in fact, be entering such a time already. It is surely part of our calling to keep some memory of both Western civilization and Christian truth alive and vibrant enough to serve as a viable alternative to those terrible choices in that day.

NOTES

1. Alert readers will have noted that not all of the individuals I have listed as bearers of the tradition were white, and many were neither Anglo-Saxon nor Protestant. I am rather characterizing the caricature of the tradition in an American context as it is often encountered from the postmodernist left.
2. Determinism is the view that all events are rigorously determined in advance by some force, usually either natural, social, or economic, with the implication that human agency is itself merely the inevitable outworking of such force.