Why Should Christians Think about Postmodernism?

Postmodernist epistemology is a pretty abstract topic. So what are the practical lessons that we can glean from thinking about it?

First, it helps us to avoid two errors. We should cherish and cultivate some elements of postmodernism and abhor some others. So any response to it that is either completely negative or uncritically positive is wrong. Complete rejection of everything postmodern is culturally backward, intellectually wrongheaded, and denies the common grace found in every culture. Yet we should be wary of those who think of themselves as “postmodern Christians” or “post-evangelicals” or the like: By and large, they dismiss modernism (or some caricature of it) with scorn while uncritically adopting a postmodern agenda without careful biblical reflection. “We want relational truth, we want Jesus the truth incarnate, not propositional truth,” they say. This is wise in its affirmation and foolish in its denial. For example, there are at least eight “believe that ______” clauses in John’s Gospel, where what is to be believed is some propositional truth (see John 11:27, 42; 14:10, etc.). Some of these cases make it clear that believing some specific proposition is essential for salvation (see John 8:24; 20:31). Scripture can be expounded in inaccurate, boring, and irrelevant ways, but this does not mean that we should give up the faithful exposition of God’s Word. Let God be true, and every worldview a liar. We are so adept at teaching Christians to be fulfilled, and so practiced at inviting them to live the abundant life, that we neglect to prepare them to die well. Yet only those who are passionate about laying up treasures in heaven are equipped to live and serve well here.

Second, postmodern openness to “spirituality”—which often means something like “authenticity”—encourages us to ensure integrity, humility, and consistency between our teaching and our conduct. If people visit our churches and face condescension, dismissiveness, self-righteousness, or what is perceived as religious cant and sloganeering, they will leave pretty quickly. As far as I can see, postmodern visitors cope equally well with innovative styles of churchmanship and more conservative styles, provided they “read” what is going on as genuine, authentic, sincere, humble, and unfaked. These have always been Christian values, so here postmodernism merely provides us with an extra incentive to be what we should.

More specifically, postmodern emphases can enhance our Christian lives in these ways.

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2. Postmoderns often value personal relationships over truth structures. Of course, we do not want to sacrifice the gospel that was “once for all entrusted to the saints” (1 Tim. 3). But it is always good to be reminded that lost men and women are not mere potential information receptacles. They are people—God’s image-bearers. We should always mirror Jesus’ attitude as he wept over Jerusalem (see Luke 19:41–42). There are countless ways we can adjust our evangelistic priorities if we remember this.

3. Because of the postmodern penchant for open-ended interpretation, it is becoming more and more important for Bible teachers—whether they are speaking to large crowds or leading small groups or counseling others one-on-one—to show that their teaching and encouraging are grounded in Scripture. Now, of all times, we must not back away from God’s Word. Instead, we must become more explicitly scriptural, so that Christians see that we always trace the most fundamental issues back to what God has said. Then if someone replies, “Oh, that’s just your interpretation,” we must never let this evasion go unchallenged. With the text open before us, we must ask our challenger what his or her interpretation is and then examine what Scripture actually says. Where there is uncertainty, we should admit it, where an interpretation—whether theirs or ours—is weak or false, it must give way to Scripture.

by D.A. CARSON