



Biblical Responses to Secular Beliefs

(6) Postmodernism

Ephesians 6:10-20

Hebrews 1:1-4

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This morning we will get back to the series of sermons call “Biblical Responses to Secular Beliefs.” The reason for this series is that we live in a society in which the secular way of looking at the world is the dominant worldview and secular beliefs are everywhere. Some of them are obvious. But others are not. And they influence us. It is inevitable that our thinking be influenced by the culture in which we are living. And some of those influences are in ways that are contrary to the biblical way of looking at the world. It is our calling as Christians to resist being conformed to the thinking and the ways of the world and to be renewed in ways that conform with the character of God and the Bible. And part of that is by reflecting on Truth in the light of error or error in the light of Truth. We are in the midst of a battle and an important part of winning the battle is to have a solid foundation in the Truth and having some insight into the false ways of looking at the world by which the devil seeks to influence us.

Listen to the way that Paul speaks of this in Ephesians 6:11 & 14. “Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.... Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth....” That is what we are trying to do - fasten on the belt of truth to be helped to stand against the schemes of the devil. That implies both insight into the Truth and into the schemes of the devil. This morning we want to consider another of the schemes of the devil which is known as postmodernism. We will consider postmodernism and then we will

consider the biblical teaching in the light of that error or false teaching or scheme of the devil.

Before we begin I want to say something about the necessity of this kind of thinking. When we are thinking about postmodernism we are thinking philosophically. More particularly the area of philosophy that we are thinking about is called epistemology. Epistemology is the study of how we know what we know. How do we find the truth? How can we be certain about anything? Clearly there are a lot of opinions about what is true and what is not true. Epistemology seeks to bring clarity to that whole process of how we can know what is true and what is false.

Now that is a fascinating subject for those who are wired to enjoy that kind of thinking. But for most people – not so much. Most people are not into thinking about such abstract things and just want to get on with their lives and make a living and have a good time and be nice people. And most Christians also do not want to spend a lot of their time thinking about things like epistemology either. They just want to get on with their Christian lives and learn practical things and keep the abstract thinking to a minimum. And that is just fine. We are not all wired to be philosophers and there is no text that says that we need to be.

However, some thinking along these lines is unavoidable for Christians, because Christianity is a way of looking at the world and we are surrounded with people who look at the world in different ways. Christianity is a comprehensive truth-claim about God, about the Bible, about how the world got here, what it means to be a human being, about the meaning of history and where it is all going to end. All of the truth claims of Christianity are about things that philosophers philosophize about. And one of the great truth claims of Christianity has to do with how we know the truth about the great questions of life – does God exist?, how did we get here? and what does it all mean? One of the fundamental truth-claims in Christianity is that we know the answers to the most important questions of life from the Bible – that the only way that we can know the truth about the nature of things is by God speaking to us from outside of the creation through revelation.

That is an epistemological assertion. When you say, “I believe that the Bible is true” or “I believe that God exists because the Bible says so,”

you are making a profound philosophical statement. My point in all this is simply to say that some degree of this kind of thinking is unavoidable for Christians. It does not matter what you call it. It just matters that you understand a little of it.

And so with that in mind let's think a little about postmodernism and what the Bible says over against the claims of postmodernism. The Bible does not say anything about postmodernism explicitly, because postmodernism was not invented yet when the Bible was written. But what the Bible says about how we know what we know does address what postmodernism says about how we know what we know.

So postmodernism is about how we know the truth and its central claim is that we cannot know the answers to the big questions of life.

Christianity says that we can know the answers to the big questions of life because God has told us those answers in the Bible and also to some extent in nature. Postmodernism claims that it is impossible for us to know the truth about questions like whether or not God exists and how the world got here and what it all means. Postmodernism claims that human beings cannot have true knowledge about the nature of things.

Now this way of thinking did not just come out of the blue. It is just the latest thing in the history of human thought about the great questions of life. It is called postmodernism because it is a reaction to modernism. Modernism is the way of looking at the world that thinks that we can find the truth about the great questions of life on the basis of reason and science and evidence and experience. Modernism is still alive and well because there are still many people who believe that the big bang and evolution explain how the world came to be. Everyone who is confident that there is nothing beyond this physical world is a modernist. And there are still lots of them out there.

But there has been a reaction to that confidence in knowing the truth about things. Philosophers have thought deeply about the question of how we know what we know and they have come to see that it is a rather complicated area when you dig into it and some of them have come to the conclusion that it is impossible for us to know much of anything for sure, especially when it comes to the big questions like the existence of God or how the world came to be and how we know what

is right and wrong. Postmodernism does not only reject the Christian answers to those questions. It also rejects the answers to these questions given by modernists and all other worldviews.

Postmodernism says that there is no way of knowing for sure whether God exists or whether he does not exist or if the world began by creation, or by the big bang or if it has just always existed.

What this amounts to is the denial that there is one great big truth that is true for everyone. This is where you get the kind of thinking that something can be true for one person and not true for another person – or that something can be right for one person and wrong for other person. That is a postmodern way of thinking. There is no truth that is true for everyone. We all have our own truths, but there is no truth that is just out there that is true for everyone.

Now we must understand this is about big truths such as the existence of God or what is right and wrong. Postmodernists do not deny that $1 + 1 = 2$. It is hard to deny that if you get hit by a car, bad things will happen to you. Postmodernists can't very well deny the law of gravity and such things. It deals with deeper questions like why there is gravity in the first place and why there is anything at all and what does it all mean. Postmodernism says that we cannot know the truth about those kinds of things. There is more to it, of course, but I only want to get into this as deeply as is necessary for our purposes as Christians to help us not to be conformed to the thinking of the world.

The basic idea is that when it comes to the big questions of life there is no such thing as capital "T" Truth. There is no Truth that is out there that is true for everyone. There are only small "t" truths or points of view. If there is one big truth that is true for everyone, we have no way of knowing what it is and so all we have is our own opinions. And every opinion is just as valid as any other opinion when it comes to things like morality and the meaning of life and those sorts of questions.

One of the aspects of this is that we are all influenced in what we believe to be true by our upbringing and by our culture. A person who is born in India of Hindu parents is more likely to view the world through the lens of the worldview of Hinduism. A person who is born in Canada of secular parents is more likely to view the world through the lens of

the secular worldview. That is obviously true, but what postmodernists make of that is the claim that truth is a subjective matter which is determined by your environment rather than it being an objective reality that is true for everyone whether we believe it or not. The postmodernist takes this obvious feature of the world and make it into a principle of their understanding of reality – namely that there is not one truth for everyone – there are only points of view and there is no way for us to come to the capital “T” truth about the nature of things.

One of the implications of postmodernism is pluralism. There are different ways of thinking about pluralism, but for postmodernism, pluralism is the conviction that everyone’s truth is equally valid. If we have no access to capital “T” truth, then there is no way to say that one person’s truth is better than another person’s truth. If there is no Truth that is true for everyone, there is no way to judge the validity of other people’s beliefs. All worldviews are equally valid. All moralities are equally valid. All religions are equally valid.

And this is where our society’s understanding of toleration comes from. Toleration used to mean something different than it does today. It used to mean that everyone has the right to say what they believed but people still believed that some people were right and other people were wrong. Toleration today is believing that everyone’s point of view is equally valid. Every worldview is equally valid. You can’t say that one is right and the other one is wrong.

The one thing that is not tolerated is the conviction that one worldview is right, and all other worldviews are wrong. It is this way of thinking that is behind the strong language against Christians when we insist that Christianity is true and all other ways of looking at the world are false. It is this way of thinking that is behind the strong reaction to the Christian refusal to affirm homosexuality and transgenderism as legitimate and healthy choices. The greatest commandment of postmodernism is toleration and the one thing that it will not tolerate is the Christian viewpoint that there is only one valid way of looking at the world and there is an objective standard for right and wrong which comes from the Bible. Postmodernism is tolerant of every viewpoint except the Christian viewpoint because Christianity insists that the worldview of

the Bible is the only valid worldview and that the Biblical teaching on sin and righteousness is the only true standard of morality and that it applies to everyone. That exclusivism is the unpardonable sin from the postmodern perspective.

The worst thing you can be is to be intolerant. Those who claim that some ways of looking at the world are false and only one way of looking at the world is true are viewed as bigots and extremists and fundamentalists and dangerous. The irony, of course, is that postmodernism is extremely intolerant of those who differ from them in affirming all others no matter what they believe and how they live. And we are seeing this intolerance more and more in our society as there is a growing willingness to use shaming and intimidation and even the law to force everyone into line and so religious freedom is under attack.

Now there is a lot of pressure on us to accept the postmodern way of looking at the world. This is another one of these convictions that is part of the environment in which we live and there is a strong temptation to conform. There is the shaping influence of hearing those ideas again and again and again. There is the shaping influence that comes from the fact that postmodern assumptions underlie the values that are reflected in the media and the people with whom we interact. And there is the shaping influence that comes from the fact that it is difficult to live with the knowledge that we are considered to be bigots and homophobes and intolerant and extremists and generally an unhealthy and unwelcome presence in society. There was a time when people who disbelieved in Christianity, nevertheless, saw it as a positive influence in society. Those days are gone. We are not welcome. Our views are considered to be harmful and hurtful.

And all of that is a powerful incentive to conform. And it does cause many to conform. There are all kinds of people who claim to be Christians who have conformed. There are all kinds of churches and denominations which have conformed to the current affirmation of homosexuality and transgenderism. Many of the people who leave Christianity do so because of its so-called intolerance. And so there are strong incentives for us to adjust our convictions so that they are not so

contrary and offensive to the people among whom we live and move and have our being.

Now one of the interesting things about postmodernism is that it is a reasonable way of looking at the world if you do not accept the Bible as the word of God. Indeed the Bible teaches that the only way to know the truth about the nature of things is by receiving the revelation from God that comes in nature and the Bible. The truth in postmodernism is that finite man cannot find the truth about reality on his own. The Bible also teaches that finite man cannot find the truth about reality on his own. It teaches that implicitly by means of its teaching about revelation from God. It does not give a lot of attention specifically to the fact that mankind cannot find out the truth about the nature of things on his own.

That is very interesting and significant. We can say on the basis of biblical truth that there is no way for mankind to come to know the truth about reality on the basis of reason alone. But the Bible does not frame the problem in that way. The problem as the Bible expresses it is not that man is unable to find the truth apart from revelation from God, but rather that mankind is not looking for the truth in the first place. The biblical approach to the whole subject of mankind and the truth is that we know the truth about God and the world but by nature we suppress what we know to be true. The problem is not that we cannot find the truth. The problem is that the truth is all around us and we hide from it because the truth is that God is our Creator and our King, and we refuse to submit to him.

A verse that puts this very clearly is John 3:19, "And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil."

The biblical answer to how we know the truth about the nature of reality is that God has revealed it to us both through the creation and in the Bible. One of the ways that God has revealed himself to all people is through our consciences. Romans 2:14-15 says, "For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their

consciences also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them....” Everyone knows that they are accountable to God because God has written his law on the hearts of all people. This is different from God writing his law on the hearts of his people when they are renewed. This refers to conscience – a sense right and wrong that everyone has. And that conscience reveals God to us because we all know that we are accountable to him.

But the greatest revelation of God is in the Bible. The Bible begins with the words, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” and it goes on from there. The biblical teaching about how we know the truth about the nature of things is interesting in that it is more about the revelation of a person – the person of God than it is about some abstract revelation of Truth. It does talk about the Truth, but the truth is closely tied to God himself.

This is expressed by the fact that the focus in the Bible about human beings knowing the truth about reality is on the word of God – which is God speaking. A key verse here is Hebrews 1:1-2 which says, “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son....” The key here is that God has spoken both by the prophets and by his Son. This is the claim of the Bible over against postmodernism and over against any other way of looking at the world. God has spoken to us. God has spoken to us through our consciences. God has spoken to us through the creation. God has spoken to us through the prophets. God’s word through the prophets is preserved for us in the Old Testament and God’s word through his Son is preserved for us in the New Testament.

The word “truth” is a common biblical word. It is a rich word that has many different facets of meaning, but an important part of its meaning is that we know the Truth by knowing God. God and the Truth are closely connected. Psalm 119:160 says, “The sum of your word is truth....” Isaiah 45:19 says, “I the LORD speak the truth; I declare what is right.” Isaiah 65:16 refers to God as the “God of truth.”

Jesus said of himself in John 14:6, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” In John 16:13 he said, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the

truth..." In John 17:17 Jesus said to his Father, "[Y]our word is truth." In Ephesian 1:13 Paul writes to the Ephesians, [Y]ou heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation."

This is the claim of the Bible. Postmodernism says that we cannot know the truth about reality and morals and the nature of things and so there is no truth that is true for everyone, but there are as many truths as there are people. The advantage of this from the perspective of the world is that we are all free to believe what we want, and we are all free to live as we want. So from a postmodern perspective everyone is free to do their own thing and to live as we please and to live for whatever we feel like living for.

The biblical picture is very different. The Bible is God's revelation of himself and of all meaning in the light of him. In the biblical worldview God is at the center and the purpose of human life is to serve and live for God. In the biblical account the great problem of the world is sin. What postmodernism calls freedom, the Bible calls slavery and emptiness and futility.

Listen to how Paul speaks of this in Ephesians 4:17-19, "¹⁷Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. ¹⁸They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. ¹⁹They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity." What postmodernism call freedom, the Bible call darkness and futility and ignorance.

Postmodernism is a celebration of ignorance. It celebrates its claim that we cannot know the truth about reality and so we are free from any truth claim that we choose not to accept. The Bible is the revelation of the holy and glorious creator-God of which it speaks. It reveals him as the King over all who is to be submitted to and served. It also reveals him as the God of goodness and love who wants the very best for the human beings that he has made.

The Bible has bad news for those who insist on defying God, but it claims to be good news in Jesus Christ. The theme of the Bible is

salvation for sinners in Jesus Christ. It is about the love of God for a sinful world that led him to send Jesus to be the Saviour of sinners. Jesus lived and died and rose from the dead and God invites sinners to believe in him for forgiveness and healing and renewal. Indeed, Jesus invites us to follow him as the light of the world and he promises that if we do that we will no longer live in darkness. John 8:12, "¹²Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'"

The Bible has a very different way of talking about the good life than the world has. The world says – live as you please. Many people find that to be an empty life. Many people experience pain because there is ultimately no satisfaction in living for ourselves. The Bible claims to be the Truth. It is in fact God speaking to man revealing himself as Lord, but also as merciful Saviour and he claims that a life that is rooted in his love is life as it was meant to be lived.

Postmodernism promises freedom in ignorance and delivers slavery and emptiness. God in the Bible asserts his divinity and his authority and his holiness and he commands us to repent of our sins and believe in Jesus. He claims that living for him is full and satisfying because we were made by him and for him. What he said to Israel long ago he also says to us – Deuteronomy 30:19-20, "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life...."