MD TORRES

HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE —WITH— POST MODERNS



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Acknowledgements

To every postmodern I have ever journeyed with.
Thank you for being my Rabbis.

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Introduction

I want to begin this book with a twist. Rather than introduce myself as a church growth guru, boasting about how much of a postmodern outreach expert I am—complete with my list of accomplishments including a growing church that meets in a cafe on Friday nights in the city's main party strip (none of which is true)—I want to unfurl the theatrical curtains to show you a completely different and unanticipated scenario: My failures.

No, you are not overdue for your next visit to the optometrist. You read that right. I want to begin this eBook by taking you on a journey through every dramatically botched and fumbled attempt at outreach I can remember. Because the truth is, I have stuffed it up more times than I have gotten it right.

I'll start with my teen years. I was born and raised in a premodern[1] Latino church, situated in Newark, New Jersey on a small hill overlooking the Hudson river into Manhattan. I have fond memories of that church. It's where I learned how to play spin-the-bottle and truth-or-dare, where my first three girlfriends came from and where I apparently slapped a nice lady right across the face, echoes and all, as she attempted to hold me as a baby in the middle of the worship service. It was also where I was introduced to my Christian faith and taught how to share, express and experience it. But there was a problem: the premodern ethos of my home church did not exist in the world outside.

Modernism was winding down and postmodernism was gaining greater influence.[2] But we had no idea. To us, the world was simply in rebellion against God. There was no attempt to understand the culture, to get to know their value structures or to befriend them.

Our premodernism insisted that we were right and they were wrong because we had the infallible Bible as “the” only source of truth. Those who rejected it were simply sinful, rebellious people who were denying what they knew to be true.

Except they didn’t know it to be true. Their rejection of scripture was grounded in modern and postmodern sentiments. The questions were profound. The objections were intellectually compelling. There were strong cases to be made for atheism and relativism. But never mind all that. That’s too much work. Just stick to your bubble. The ideology that keeps you comfortably in the ivory tower of “rightness” and everyone else in the valley of “wrongness”. Because it’s comfortable there, and the world makes sense from up there. Step down into the valley to have meaningful discussions, to come close to the culture instead of attack it, to befriend the sceptic instead of debunk her and you might get soiled by their obstreperous heathenism. So I stayed. Far away from the culture, despite the fact that I attended public school all my life. Far away from truly knowing and understanding. What was the point? I had this caricature in my head—a straw man if you please—that I found quite snuggly. This cartoon of culture, how it thought and what it really needed, that informed how I felt about it. And because I had this, I didn’t need to get to know people because I already knew that so long as I told them the truth and showed them they were wrong then the little voice of conscience they spent every waking moment inebriating would eventually get to them and they would fall on their knees confessing what they had known all along.

This shallow and one-dimensional picture I had of people, addiction, existential anxiety, brokenness and doubt was fueled by the assumption that everyone knew exactly what I did: the Bible was true, God was real, and Jesus was the only way to heaven. Those who denied it were really only denying what they knew to be true

because they were looking for an excuse to party, get smashed and have sex with whoever, whenever. And all I had to do—good little Christian me—was tell them they were wrong and I was right. I could talk about how their lifestyle was sinful; and offer them Jesus. I could tell them their hearts were unsatisfied; and offer them religion. I could point out their nefariousness with undeniable conviction; and offer them salvation. It was easy!

Until it wasn't.

One of my earliest memories "witnessing" was with a secular friend in High School. Aramir was his name. We hung out all the time. One day—for reasons I can't remember—we got onto the topic of faith and somehow I ended up turning it into a discussion on why I didn't listen to secular music. Here was my chance! I could tell him how bad it was, how it warped your soul and twisted your mind by awakening carnal desires and leading you to embrace mendacious ideological constructs. So I dived right in with all my arguments prepared. Nothing about Jesus. No relational expression of faith, God or scripture. Just a good old lecture on the evils of secular music that would have made my conservative community weep with pride and joy. My friend listened carefully. He never appeared upset. In fact, I thought I had somehow gotten through to him. But I was wrong. Dead wrong.

He never asked me about God or faith again. A year or so later we graduated school, went our separate ways and I never saw him again.

Opportunity blown.

But I can't stop there. I am compelled, for some strange, uncharted reason, to tell you more. Allow me to fast forward a few years to my

early twenties. I had just joined the Army and was stationed in Schofield Barracks, Hawaii. A young soldier there whose name was Baner (we went by last names in the Army), found out I was a Christian. One day he came to my room and engaged me in a conversation on faith. He asked what would happen to all those people who had never heard of Christ. Could they go to heaven?

My conservative, premodern glasses wouldn't allow it. After all, there was only one source of truth. And the Muslims and Buddhists didn't have it. So I looked him in the eye and boldly proclaimed the unadulterated truth: "No". That was my answer. And I was proud. In the face of the sceptic I had stood firm for what was right and true. Baner was shocked. *Is that the kind of God you worship?* His peering eyes, a soft azure that cut through your soul, asked. He shook his head and stood up, "Nah. Forget it."

Conversation over.

Shortly after, my roommate challenged me to a friendly discussion. I had no idea how to have those, but I enjoyed it about as much as anyone can enjoy getting mopped on the floor by an intelligent agnostic who defied all of my caricatures. Then came Wilson, a drug addict who kept asking me where God had been during his dark nights of agony. Baner, also an addict, had the same questions. I had no answers. My premodernism had taught me that no matter what, you can always trust in God. But these guys had really good reasons not to. And I had lacklustre arguments that, while satisfying for me, left everyone else in the room wanting.

One day, Wilson came by my room and declared, "Someday, Torres. Someday, I will be free!" A perfect opportunity to invite him on a truth seeking journey, wasn't it? Except, I froze. I said nothing. He disappeared shortly after. For two years no one knew where he was.

He turned up again, consequently got arrested and sent to military jail where he stayed until he was dishonorably discharged. I knew where he was. I knew how to get there. How to make an appointment. How to get in.

I never visited him.

Is that the worst of it? I'm honestly not sure. There was also the time that the Command Sergeant Major of my battalion had a once-in-a-lifetime conversation with me. It was remarkable. Command Sergeant Majors are the highest ranking enlisted soldiers in the Army. I was separated from her by six ranks which meant the chances of her and I talking about the notability of Jesus' claims were about as high as the average citizen going out for a pizza with their State Governor. Having even a basic, mundane interaction with people up there is rare, let alone an unveiling-of-the-soul kind of chat. And that's exactly what happened. Mourning the recent death of her husband, the Command Sergeant Major looked at me, the file and rank of military structure faded, the wall disappeared, grace was up to something. "I don't know what I am going to do with my life now," she murmured.

There weren't any tears or broken words. After all, she was a high ranking enlisted soldier in charge of an entire battalion. You don't get there without freakishly high levels of tenacity and self-control. But her eyes, lost, as she gazed over the horizon of my cheap office table, unveiled an agony that few had ever seen and one which human eyes, I would venture to assume, would never see again.

My reply? "Sergeant Major," I leaned forward with the paperwork she needed, "You have to sign right here."

She snapped out of it. Signed the paperwork. And off she went.

What the heck?

This experience reminds me of an illustration: A man wakes up in the morning and tells God he wants to witness for him but is afraid. So he asks God to give him a sign whenever God wants him to witness. The man leaves his house and boards a bus. At the next stop another man boards. The bus is empty but for some strange reason the other man sits right next to the would-be-witness.

Sign one.

Then, the man begins to weep.

Sign two.

Followed by a heart wrenching cry: “What must I do to be saved?”

At that moment, the first man cowers in his seat. He bows his head and prays, “Lord, is this a sign that you want me to witness?”

The scene is comical, but confronting. We want to witness - but we don’t. In the experiences I have just shared, I was not equipped. My premodernism had taught me to engage with people who were like me. It had not taught me to engage with those who traversed a different path. However, I dare not blame my premodernism alone. I was afraid. Plain and simple.

We all stuff it up, don’t we? We do. But I can’t help but look back and wonder, why was I so willing to stand so strong for the right though the heavens fall (referring to traditional Christian values I thought were important) and yet not be able to engage someone in a mutual truth-seeking journey?

Powers was next. She was going through a divorce. She asked me about divorce, adultery and sex outside of marriage (she had hooked up with another guy in the unit). I answered. No journey. No mutual seeking. Just cold, hard facts. The premodern gurus would have bowed to me.

I was their poster boy.

Powers said I was brainwashed and never asked me about God or faith again.

You might look at this and say, “That's just the way it is. People are always going to reject truth!” And I don't blame you. I believed the same thing. It was a convenient belief, really. I could avoid the responsibility of coming to know people, mutual searching, admitting I didn’t have all the answers. I could excuse my poor judgment, lack of interpersonal skills and black-and-white view of reality. I could stay in my self-aggrandizing bubble—cozy and content—never bothering to consider, even just for a moment, that people were not rejecting truth. They were rejecting me. Oh, how commodious it is to live in a state of such self-delusion that you can emerge an instrument of the dark intelligence by becoming the very kind of presence that drives people away from the truth, and yet believe—I mean truly believe—you are right because you said what the Bible verse says (in the King James Version no less!).

How commodious indeed.

How many of us exist in this prison of misapprehension? This fantasy world where we have written a script of ourselves and those around us. Our script is always heroic. Theirs is either the damsel to be rescued, or the Wormtongue for whom there is no recourse—

only sharp and unapologetic words to expose him. All the while we think we are doing God a favour, without recognising that—in all our zeal—we have become instruments of the rebellion! Satan laughs. He laughs because we think ourselves so faithful, and yet it is through our unsanctified defense of the truth that he most effectively catapults his anti-God propaganda into the cultural consciousness.

But there were moments of success. Moments where I did get it right. They happened without me realising what was happening. Moments where I would take a fellow soldier's Bible question, bathe it in relational intimacy and offer them not a religion with rules and regulations, but a personal, intimate experience with the divine. They listened. I remember the nods. The eyes widening with possibility. I saw secularism and hedonism stop dead in their tracks. I saw in my friends' eyes, a battle raging deep within. Somehow, their ideological structures were collapsing in the presence of this relational God. This God of *withness* who was inviting them to a friendship. They had never encountered this before. Sensuality and the mindless pursuit of trivial pleasure bowed in the presence of something infinitely more invigorating, compelling, and satisfying.

That's when I began to realise the mind of the modern man is not reached like the mind of the premodern. The premodern assumes the authority of God, scripture, and religious teacher. The modern man holds each of these in contempt for science, he believes, has made a mockery of them all. Thus, my premodern arguments continued to be met with an echo of rebuttals: "God can't be love in light of my pain." "Where was he?" "Oh, you are religious?" "What's up with the crusades man?" "Religion has caused more wars and more horror than anything else. No, thank you, I'll just stay over here with my beer and TV remote. That'll do."

And yet, when approached with authentic relationship something happened. The walls came down. Their eyes betrayed a desire to explore. Somehow, the invitation to forget all the religious noise and just taste the goodness of God, to know him and be known by him, was a welcome proposition.

I left the Army and wound up in Australia. How? I met a pretty girl, that's how. But that's a story for another time.

In Australia I was introduced to a true secular, postmodern society. It was there in New Jersey, but my premodern bubble had shielded me from it. It was there in the Army, but my debates with modern sceptics took up all my time. Australia is a different monster. The secularism here is not anti-church. I wish it were! Anti-church crusaders acknowledge the church's existence. They are angry with it! But this postmodern, secular Australian culture isn't angry with the church. They don't even know it exists. And if by chance they *do* know it exists, they just don't care.

Okay, they know it exists in a geographical, "Yeah, that's St. Mary's Cathedral over there," kind of way. But church is not on their radar. The typical Australian, I was told, lived and died without ever setting foot in a church or even thinking about it. It just wasn't important to them.

I was interested. So I began studying postmodernism, cultural outreach and truth-seeking relationships. The more I learned, the more I recognised signs of its presence throughout my life. It was a stimulating experience, reading those books and listening to those lectures. I even went on iTunes University and downloaded entire university lectures on philosophy, starting all the way back with Socrates and working my way forward through Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Marx, Kant, Hume and

Derrida. And I learned a lot. But nothing prepared me for the real experience of setting the books aside and meeting with a living, breathing postmodern.

And then it happened. A woman in her 30s contacted me through a friend. She had never been to church before. She had never read a Bible. But one day she woke up with existential anxiety and was thirsty for answers. “How can someone as alive and conscious and full of life as me, just die and that's it? It’s over?” We met. We studied. We talked. It was insane. But she wasn’t some scary, unreachable millennial with a 30 foot thick philosophical barrier around her heart. Instead, I found her to be, well… human.

And then it happened again and again and again. A drug addict, a counselor, a physics major. But perhaps one of the most memorable of them all was this one millennial who invited me to a cafe to talk God. She was the poster girl for postmodernism. From the very beginning she lambasted me with questions about gay and transgender rights, the impossibility of knowing absolute truth and the value of feminism over against the supposed patriarchal biblical ethic (which she found repulsive). Her questions were tough. Tougher than anything my modern Army buddies ever threw at me. But by this point in my life, I had learned a few lessons. I wasn’t a postmodern guru and I’m still not. But I had learned, through failure and regret, that people don’t need gurus. They need partners. Someone to journey with them, wrestle with them, acknowledge the validity of their questions, doubts and struggles. Someone who stops preaching and assuming long enough to hear—truly hear—what their hearts are searching for.

As I sat there with this humanistic, relativistic, left-wing university student I listened long enough to hear that despite all the philosophical finesse, what she was really struggling with was a

sense of abandonment. Abandonment from within her own family and a perceived abandonment from God himself when, as a teenager, she had traversed the treacherous minefield of love, chemical explosions and romantic adventure only to be broken-hearted—or more like shattered—despite her faith-driven appeals to God's presence and guidance. *Where was he? He's just like so and so. They let me down. He let me down. I'll harp on about the injustice of empire long enough to forget how unjust those closest to me have been—especially God.*

We studied together for over a year. There was no baptism after. There was no metric by which I can measure my success with her—not by institutional standards anyways. But there was that last meeting we had where we put the philosophy aside and just spoke about pain, fatherhood and insecurity. Before we parted ways, she looked me in the eye and said, "Thanks. This is exactly what I needed."

We are still in touch and plan to study more in the future.

How did this happen? Not by accident. It happened because I failed. Over and over again. And with every failure I learned. With every failure I grew. They humbled me and drove me back to the Bible for answers. They also schooled me. They were the practical lessons I needed to discover how to reach the secular, postmodern mind. The young lady above is one of the "others"—secular, relativistic and altogether different kinds of people with worldviews miles apart from my own. I have talked, answered questions and asked many more. In the end, I have discovered that people don't need data, facts or propositions. People need incarnation. People need people. Relationship is the most potent conduit of truth.

I am still not a guru. I have much to learn. But in this short eBook I want to share with you what I have learned through pain and disappointment. In five concise chapters I want to take you through my bruises and regrets, so you can discover something that will inspire and equip you to more effectively reach this wandering and broken generation. Welcome to my school of hard knocks.

Endnotes

[1] The term premodernism has been used in reference to the historical period following the middle ages, or as a blanket term alluding to the worldview that all truth has one absolute source which, in the western sense, would be the Bible and its derived authorities, such as the church or the priest. Throughout this eBook, it is the later use that I employ.

[2] Those well-schooled in postmodern history will find this statement difficult to reconcile since postmodernism was already in full swing by the 1950s and I, after all, was born in 1985. However, keep in mind that I was raised in a region that was primarily immigrant. The vast majority of the migrant cultures brought with them the premodern sentiments of their homelands where the cultural milieu was still governed by superstition, mythology, witchcraft and Catholicism. As a result, the youth I grew up with tended to be the first generation of our migrant community to be raised in the US. This made us the first ones to be exposed to postmodern indoctrination.

Chapter One: What Are We Talking About When We Talk About Postmodernism?

Imagine a large Victorian mansion situated on a hilltop, its decorative shingles and broad columns glowing in the moonlight, and past the windows of the second floor balcony a feast is in progress. In the centre of the room, there is a large table filled with food and occupied by a group of finely dressed academics with large bellies. As they eat, crumbs from their meal drop to the floor where a swarm of crows await. Then, as the festivity draws to a close, the crows devour the morsels and rush out into the darkness where, much to your disgust, they regurgitate the contents of their buffet.

What are we talking about when we talk about postmodernism? That is a question we must answer before we take another step. Because, it turns out, the answer to that question is much more complex than many of us imagine, but also significantly simpler.

Postmodernism, as a philosophical system, has yet to be adequately defined. No one really knows what it is or how to contain it. This is intended, of course. If postmodernism is truly postmodern, then you will never be able to define it. The very act of defining it betrays its essence. A married bachelor is a contradiction of terms. A definition of postmodernism is likewise.

So then, what are we talking about when we talk about postmodernism? From a philosophical perspective, we are poking at an ideological construct that is not a construct. A house with windows for doors and doors for windows. Where stairs lead to walls and cabinet doors open to brick partitions. A house where the roof serves as part floor, part west wall, and the floor serves as the attic.

An undefined and unrestricted questioning of it all. A cynical deconstruction of any foundation of truth whatsoever.

But it's more complicated. Postmodern epistemology (theory of knowledge) is in some ways a counter-epistemology and in some ways not. Who knows? I sure don't. Words, in this system of thought, have no singular objective meaning. So then, how can we understand postmodernism if the very words used to explain it—words at times constructed anew—exist with a multiplicity of interpretive options? Well that's the point. You can't understand it. Any degree of intelligible discussion over postmodern epistemology is an exercise of the ego—an unveiling of one fibre of cultural conditioning after another—with no real content being explored. What is real and what is not? Who is to say? We just trudge along satisfied with the fact that the impossibility of containing this ideology is not to be fixed but celebrated. But what exactly are we celebrating? I don't know and that is, in itself, what we celebrate. We celebrate the not knowing what we celebrate. Are you confused? Don't be. You are meant to be.

And then there is postmodern ontology (nature of being) which claims that culture is fragmented and builds its frame on the cues it gets from culture. In this sense, postmodernism isn't simply a philosophy that trickles down, but an ontology that floats up. Though once it has floated to the mansion, it is devoured by the philosophers and then, once again, trickles back down until it is regurgitated upon the culture, a paler version of itself.

So, what are we talking about really?

The meal represents the ontology which emerges out of social, political and religious reorientation and is then codified by the large bellies we call the philosophers. As these brains, locked in the

mansions of academia, enjoy their undefinable meal, crumbs inevitably fall. These are then gathered and consumed by the influencers of society - the musicians, actors, authors, lecturers and politicians. They devour the crumbs and then, via whatever medium they employ, regurgitate the contents onto the culture (represented by the dark world outside the mansion). What this illustrates, with a touch of pessimism of course, is that our neighbors and coworkers and friends are not necessarily postmodern because they are committed to its tenets but because they have been fed by the disgorged remains of a philosophical narrative many have never even heard of.

You may be thinking at this moment—you sound awfully melancholy about this! And yes, I do. But only because the best way to paint an accurate picture is to not simply communicate data but to stimulate your senses. To disgust you with images of menacing crows spewing in the darkness long enough to inform you that this has nothing to do with birds or indigestion and everything to do with how a philosophical system finds its way from the table of the elite to the latest Pixar animation film and into the cognitive assumptions of an entire generation. The postmodernism of the culture is an unsophisticated version of the real thing in the same way that a meal is not properly represented by its crumbs and less so by its partly digested vomit.

So then, what are we talking about when we talk about postmodernism? Are we talking about an intricate creed reserved for the philosophers? Are we talking about a paraphrase of that creed promulgated by the influencers? Or are we talking about a platitudinous belief system that the culture accepts as self-evident, without the slightest idea of where it comes from and where it's headed? And while we're at it, which of these factions are we attempting to reach? The large bellies, the crows or the unseen

inhabitants of the darkness, who are unwittingly conditioned by philosophical presuppositions they have been fed since their youth?

If you downloaded this eBook hoping to gain some sort of insight into the depths of postmodern philosophy then you will be awfully disappointed. See, I don't know what you are talking about when you talk about postmodernism, but I do know what I am talking about when I talk about postmodernism. I am talking about the culture. Not the philosophers. Not the influencers.
The culture. The neighbors. The coworkers. The friends at school, the gym, the cafe. How do you reach them? How do you study the Bible with them? How do you build truth-seeking relationships with them? That's what this eBook is all about.

Perhaps you are disappointed. You were hoping for something more intellectually stimulating. A primer, or perhaps main course, on everything postmodern. But allow me to challenge you from my personal experience and interaction with the culture. The idea that understanding the philosophers will somehow enable you to connect with the culture is a myth. You don't need a PhD in postmodern ideology in order to connect with the culture. Because the culture, more often than not, has no idea what postmodernism even is. In fact, Christians talk about postmodernism way more than postmoderns talk about postmodernism because most postmoderns have no idea what postmodernism is and, in fact, have never even heard the word.

Therefore, what we Christians need is less pontificating on emerging philosophical theories and more pragmatic, in-the-trenches kind of skills. Because when it comes to reaching the culture, you don't need an eloquent understanding on post-structural, post-humanist or metamodern epistemology, sociology

or history. A working understanding helps, yes, and we will explore that. But what you really need is to incarnate into the culture. To get to know it. To listen to it. To appreciate it and contextualise your communication to their value structure and cultural anecdotes.

But why does this matter? Because we live in an age where information is at our fingertips and we run the risk of becoming more and more like Talkative--that character in John Bunyan's classic Pilgrim's Progress--who could hold an informative conversation on any topic or theme and yet lacked true experience with anything he spoke of. He was, to put it bluntly, a highly opinionated phony. As a pastor actively involved in training and equipping church members to connect with the culture, I have witnessed a trend on reading books and attending seminars on postmodern outreach until we can deliberate on the topic for hours and yet are no more capable of studying the Bible with a postmodern than before. What we need is less dizzying navigations of “postmodern theory says this and that” and more real life skills on leading the culture to Christ.

This is why it’s so important to identify what it is we are talking about when we talk about postmodernism. Because for all the chatter we often engage in, few people seem to know. As I asked before, are we talking about reaching the large bellies in the mansions? The crows who influence the culture? Or the culture itself? Because your answer to that question impacts the method you proceed with. So I stress, in this eBook it is *the culture* I am focusing on because that is the sphere in which the vast majority of us have some level of contact and influence.

However, the question goes a bit deeper than simply identifying the broad demographic that we are pursuing. It’s one thing to say we are talking about the culture and not the philosophers or trend-

setters, but even then, what do we mean by “culture”? Who are these ethereal postmoderns we keep talking about? What do they look like? Where do they hang out? How do we find them?

In my experience as a millennial pastor and postmodern aficionado, it's not that most people have no idea what they are talking about when they talk about postmodern culture, it’s that they have too much of an idea. There is an image in their head—an avatar of sorts—of what a postmodern is, looks like and enjoys. All the men have beards, fedoras and tattoos while the girls, adorned in the latest thrifty craze (because they are all protesting fast-fashion you see) and tattoos of their own, are sitting at a round table in a cafe eating ethically-sourced gluten-free vegan paninis. They talk about social justice as they sip on their turmeric lattes, so picturesque and à la mode, all the while oscillating between their present interaction and the cyber cloud to which their consciousness is uploaded (thanks to their cell phones).

“We need to have round tables in church because that’s what they have in cafes”, I hear one guru say, followed by, “yes, and festoon lights, indie bands and a pastor in skinny jeans!”

Add a Friday night Ted Talk style program, exploring themes like feminism, gender fluidity and egalitarianism and you are all set. Because, so the myth goes, this is what it takes to attract the postmodern. But the problem is, such a caricature of postmodernity’s cultural impact is narrow at best. The chic/politically active social justice warrior expression of the postmodern weltanschauung (German for “worldview”) is only a tiny substrata of this world which, constantly depicted by the media, seems to have captured the imagination of those who talk about postmodernism, but have yet to interact with its adherents.

So when we are talking about postmodernism we have to do two things: First, we have to define who we are trying to reach; but second, we have to be careful to not define too much. For those who already have, you need to let go of these pre-conditioned images because the truth is, they don't exist in the degree we think they do. And to carve out an entire methodology of outreach and evangelism to an imaginary, media-driven conceptualization of what postmoderns are, look like and value, is missiologically absurd. Postmoderns, in my experience, are everyday people who show up in a diversity of ways. The trendy world is in there somewhere, but more often than not, most are pushing 40, have no tattoos, do not listen to indie music and are all around average and, dare I say, a bit... umm... boring.

So the average postmodern is neither a philosopher, pouring daily though the metamodern manifesto, nor a DJ who spends 290 days a year taking selfies in Ibiza. And you need, before reading the rest of this eBook, to disassociate yourself from the caricatures, because so long as you embrace them your approach to mission will be warped by the expectations they create. You will be basing your entire pathway to cultural outreach on a stereotype, a corny stock-photo version of a complex and undefinable population that deserves to be encountered on its own autonomy and in its own diverse, multi-cultural and poly-expressional subsistence.

Because, when we are talking about postmodernism, as far as this eBook is concerned, what we are really talking about is a group of people who are not philosophers or influencers, but rather, mums, dads, students and workers who live by a watered-down postmodern code that they have extrapolated from the influencers, who are in turn simply paraphrasing the philosophers, who are in turn attempting to codify complex sociological shifts. Thus, in the end, what we are really talking about when we talk about

postmodernism and postmoderns is what I refer to as the pop-postmodernism and the resultant pop-postmodern. This label represents the heterogeneity of everyday people with everyday problems who interpret their existence and predicaments through the lens of the regurgitated crumbs of an ideology they hardly know exists.

So forget the philosophers and, while it is worth keeping them in our sights, we can temporarily suspend the trend-setters on the top row of our “I’ll-come-back-to-you” shelf. For now, in keeping with the scope of this eBook, let’s talk about the people around us—the ones within our circle of influence. Because, it turns out, in order to effectively reach the culture and study the Bible with a postmodern, you only really need to know three core things: They are the pattern of pop-postmodern thought; the necessity of a truth-seeking posture; and the need of narrative pathways over thematic structures. In the ensuing chapters I am going to unveil these three elements, skills I have learned through scars and failure, one by one until, in the end, you will have with you the foundational tools necessary to engage and explore the narrative of scripture with the postmodern mind.

Summary

Before we dive into studying the Bible with postmoderns we need to understand what and who we are talking about.

The “what” of postmodernism can be separated into three broad categories:

1. **Postmodern Philosophy.** The complicated and multifaceted deconstruction of modern assumptions that has yet to be defined (and perhaps never will be).
2. **Postmodern Art.** The paraphrased version of the philosophy that is fed to the culture.
3. **Pop-Postmodernism.** A further diluted version of the philosophy which is derived from the arts and converted into clichés and platitudes that people then use to navigate reality.

The “who” of postmodernism can also be separated into three broad categories:

1. **Postmodern Philosophers.** The academic large-bellies who codify the concept and expatiate its complexities and nuances.
2. **Postmodern Influencers.** The celebrities, artists, politicians, lecturers, etc. who paraphrase the philosophy from abstract thought to sensory experience.
3. **Postmodern culture.** The average, everyday person who has been conditioned to see reality via a simplified--and often cheesy--postmodern outlook I refer to as pop-postmodernism.

Application

Throughout this book, it is the pop-postmodernist that we are discussing. Studying the Bible with them means three things:

1. **Basic knowledge.** We don't need a complex understanding of postmodern philosophy. We simply need to grasp a few key concepts.
2. **Posture.** We need to adapt the energy or posture we bring to the faith-journey in order to win the confidence of the pop-postmodern.
3. **Contextualisation.** We need to contextualise our exploration of Jesus to the value-structure of the pop-postmodernist in order to lead them to the heart of God.

We will now begin exploring each of these steps.

Chapter Two: The Pattern of Pop-Postmodernism

Postmodernism is yet to be defined. And chances are, it never will be because it is this undefinable reality that makes it what it is. This is true even of pop-postmodernism. However, there are some common patterns that seem to repeat over and over again. Recognising these patterns and learning how to interact with them is the first key to studying the Bible with postmoderns.

It was about two years ago now. I pulled into a parking bay at a local university near one of the churches I pastor. It was a frustrating parking bay because you had to buy a ticket for it. Only, when I got to the ticket machine it asked me to key in my license plate number. Well, that's problematic. It's not one of those things I ever thought to commit to memory. Even if I tried, I'm a millennial. The last time I had to memorise anything was when I joined the US Army in 2004 at 18 years of age. Mobile phones were a thing then, but certainly not what they are today. So I had to memorise my social security number. I still remember it, but I will refrain from proving so because that would be dumb.

I dragged my feet back to the car—a beat up Toyota that has since been scrapped at the local wrecker—pulled out my smart phone and snapped a photo of the license plate. Read it and remember it all the way back to the ticket machine? What for? A photo will do. No mental exercise necessary. I can reserve that energy for the physics student I am about to meet—a brilliant African whose family survived the Rwandan genocide, trekked through streets littered with bodies and encountered angry soldiers looking to spill more blood on their way back to their homeland of Burundi.

I don't recall much of our time together, but I remember us discussing faith and God. It was a good discussion. Straight forward, no bells or whistles. I enjoyed it. But things got more interesting when, toward the end of our discussion this young student summarised our elegant discourse with the following unforgettable aphorism: "Everything is relative."

It wasn't the expression that I found surprising. It was the matter-of-fact way in which he said it. Almost as if this was a universally accepted principle like "the sky is blue" or "yellow coconut curry is the best food on the planet." There was no tension in his statement. As far as he was concerned, this was common knowledge. Had we been kids, his statement may have been preceded by the colloquial "duh" because it was, after all, such an obvious thing to say that surely I believed it just as much as he did.

Here is where the postmodern philosopher parts ways with the pop-postmodernist. It is a gross oversimplification to say that postmodernism is basically nothing more than moral or epistemological relativism. This idea that there are no moral absolutes, no sources of truth and that everything is relative—"your truth is your truth and my truth is my truth and both are true"—is not what the postmodern philosopher is advocating. Not that simple anyways. Nevertheless, the philosopher has enjoyed his meal. How delicious it was! But the rest of the culture does not have a belly large enough to accommodate all that food. So it is the regurgitated crumbs we have swallowed. A meal that amounts to nothing more than an adapted and inarticulate version of a complex doctrine.

In other words, the postmodernism of pop-culture is a cheesy derivative of the real thing. And yet, it remains potent and intoxicating—hence our focus on the neighbour rather than the

ideologue. Kierkegaard, Derrida and Foucault may have nurtured a profound and insightful deconstruction of thought, speech and human development, but the culture just heard the Monkees singing "...today there is no day or night. Today there is no dark or light. Today there is no black or white, only shades of gray." And regardless of whether the singers were protesting or celebrating the concept, the fact remains that what it expresses is a caricature of postmodern philosophy and not the above in all its glory. And it is this consequent burlesque that we, the Jesus follower, must encounter and engage.

But how do we encounter it? And how do we engage it? Let's take a few moments to explore the common themes inherent in pop-postmodernism so that we can understand it a little more. Put simply—let us encounter postmodern culture. Once done, we will explore the foundation for effectively engaging it.

"Works for you, but not for me."

Before the postmodern age, the culture, by and large, accepted the premodern presupposition that absolute truth was relegated to the realm of religion, church, Bible, priest and pastor. Even non-Christians shared the belief that the Bible was a divine and authoritative book. They may have disliked its condemnation of their selfish ambitions, but they did not doubt its authenticity. If ever they awoke to a sense of spiritual thirst or conviction, a Christian neighbour could explain the Bible's message to them and invite them to receive Christ. While not always successful, this was the pattern of evangelism in the premodern world. Everyone started at the same place. The Bible was authoritative. And from that starting point one could challenge, instruct and advise.

Then came the modern age. I won't bore you with all the dates and historical events that led to its arrival, but suffice to say, where the premodern age had one absolute source of truth, the modern age argued that there were many, with science taking the crown in academia. In this worldview, the multiple sources of truth had to be explored and the Bible was no longer at the top of the heap. In fact, religion came to be discredited more and more as scientific discoveries claimed to debunk its metaphysical assumptions. The theory of evolution gained traction and a literal six day creation came to be regarded as ludicrous as the flat earth theory. Science promised progress and utopia—a new era in which diseases would be cured, life expectancy would be increased and technology would radically and positively impact our quality of life.

But science didn't deliver. Instead, two world wars emerged in its wake. In fact, the new era proved to be deadlier and bloodier than the premodern world with its religious crusades and fanatical witch hunts. Scientific progress, it appeared, had not only improved how effective we were at preserving and improving life, but it also improved how good we were at destroying it. Fully automatic rifles, artillery cannons, machines whizzing through the air with explosive rockets and of course—the atomic bomb which, for the first time since human history began, introduced the possibility of complete self-annihilation.

Religion failed. Science failed.

Now of course, these things don't emerge as pretty little blocks of cultural change. The transitions are messy, not sexy. And to this day there remain premodern and modern populations that can be reached for Christ using premodern and modern methodology. And as Christians, we don't do so bad at that. Where we are failing is with the emerging generations—the ones most impacted by the

regurgitated crumbs. Because on the tail of modernism's demise there emerged a philosophical system that aimed to deconstruct the assumptions of modernity. And that philosophical system, brilliant and insightful as it was, trickled down to the culture a pale version of itself until an entire generation emerged with the mantra, "That's true for you, but not for me."

But where does this begin? Again, I won't go into a detailed and impossible to follow extrapolation of deconstructionism and relativism, but allow me to give you some foundation to stand on. For postmodern culture there is an inherent distrust in what is referred to as "the metanarrative". A metanarrative is a big story and the purpose of the big story is to string the human story together. Metanarratives can most commonly be found in religious thought. The beginning of the human story via creation, its fall and its redemption—all of it is a big story that ties human history together. It is a metanarrative.

But metanarratives have caused nothing but ideological wars. The postmodern philosopher Jacques Derrida, himself an Albanian Jew who lived through the intolerance of the Nazi uberman creed, was all too familiar with the vitriolic violence exhibited by Christians, Jews and Muslims toward one another—each group claiming to have the truth. Whose metanarrative is true? Which one contains all the light the universe has to offer? None of them. They are true only to the adherent, and beyond that they are not true. So if Christ has given your life assurance and meaning well, congratulations to you, but please, don't get the wild idea into your head that all of a sudden everyone else needs this same Jesus. He may be true for you. But he's not necessarily true for the rest of society. Every person has their own truth and must live out their own reality. Evangelism, in this perspective, is interpreted as a sort of crusade against ideas—a genocide if you will, of diversity of thought.

So when the Christian, in his premodern assumption, boldly proclaims Christ as the only way to heaven, the postmodern does not hear “one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread” but rather, he hears a totalitarian ideology intended to purge the world of its color and creativity by bringing all minds under the subjection of one overbearing construct. And this, the postmodern views with disgust. “That may be true for you, but not for me!” is her only refuge.

Again, the philosophers would not put it quite that way, but this is what the culture has embraced and made its own. And as Christians, we have a choice to make. How are we to meet this suspicion of the metanarrative? How are we to engage it? We will explore this after summarising two more core patterns of postmodern culture.

“Moral Absolutes are Oppressive”

It happened twice in the same cafe. Well, not exactly. It was the same franchise but different location. Nevertheless, it is the place where I came face to face with the most difficult question a Christian can ever encounter from a postmodern. It’s the kind of question no one seems to have a good answer to, but everyone thinks they do. So I sat there, surrounded by wooden booths, large Chesterfield sofas with a red temple kind of tint and the soft gentle rise of steam from a peppermint tea as my postmodern friend dived into the dreaded theme of transgenderism, gender fluidity and homosexuality. “I’m not sure I can be a Christian or follow a God who doesn’t affirm each of these” she said. And by the look in her eyes, I knew she meant business.

If I went straight to the Bible verses opposing such behavior the conversation would be over. She might sit there and listen respectfully, but I had learned my lesson with Aramir, Baner and Powers. Through failure and rejection I had discovered that most of the time a theologically accurate answer is not necessarily the right answer. Facts are not the apex of communicating truth, for truth transcends mere facts. Truth is a person, not a thing. If truth were merely information then of course, forget about rapport and gentleness and servanthood—just get the information out there. Put it up on the billboards in black and silver for all the world to see. Regurgitate it upon the seeker without any care for their value structure and worldview. But if truth is more than information—if truth is a person—then it can only be adequately communicated in relationship. And relationship requires trust, intimacy and an ear willing to listen to the heart behind the words.

A few months later, a local counselor on a search for meaning sat with me in the same cafe. We had connected through a mutual love of veganism and the belief that the human body was, in some spiritual way, a temple of sorts. We had a simple conversation, beginning at the beginning—the heart of God. But when the questions came, he went straight for the jugular—How do we understand God's love in light of sexual orientation? Where do homosexuals fit into this narrative?

I won't attempt to reproduce our conversations here because it goes beyond the scope of this book. But the conversation, in both instances, propelled onwards with the following question—How does a human acquire knowledge?

You may be wondering, what in the world does that have to do with the question at hand? And the answer is very simple. In postmodern culture, there is no source of absolute knowledge.

Therefore, humans acquire knowledge from a multiplicity of sources, none of which are infallible. In the end, this means that our beliefs—including our morals and ethics—come to us from a plurality of non-absolute sources. Our upbringing, our culture, our social conditioning, our environment, etc. But another person with a different upbringing, culture, social conditioning and environment could develop a different moral compass and ethic and the proposition is that the first individual cannot impose on the second individual the moral system he has developed because his is no better than the others. Both of them are right for the individuals who ascribe to them, but are not to be imposed upon another person. Any attempt to do so, whether through peer pressure, social shaming or political legislation amounts to oppression. Consequently, the LGBT path cannot be condemned because it is not wrong. There are no moral absolutes, and to try and impose the moral structure of an ancient near-Eastern document on a contemporary culture is the height of oppression and bigotry.

Because there is no metanarrative stringing the human story together, then there is no absolute moral standard. And because there is no absolute moral standard, then LGBT rights cannot be opposed. But the real issue in this entire conversation is not LGBT at all. The real issue that must first be addressed before any meaningful discussion can ensue is—How do human beings acquire knowledge? If we acquire it randomly from equally subjective sources then we have no right to label homosexuality or transsexuality a sin. And this moral relativism, once again an oversimplified version that would make the philosophers twitch on their couches, is part of what drives the ethical train that emerging generations unwittingly ride.

And how does this ethic express itself in everyday life? You will often encounter it in an “anything goes” kind of attitude. “Do whatever you want so long as you don’t hurt anyone.” “Don’t let other people tell you what to do.” “Carve out your own reality.” “It may be a sin for you, but not for me.” And on it goes.

Now, the objective here is not to condemn this mindset. We are not interested in exposing and chastising the cultural milieu. Neither are we searching for inconsistencies and holes in logic in order to win a debate. These are premodern and modern approaches to the issue. And perhaps the most difficult thing for Christians to do is to suspend their own belief system long enough to really and truly enter into the world of the other. What beauty lies within this conceptualisation of reality? What redeemable quality can we mine out of its depths?

This we will explore in greater detail because, to study the Bible with a postmodern you must be able to become a postmodern. You must incarnate into their heart and see what the postmodern sees, not in order to excoriate it, but rather to admire it. To lean in and do the hard work of finding a way to discern its poetry and prose. Because the truth is, you do not understand someone just because you can debate and berate their beliefs. No. True understanding belongs only to those who can defend the worldview of the other as though it were their own, even if it isn’t.

“The Certainty of Uncertainty”

Before 2018 ended, I hopped on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook (yes, I am old thank you very much) and invited my followers to ask questions related to faith and church culture. One of the questions that came though was, “Should Christians be involved in pop-culture?” It was a good question but quite frankly, a bit odd. What

do you mean by involved? Involved like “Clinton and Lewinsky” involved? You know, the forbidden kind of involved where healthy boundaries are crossed to the point of national embarrassment and moral disaster? Are we talking about an amoral kind of involvement like, I own every Apple product in the market? Or are we talking a lesser kind of involved like, I downloaded iTunes on my Windows desktop so that I could drag music onto my Google Pixel, does that count?

Honestly, I don’t know so I just had to take a guess that perhaps, as in countless other instances, the question was seeking some sort of reprisal for those pesky liberal Christians who can’t seem to see just how evil pop-culture is.

In reply, I appealed to the example of Paul. Now if you have read any book on reaching postmoderns or listened to any sermon, you know none of them are complete without talking about Paul in Mars Hill. It’s almost like you have to because if you don’t then you just aren’t legit. So, in order to pay my respects and gain some level of credibility allow me to also pay good ol’ St. Paul a visit as he stands before the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers of Athens.

Acts 17 has the story and I won’t exegete the text for the sake of those who have been dragged through this explanation in every other cultural outreach resource they have ever gotten their sweaty little palms on. But suffice to say that Paul, in preparation for his audience with the Greeks, immersed himself in the pop-culture of the day. He studied their poetry and analysed their mythology going so far as to equate the person of Jesus with the “unknown God” that they worshipped. Paul certainly immersed himself in the pop-culture of the day in order to reach his audience and his mantra “I have become all things to all people that I might by all

means save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22) is worthy of contemporary emulation.

But what does this all have to do with the certainty of uncertainty? Because it is in pop-culture that the heartbeat of a generation is most eloquently observed. Whether its Blondie echoing, "I know but I don't know"; John Mayer opening a window into his existential search as his voice melodiously rises and falls, "I'm a little lost at sea, I'm a little birdie in a big old tree, ain't nobody looking for me, here out on the highway"; or Mike Posner weeping lost opportunity to the poetic strains of "...you don't wanna be high like me, never really knowing why like me"—pop-culture is, in many ways, the keyhole through which we can glimpse the mood of a generation.

And if there is one thing that is evident in art and personal interaction with the culture is that there is a certainty that nothing is certain. Unlike the older generations that trusted in their government and institutions—the ones that brought them through two world wars and provided them with stable jobs—later generations trust their governments very little and share an aversion and distrust of institutions of all kinds. Vietnam, Watergate, institutional racism, the failure of the world's greatest superpower to prevent 9/11 (or maybe they caused it?) and the consequent war in Iraq premised on weapons of mass destruction that no one ever found—is it any wonder? The church can no longer pass itself off as having the moral high ground either—not when allegations of abuse and sexual misconduct are rife against lay members and all the way up to the top leaders.

Add these experiences to a worldview that already casts doubt on the metanarrative and proposes the absence of any absolute source of truth or morals, and you end up with a culture that is being dragged in three directions at once. Because when there is

no certainty to life, then the human psyche must of necessity find a resolution—something, anything, to make sense of what little meaning life appears to have. And here, the culture parts ways, which is, as I noted earlier, one of the reasons why postmoderns cannot be lumped into one easy to analyse test tube. And those three directions in which this uncertain culture is being dragged? They are indifference, nihilism and humanism.

Indifference

The indifferent approach is the one I encounter most often. It knows not and seeks not to know. Its adherents are not interested in deep philosophical questions—only to have as simple and enjoyable a life as possible. So they are content with not knowing. For them, the uncertainty of life is remedied through amusement, inebriation or the pursuit of some lofty aspiration. This pleasant creed often carries its enthusiast through the tedium of pleasure seeking, providing them with a barricade against any kind of discomfort threatened by reality. However, it also leads to disillusionment and despondency. Perhaps few have captured the futility of this approach as brilliantly as Russell Brand in his book "Recovery: Freedom From Our Addictions" when he wrote,

> The hardest thing I've ever done is toil under the misapprehension that I could wring pleasure out of the material world, be it through fame, money, drugs or sex, always arriving back at the same glum stoop of weary dissatisfaction. (28)

Nihilism and Humanism

The nihilist approach belongs to those who have made peace with the uncertainty of life and have embraced that humanity is headed

nowhere and that all is ultimately meaningless and pointless. The humanist, in turn, belongs to those who, in the face of life's uncertainty, seek to manufacture a certainty from within. For them, meaning, virtue, purpose and destiny are ours—not necessarily to discover but to devise. Inherent within man lies all that is needed to inaugurate our own certainty.

Now of course, it would be false for me to suggest that each of these categories exists neatly separated within the cultural consciousness and that I could, at any moment, separate the classes into neat little blocks with the indifferents here, the nihilists there and the humanists in that other spot. Truth is, most people oscillate between all three, and many more manufacture entirely different approaches, because to live without certainty is to never be certain about anything, including your own approach to uncertainty. Does it matter? Yes. Today it does. But perhaps not tomorrow. Is there hope? Of course not. Hope is an exercise in futility. But what if there is? Could it be found within? Perhaps. But I don't care anymore. At least, not right now. Can we stop thinking about this? Netflix just released a new series. Binge time!

So what are we to conclude? First, that postmodernism as a philosophical system and cultural phenomenon eludes us. No blanket definition exists for it and none can ever be construed. The moment you define it, it ceases to be itself and metamorphs into something other than what it has always been imagined—or not imagined—to be. However, certain patterns exist—broad themes that give us a foundation to stand on. The first is the absence of the metanarrative, the second is the absence of moral absolutes and the third is the absence of certainty.

Is this what postmodern philosophy is all about? A list of absences? A train wreck of deconstructed ideas with no adequate

replacement? Not exactly. But, in the everyday humdrum of breakfast, work and a few episodes of the Big Bang Theory, the many nuances of the philosophers are lost and this overwhelmingly simplistic formula takes their place. So then, how do we as Christians engage the adherents of such a doctrine in a meaningful and constructive way?

We will begin that exploration in the next chapter.

Summary

The pop-postmodern mantra is very diverse but tends to have a combination of these three core beliefs:

1. **There is no big story stringing the human story together.** We can only speak of our personal anecdote which is true for us, but not truer than the experience of the other. Both are true (even if they contradict).
2. **There are no moral absolutes.** Because knowledge does not have an absolute source morality itself does not either. Rather, it is culturally conditioned and what is wrong for one person may not be wrong for another.
3. **There is no certainty in life, and that's okay.** This reality is either ignored through vice, embraced through nihilistic ideology or resisted through humanism.

Application

1. **Become a storyteller.** Some have said these ideas mean we cannot approach the postmodern with doctrine but must, instead, forget doctrine altogether. I have not found this to be true. Postmoderns value small stories, so I introduce the Bible as a story about God's personal experience. It is his biography, which is broken up into small stories (doctrines). In this approach, doctrine becomes very useful because it takes the metanarrative of scripture and breaks it up into bite-size pieces. I approach the postmodern with this framework of little stories that combine to indeed tell a big story. This helps them embrace the metanarrative without becoming overwhelmed by it. For those who insist that the postmodern aversion to metanarratives is too strong, remember that we are not here talking about philosophers, influencers or even pop-postmodernists who are averse to religion. Rather, we are talking about a pop-postmodern who has already been awakened to his/her spiritual need via the background work of the Holy Spirit. We must never forget as Christians that the work of conversion both precedes and transcends us. God is the one at work on preparing the soil and making the plant grow. Our only work is to plant the seed and water it. (1 Corinthians 3:5-7) Consequently, we are not called to find gimmicks or methods by which we convince the uninterested, but rather to ask God's Spirit to guide us to the ones whom he has already prepared. Chances are, while a certain level of resistance will remain, postmoderns in this category are already questioning their own worldview and looking for a compelling alternative.
2. **Emphasise morality as the outflow of story, not as imposed or coercive constructs.** Once the postmodern begins to see the validity of a metanarrative, it's easier to discuss moral

absolutes. However, the way those absolutes are discussed is very important. Postmoderns share an aversion to power structures and hierarchies (reflected in egalitarian/anti-patriarchal values) so, introducing morality as “God said so” will never work. Instead, morality must be explored from within, as the expression of God’s love, with reality and morality designed to reflect that love. Likewise, it’s important to show to what degree moral subjectivity is indeed true. While we do have moral absolutes in scripture, there are cases where morals are culturally conditioned (ie. bowing as a sign of respect in Eastern culture versus shaking hands in the West. One is not better than the other. Both are equally good. They are relative in that sense. However, both nevertheless express the moral absolute of respect that comes from the heart of God.) More on this in the coming chapters.

3. **Reframe Certainty.** The approach to certainty will also be addressed in future chapters. Suffice to say that traditional models of appealing to people's concerns for the future don’t work with postmoderns. They are not afraid of uncertainty and welcome it. Trying to hook them with the promise of peace in the storm, assurance for the future, etc. does not work as it did with older generations driven by a more modern/premodern outlook on the future. Instead, the postmodern tends to be more interested in an equal and just society for all. Framing certainty within the social value structure of the postmodern is imperative here.

Chapter Three: Truth-Seeking vs Truth-Telling Relationships

How do we, as followers of Jesus, effectively engage our postmodern neighbours, co-workers and acquaintances? The answer to that question is the true aim of this eBook. Therefore, we will move away from the philosophical banter of the previous chapter to the practical application many of us crave. In this chapter, I will lay the necessary foundation which, if ignored, will make all subsequent points in this volume of no consequence. Therefore, I encourage you, the reader, to take seriously what I share and to seek opportunity to employ it.

Armed with a basic understanding of the cultural mindset (suspicion of metanarratives, moral relativism and a restful deportment toward uncertainty), we now have a choice to make. Shall we, the church, approach the culture from above? From beneath? Or shall we approach it from beside?

One of the biggest mistakes Christians make in attempting to reach the culture is that we approach the culture as “truth-tellers”. Some of you may be thinking, “Well, why not? After all, we are called to proclaim the truth are we not?” And the answer is “yes”. But the truth is not mere information. The truth is a person—Jesus—who communicated himself in the act of incarnation and in a life of relational intimacy with others. And the problem with approaching the culture as truth-tellers is that we enter the experience from the top—with a “let me tell you what's up” kind of posture. We are the gurus. The rabbis. The experts in all things spiritual. And we are here to school the culture.

But such an approach, while revered by the premodern who will see in the guru a spiritual giant, is interpreted by the postmodern as an inauthentic know-it-all. It raises people's defenses and immediately lowers any chance we have of reaching them. Telling a postmodern that the proposition, "there is no such thing as truth" is itself truth and therefore, they are advocating an internally incoherent and logically inconsistent ideology is a very effective way at getting the vast majority of them to not listen to you anymore. Not only are postmoderns happy and content to live with logical inconsistencies (which means your argument is pointless regardless of how clever it appears to you), but they are also more willing to trudge through the emptiness of life than embrace the elitist mentality of the bigoted premodern, religio-centric masses that we Christians most often symbolise.

So then, what are we to do? First, we must understand that when it comes to studying the Bible with a postmodern nothing will work with a postmodern who is simply not interested in the spiritual search. These insights will only aid us in better meeting the needs of the awakened postmodern—an act initiated by the Holy Spirit and not by the painfully obvious marketing gimmicks the modern church is so fond of.

But when a postmodern, awakened from their spiritual coma, seeks to understand an alternative worldview, we as Christians can immediately turn them off by approaching them as "truth-tellers", coming from above with all the answers and all the solutions. Likewise, coming at them from beneath, walking on eggshells and desperately trying not to offend, smells of spiritual contrivance and looks no better than an insecure kid at the school dance trying, to the grimace of the onlookers, to find a dance partner while simultaneously protecting himself from rejection. You cannot be in

self-protection mode and make a difference or impact in any sphere of life—so let it go.

Instead, what we are called to do is to simply emulate the way of Jesus—albeit in a limited human expression. That is, rather than approach the culture from above, with pride, or beneath, with apologies, we are to simply walk across the street and approach it as their partner in the spiritual search. In other words, we are pursuing mutual truth-seeking relationships, rather than truth-telling ones. The difference is that in this scenario, we are coming alongside the postmodern and saying, "I don't have all the answers, but let us seek truth together", and then trusting that, throughout the journey, the Spirit of God will accompany you both. In this experience, rather than telling the postmodern what to think (truth-telling) you are accompanying them as the Holy Spirit teaches them, and you, how to think (mutual truth-seeking). You answer questions, contextualise your understanding to their value structure, and ask more questions than they do. You aim to get to know the person, to appreciate them, to value them as a fellow seeker of truth. You recognise your brokenness alongside theirs and make no attempt to hide it. You are not their guru. You are their companion. You are not their teacher. You are one another's teacher. And both of you learn as you pursue a deeper experience with Jesus and a more relevant grasp of the narrative of scripture.

And it is this mutual truth-seeking relationship that we Christians must master if we wish to effectively reach the postmodern mind. We must abandon all self-aggrandizing ideas, all sense of superiority and our notorious guru/saviour complex. We must repent of our addiction and obsession to being right and instead, embrace a humble, unassuming posture with the culture. You won't always get it right. In fact, at first it will be very difficult. But as time progresses, you will find your ability improves. And the best

part is, this approach takes nothing away from the validity of truth and the message of salvation. To the contrary, it creates a wide and sturdy bridge on which to have those difficult conversations and allows the culture the space that it needs to analyse and process the beauty and discomfort of the gospel at their own pace.

There is another reason why the mutual truth-seeking approach is so indispensable in studying with postmoderns. Because the nature of postmodernism eludes absolute categorization and definitions, there is no possible way of learning what all postmoderns believe and value. Some of them are atheists, others are the kids in your youth group every weekend. Some are social justice warriors, while others couldn't care less about social justice. Some are deep thinkers—artists and thought leaders—others just like to play video games. Some are vegans with a conscience for the suffering of animals. Others don't care. Some are hipsters, others are in urban gangs, there are geeks who spend their free time designing their own desktop computers and others still, sports fanatics who have memorized the roster for every team before the season begins. Some like to shop, others believe fashion is undergirded by an immoral system of exploitation. Some are Marxists and believe strongly in ushering in a democratic socialism to cure society of its ills. Others are capitalists who travel the world, snap pictures for Instagram and make a million dollars each year. Some despise organized religion and institutionalism of every kind—others are Catholics or Protestants who find value in the structure and traditions these ancient time-tested communities provide.

And these are just the surface differences. Many other differences exist and others are emerging. Postmodernism is currently transitioning in the culture-making way for the metamodern perspective. Among the trend-setters, postmodernism is already

dead. In the culture, the transition is emanating and will shortly become the new *modus operandi* for ethics and meaning. And then what? By the time the church figures out what metamodernism is, it will already be long gone—a new proposition having surfaced with the next generation. Can we ever truly keep up with this smorgasbord of ideas teetering and tottering from supremacy to obscurity?

In the end (and as a pragmatic individual this is my main contention) it doesn't matter as much as many of us think, because the truth is, you don't get good at reaching the culture by reading every new philosophical dissertation. Rather, you get good at reaching the culture by learning how to listen. Because when you learn how to listen, then it doesn't matter how diverse your audience, or how often they evolve. Listening is all the school you need. Listening becomes your greatest ally. You are a student of the culture by sitting at the meal table, not the lecture hall. And as you learn how to listen, a fundamental element of building mutual truth-seeking relationships, you are then equipped to connect with the postmodern, metamodern or "whatever-else-comes-next" without having to run to the next 3-day workshop. You have something infinitely better.

So how do you study the Bible with a postmodern? Step One, assume a mutual truth-seeking posture. This position involves three simple skills. The first is the ability to appreciate the worldview of the other, regardless of how different it is from your own. Before any attempt is made to critique it, even in your own mind, time and energy must be invested into admiring it.

The key to being at peace with the divergent ideologies that encircle us is to be at peace with your own. As a pastor, I have observed that those who are most defensive of the truth tend to

have the greatest degree of insecurity concerning it. Be at peace with your own belief, anchored deeply in its riches, and you will be able to cautiously admire the winds of thought that vacillate all around you.

The second is the ability to ask good questions and listen to the answers. You are not the tutor but the peer—a fellow sojourner seeking truth. So you ask questions and listen. But what does it mean to listen? It means to suspend yourself and your story. It means to enter into a state of immersion in the other. You do not listen to respond. You do not listen to dissect. You do not listen to retort. You listen to enjoy, to captivate and to experience, even if just for the passing of a brief moment, the colours and shades of light cast upon the horizon of the seeker. And this listening, coupled with appreciation, will earn you the right to say, “Would you like to hear my story?”

The third is the ability to say, “I don’t know”. Postmoderns are suspicious of anyone who claims to have all the truth or all the answers. They can also spot a phony answer from a mile away. You don’t need to know it all to impress a postmodern. What impresses them is a Christian’s ability to humbly admit the limitations of their knowledge. Remember that secular postmoderns are hardly ever thinking about or looking into “church”. The exposure they have to Christianity is often relegated to Newsweek and Time Magazine articles about priests and pastors who are child-abusers, the political evangelical establishment and their hunt for legislative power (including their opposition to gay, transgender and reproductive rights) and, on occasion, the odd proselytiser. These minor exposures are enough to paint a picture of narcissistic, pushy ideologues who are incapable of interacting meaningfully with anyone outside their *cul de sac*. So when a secular postmodern

meets a Christian who is comfortable with saying, “I don’t know” or, “let’s figure it out together”, they experience a positive shock.

Just a few days ago, I spoke with a man who wants nothing to do with church. He was raised by religious parents who physically abused him and his siblings. He believes in God, but wants nothing to do with that room “full of hypocrites”. However, after discussing life, faith and God with him--using the skills of acknowledging his worldview by being at peace with mine, listening and having an open mind he ended the conversation with these words, “Now I know that when I decide it’s time to explore Christianity, you are the guy I need to talk to.”

This statement comes after years of his own spouse (and spouse’s family) hounding him to go to church and study the Bible. He has categorically rejected them every single time. But from one simple, sincere discussion he opened up like never before. This has nothing to do with me or some magical ability I have to reach postmoderns. It has everything to do with adopting a mutual truth-seeking posture as opposed to a truth-telling one.

Summary

Pop-postmodernists cannot be reached using the top-down truth-telling model. They do not want to be told what to think, but are open to exploring how to think about diverse themes and perspectives. Therefore, as Christians, we must approach them with a humble mutual truth-seeking posture that assumes a posture of student rather than guru.

Application

The way to assume a mutual truth-seeking posture is as follows:

1. **Be at peace with your own beliefs.** If you have any insecurity about what you believe, you will be incapable of assuming this posture. If this is you, take the time to build a strong foundation for your faith and explore deep answers to your questions. Spend time in prayer and Bible study with an intentional plan for what you want to accomplish (although growing in faith takes a lifetime, developing a strong foundation for that faith does not. Give yourself a timeframe, engage with a good curriculum and plan on having an end date for this exercise).
2. **Discover how to appreciate the worldview of the other with cautious enjoyment.** Timothy Keller, in his book "Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City" speaks of the need for cautious enjoyment when approaching culture, on the premise that every culture has parts that the gospel challenges and parts that the gospel is already compatible with. We need to observe the culture carefully and find whatever truth, virtue and beauty it may have. For example, the Native American and Aboriginal cultures tend to believe that ancestral spirits inhabit nature (such as land, trees, mountains, etc.) This belief, which Westerners refer to as "animism", leads them to worship these inanimate objects. Clearly, this worship of ancestral spirits is incompatible with scripture. However, it does create something that is worth celebrating and admiring: a reverence for the natural world that is often missing in our own Eurocentric culture that tends to exploit nature. Thus, we can find something of beauty even in the animism of tribal cultures that, in this example, would be the way in which they

value and protect the natural world. The ancient Native American proverb, “The earth does not belong to us, we belong to the earth,” guides their ethic on how to treat God’s creation. We can admire this without affirming ancestral worship. Likewise, we can affirm the reverence they have for their ancestors--not to the point of worship--but certainly in the value they place on their guidance and wisdom. We see this ancestral honor exhibited in tribal and Oriental cultures, as well as in scripture, and yet it can be absent in our “time-for-you-to-go-to-the-nursing-home” culture. When it comes to postmodernity, we can admire their love of equity, justice for all, and many other attributes they bring to the table. Their rejection of metanarratives has also created a space for tolerance to a diversity of worldviews which, in itself, is worth celebrating. Likewise, their relationship to uncertainty has inspired the minimalist movement that seeks to discover the meaning of life outside of material accumulation. Because life is uncertain, millennial postmoderns are not as obsessed with economic or job security as their parents’ generation and are, instead, content to pursue their passions without being enslaved to what the future may or may not hold. Learning how to see these values and appreciate them is imperative in a mutual truth-seeking relationship. It builds the rapport, respect and confidence necessary to lead the postmodern to an encounter with Jesus.

3. **Learn how to be quiet, how to ask meaningful questions and how to listen actively.** Absent in many postmodern outreach seminars and books are these practical daily skills, which many of us lack. This lack then spills over into our ability to connect with others. In order to effectively reach postmoderns we must develop the skill of zipping our lips. A truth-telling posture does not permit this, but the truth-seeking posture demands it. Likewise, we need to learn how

to ask meaningful questions and then, once asked, how to listen for the heart behind the words. Having an authentic love for people is half the battle here. The other half is practicing these skills as often as possible. See Appendix C for extra resources that can be of help in this regard.

4. **Master the words "I don't know".** I often tell my congregation that I did not learn how to study the Bible with people in theology school. I learned it in life. By interacting with people who were smarter than me, sceptics and postmoderns, I have had my understanding stretched and challenged to the max. I have said "I don't know" more times than I can remember. And it is this experience that has driven me to seek answers more and more. Nevertheless, I still don't know it all and approach every interaction as an opportunity to expand my knowledge, not to simply divulge it.

Chapter Four: Pathways vs Structures

A Buddhist, Muslim and postmodern step into a car.

Sounds like the makings of a good joke. But this is no joke. It is a summary of my working week at a local home-doctor company I worked for during the latter half of 2014. I applied for the job a few months before being hired as a full-time pastor and during the time I worked there, I spent many hours with the three aforementioned persons. We spoke of faith and life as we drove from one home visit to the other. At times, the conversations were brief. At other times, they were profound.

I miss those shifts.

How do you engage people of such opposite narratives in a conversation that many find uncomfortable? The answer is simple. You discover their value structure and then you contextualise your message to it. Take the Muslim for example. He ordered an egg and cheese McMuffin, "no bacon please". Although I knew, I asked him, "why don't you eat pork?" He answered, "In Islam, eating pork is *haram"* (which means forbidden). I saw my opportunity. "I am not a Muslim, I am a Christian, but I also believe that eating pork is *haram.*"

A simple act. Nothing wild or magical. Just a point of agreement expressed using his own language. He looked at me, surprised that he had found a Christian who shared his dietary convictions. I kept going. "I am a descendant of Abraham," I said, "and member of the Seventh-day Adventist faith tradition. We too believe pork is *haram* and should not be consumed as food. We also believe that alcohol,

sex outside of marriage and idolatry are *haram.*" By this point, the man was intrigued. "Why, you are one of us!" he quipped.

Some may look at this and think, *how legalistic! Why introduce a person to Christianity by focusing on what is forbidden?* And I wholeheartedly agree. I would never do so with a secular person who knows nothing of Christ. But for a Muslim, who is already suspicious of Christians because of what he considers questionable diet and worship practices (Catholicism's statues and saints for example), the best way to engage the conversation is to begin by calming his or her fears. By finding a place of agreement, the walls are allowed to come down. We had a great many conversations. The last time I saw him he said: "I would like to visit your church someday."

We are still friends.

The Buddhist and I had beautiful discussions as well. I asked questions to better understand her worldview even though I had read a book on it (not the same thing!). In the Buddhist mind there is no heaven or hell. There is no personal God. There is an essence that has given birth to life and consciousness and all of us must return to that essence. "But what does it mean to return to the essence?" I asked. "Nirvana," she replied, "Is not a heaven. It is the end. And no one knows what the end is, only that it is the end."

By this she meant that, upon reaching enlightenment, the Buddhist could escape the cycle of birth and rebirth. To escape meant to enter Nirvana. But Nirvana was not a place of eternal bliss and peace. Rather, once the practitioner entered Nirvana, their consciousness was reabsorbed into the essence. The autonomy and individuality of the Buddhist would then be thoroughly eradicated.

In short, for the Buddhist there is no such thing as a conscious eternal happiness. Only the end.

By asking questions, I was intending to truly listen and learn, to appreciate the lens through which she saw reality. But my questions appeared to have had an unintentional side effect. One evening, as we drove to our next appointment, she blurted out, “Sometimes I wonder, what is the purpose of life? You live and suffer only to die and it starts all over again.”

I so badly wanted to engage but we arrived at our appointment and had back to back visits after. The moment passed. But perhaps it was for the best. I didn’t need to dive into a Bible study. She was being impressed by God already. The struggle and dissatisfaction with her own worldview was evident.

But what about the postmodern? He was a typical Australian in his 30s who, by his Facebook photo album, appeared to have paid his way through university as a male stripper of some sort. He was down-to-earth, intelligent and compassionate with his patients. He was married, had two children and was struggling with the loneliness of living in a new city without any friends. As my time with the company came to a close, I told him I was moving into my career as a full-time pastor.

“What’s that?” He asked.

I wasn’t too surprised. After all, Australia is as secular as a country can get. So I had a pre-tailored response that another pastor had advised me to use. “It’s kind of like a chaplain,” I said, “except I work at a church not a hospital.”

“What’s a chaplain?” he replied.

My rehearsed answer failed to have its intended effect. Mayday! Christian down! What do I do now?

Forget the script. Time to get real and do that thing where you just have a human-to-human conversation. You know, the kind where you move your lips and tongue in conditioned patterns that create sounds his psyche had gotten good at deciphering. So away we went into conversation and, as it turned out, next to me sat an educated, seemingly happy individual who had never, in his entire life, set foot in a church. In fact, the thought had never crossed his mind.

Please understand, it's not that he was anti-church or anti-God. He had no philosophical conceptualisation of postmodernism with its deconstruction of reason or its inherent distrust of the metanarrative. Although I did not ask him then, I can guarantee you with certainty that had I mentioned those words, he would have been just as confused. No, he was not a philosopher. He was a doctor with a heart for people who simply did not know the church existed. It was not on his radar. And despite what myriad of spiritual and existential questions he may have had, the church was not on the list of places to go for answers. It wasn't on any list really. It's almost as if it wasn't a thing, period.

It simply wasn't like this for me growing up in a more premodern Latino context. In that world, most of the people we connected with and reached knew exactly what the church was, felt bad that they didn't go and had a level of respect for the Bible even if they did not ascribe to its precepts. There was the drunk who, upon seeing the church pastor, quickly hid his bottle. It's as if, despite his rebellion against God, he knew instinctively that God was real and that the pastor was a sort of representative of his whose presence who

demanded some level of reverence. Or the drug addict who entered church for the first time with his head bowed, doing his best to express reverence for the divine presence that permeated the space.

When communicating truth to this culture, there is a simple structure that is assumed. The seeker tends to ask topical questions such as, What does the Bible say about death? The Sabbath? Hell? Judgment? etc. Because this culture lives with God's self-revelation as the ultimate absolute source of truth, they also have God as the source of moral absolutes. These moral absolutes are shared by everyone, thus creating a sense of shame for those who do not live up to the code. In this scenario, many seekers are looking to resolve their shame. They are painfully aware of their own rebellion and need to discover the relief the gospel brings from the burden of guilt they carry.

But when communicating truth to postmodern culture, there is no such structure that can be assumed. The questions we Christians find interesting, the culture finds absolutely irrelevant. And the topical approach to scripture has little impact, because most of our topical resources assume an interest that postmoderns simply do not have. Because the nature of moral relativism means each individual designs their own reality and moral compass, postmoderns do not share the same level of shame. This means that, unlike many Christians who obsess about topics like grace versus works, postmoderns simply don't care. Why would they? They also don't share the shame-induced legalistic baggage of earlier generations. As a result, they are not desperate for forgiveness or even salvation—at least, not in the way we often frame it.

Another disconnect is how Christians deal with the topic of certainty. I often hear preachers talk about the uncertainty of the future. They point out the threat of natural disasters, wars and political instability. What hope do I have? How can I know what the future holds? Where can I turn for answers? Where can I find peace? Said no postmodern, ever.

This need for certainty was a hallmark of premodern and modern thought. But as we saw in the previous chapter, postmoderns are okay with uncertainty. It is part of who they are. And they would rather live with this uncertainty than turn to the "opiate of religion" which, in their minds, has already failed to deliver on its promises. And yet, this search for certainty is precisely how many evangelistic and Bible study resources are structured.

But it's not just the structure that is the problem. The framework of this approach is also bankrupt. It assumes a topical exploration of truth—as if God and faith could be boiled down to multiple choice question and answer "look-up-this-Bible-verse-and-fill-in-the-blank" kind of nonsense.

These structures are ineffective for studying the Bible with postmoderns for many reasons. First, they are cheesy. Second, they are too guided (meaning the answer to each question is assumed before the question is asked, resulting in "leading questions" intended to generate a particular "correct" response as opposed to open dialogue). And third, they are designed as a one-size-fits-all, check-the-boxes-so-you-can-get-baptised, and make-us-look-good model that is as artificial as it is boring.

When studying the Bible with a postmodern we must abandon the "how can I convince you of our list of fundamental beliefs so you can join our church" mentality, and instead, be willing to go on a slow,

gentle journey through the narrative of scripture allowing each theme to unfold and stand on its own merit. This means that rather than a structure of “ABCs of salvation” or “Christianity 101”, where we inundate the seeker with one seemingly random doctrine after another, we instead invite them on a journey—a narrative pathway where they can progressively discover the heart of God.

This narrative approach to the Bible, as opposed to a topical one, is the only means of providing them with a foundation that is compelling enough to replace the postmodernism that governs their perception of reality. In addition, a narrative foundation is the only way to provide them with an enthralling and credible perspective on questions they do value, such as the inconsistency of suffering, the ethic of equality, the parametric design of humanity, sexuality and society, etc. These questions, larger than life at times, cannot be satisfactorily answered in multiple choice, “look at this verse here--end of story” kind of approaches. Many questions can never be adequately answered in a multiple choice format, and it’s an insult to people’s intelligence to think they can be. Instead, they necessitate a story.

And of course, stories take a long time to unfold. You cannot study with a postmodern and plan on a “30 studies and then we'll be ready for baptism” scenario. That mindset is part of the old structure of premodern outreach. For the postmodern, you may well be looking at a two to three year journey before church membership even becomes a plausible consideration (and then not always).

You must, in exploring the narrative of scripture, gently confront their distrust of metanarratives. Often, this is not overwhelmingly difficult because the moment a postmodern decides to search out the biblical worldview there is already a sense of dissatisfaction with

their own. However, you cannot be too forceful. Instead, contextualise the metanarrative of scripture to the metanarrative the postmodern already embraces. These tend to be patriarchy and racial inequality—ideas which, to the postmodern, are the result of a big story involving empire, power structures, colonialism, imperialism and capitalism (to name a few). The Bible speaks to each of these, so study them from the postmodern perspective and contextualise your approach to speak life into their value structure. Help them to see that despite the beauty inherent in their social concerns, Jesus offers an objective solution that postmodernism does not.

Of course, don't assume all postmoderns do care about the above themes. Some of them have little interest in those. Remember to listen and ask lots of questions. In doing so, you will find the heartbeat of their value system. Once you do, prayerfully develop a pathway of studying the story of the Bible with them. Let that story unfold the heart of God. As it does, it will become the foundation for challenging their assumptions and offering them the way of Jesus.

Summary

A structured, topical approach to studying the Bible does not work as well with postmoderns. Instead, a narrative approach is what is most preferred (not to mention it is more natural to the scriptures, being how it is actually written, than proof texting). This does not mean narrative is unstructured, but rather that its structure is natural and not forced (as in topical studies). This allows the postmodern to experience the story, participate in it and assimilate it at his/her own pace rather than rushing onto the next theme.

Application

The three simple points below will be of help in a narrative approach to studying the Bible with a postmodern.

1. **Let the story unfold.** The simplest way to lead a postmodern through a narrative study of scripture is to understand the flow of the story yourself and then, take them through that flow at their own pace. A simple flow could be something like pre-creation, creation, fall, covenants, cross, church, conflict and consummation. If you are familiar with the flow you can develop your own system, contextualised to the person you are interacting with.
2. **Contextualise the story to the value structures of the postmodern.** Suppose you are studying with a university student who values racial justice. You can ask them for any documentaries they recommend on the topic. Then, as you watch, look out for the big themes. You can use those big themes in your studies. For example, you may find that a big theme is equality. You can explore this big theme in light of God's creation design, the Sabbath and the gospel.
3. **Challenge unbalanced value structures.** In this sense, you are balancing both the beauty and brokenness inherent in each culture. By celebrating the common themes you can gain the necessary respect to challenge the divergent ones. For example, you may study with a postmodern who believes that the solution to all of society's problems is democratic-socialism. If that is the case, take the time to learn what it is. Then, show them via scripture that the only true solution is the kingdom of heaven, not any man-made political system. This will be a big challenge to the postmodern, so don't push it. Continue to ask questions and learn when to keep quiet and when to take exception.

Chapter Five: The Necessity of Encounter

We have explored three simple steps in this eBook. Those three simple steps are undergirded by the presupposition that one does not need broad philosophical knowledge in order to engage with postmodern culture. Rather, what is needed is a working knowledge of their patterns of belief, the willingness to approach them as mutual truth-seekers and the ability to take them through scripture as a story rather than a set of doctrinal beliefs.

Each of these steps includes substeps. In order to develop a working knowledge of postmoderns, for example, we must be willing to do life with them. While the rejection of metanarratives, moral absolutes and certainty are common, pop-postmoderns are also very diverse. In order to adequately minister to them, we must be willing to literally sit at the table with them and discover, through conversation, their stories, heroes and value structures.

But how do you sit at the table with a postmodern? Do you lean in with answers, propositions and narrow-minded “this way or no way” inclinations? No. This posture, while mildly satisfying to the fundamentalist who thinks it his life mission to shove religious information into people’s craniums, will secure a guaranteed “no thanks”.. God asks us to meet the culture where it is and gently lead it toward his heart. Humility, authenticity and sincerity are required, together with a mutual truth-seeking posture. We approach the pop-postmodernist not as a truth-teller, but as a fellow truth-seeker, eager to journey together toward the heart of God.

This task is not accomplished by simply talking about it or reading about it. It is accomplished only by investing time and energy into developing a strong foundation for our own faith, the ability to

appreciate diverse worldviews, and acquiring the vital skill of listening. All of these are best nurtured in real-life experience, not in endless pontification over theories and buzzword methodologies.

Once the rapport and respect has been established, the culture is then more willing to engage in specifics. While the basic tenets of a truth-seeking posture must never be forgotten, you do have to lead the conversation toward Christ and his message for humanity. This is done by using stories as opposed to topics. The difference here is that stories involve nuance, complexity and mystery. Postmoderns find value in each of these. Topics lend themselves to a more black-and-white approach to truth that lacks relevance and variation. These, the postmodern interprets as coercive and oppressive, given their tendency to view life in many shades of grey.

As the narrative of scripture is explored, the responsibility of the Christian is to become a student of the culture by exploring the value structures of the postmodern. You can watch documentaries, listen to artists, accompany them to an art gallery, film or whatever expression of life they value. Some postmoderns have a social conscience, others an artistic one. Some are post-secular and spiritual, others are naturalists. We might look at this and wonder at the logical contradictions inherent in affirming both a relativist ideal alongside some of these other ideologies, but recall postmoderns are not concerned about logical contradictions. Society is fragmented and truth is to be found everywhere and nowhere.

As the journey through the narrative of scripture ensues, you will encounter some of the most difficult questions of your Christian experience. Here are some of the easier ones you will find yourself having to navigate:

- What makes you think your religion is the only true one? Or your God? Or your holy book?
- People develop their faith primarily through their environment. How do you know your faith is not just an expression of the context you were raised in?
- Words have multiple meanings, so what makes you think your view of the Bible is the only correct one?
- If God is love, why does he allow suffering? Freewill may account for some of that, but surely, like a father who respects his child's freedom and still intervenes to prevent extreme suffering, God could do likewise with us couldn't he? Then why doesn't he?
- What is evil? Different cultures have diverse approaches to what is good and bad. What makes the biblical ethic any better?
- How could God have created Lucifer with freedom of choice if good and evil didn't exist? Is it really a choice if there are no options?
- Why does God create imperfect people and then condemn them for being imperfect?
- Why does God hate homosexuals?
- How do we understand God's supposed love in light of the LGBTIQ+ debate?
- Isn't the Bible patriarchal and sexist?
- The Bible condemns homosexuality while at the same time, accommodating slavery and exploiting sentient creatures (lambs, goats, etc.) for animal sacrifices that God requested. And you say he's a God of love? Why the inconsistency?
- Christianity has been at the foundation of European colonial power and injustice. Why should I believe anything it has to offer?

In the modern era, the questions were different. They usually had to do with the reliability of the Bible and the existence of God. Christians would appeal to logical arguments, scientific support, archeological evidence and historical reliability in order to bolster the case for faith in scripture. But postmoderns don't really care about archaeology, logical arguments and science/history because--at least in the field of ethics and religion--they view each of these as unreliable sources of truth. And all truth sources are, inherently, unreliable. Therefore, while these arguments can be used, one must be careful not to push the “evidence” agenda too far and instead, to go on the journey of unfolding the story of scripture. It is very likely that every question a pop-postmodern asks will emerge out of a platform of relativism, so the Christian needs to aim to offer them an alternative platform altogether, rather than just pick at petty differences. Only a story framework can accomplish this objective.

As I draw to a close there is one more point that needs to be made. When studying the Bible with the culture, do not fall into the trap of philosophical meandering. It is very easy to get caught up in endless technical discourse that leads nowhere. Remember that no matter how much you know, how relatable and relevant you are, or how sincere and compelling your approach, the postmodern cannot be regenerated via conversation, exploration or a recapitulation of their philosophical code. What the postmodern needs is what every man, woman and child in this world needs, regardless of their environment, region, creed or experience, and that is a personal and life altering experience with Jesus. No amount of cultural savviness or methodological brilliance will ever replicate an intimate encounter with God. And to this end, the postmodern must be invited to embrace the mystery that comes with tasting the goodness of God. In the same way that one cannot experience the joy of a freshly baked donut by studying the amount

of yeast, eggs and sugar it contains, how long it baked in the oven or at what temperature, so God cannot be tasted by mere intellectual exercise. If God is to be experienced, we must, at some stage of our journey, lay all of our preconceptions to the side and ask him to reveal himself and make himself known to us. As a partner in the search for truth you can ask the postmodern, “What will you lose if for one day you lay aside the doubts of our culture and simply ask God to reveal himself to you?” You are not here asking them to be converted and join your church. You are not even asking them to commit to a new faith. Only that for one day, at the least, they would pursue the risen Jesus for themselves.

I am confident that the same God that pursued you and I is pursuing every other being on this earth and that he stands on the edges of eternity, with his heart tethered to humanity, waiting in eager anticipation for the heartfelt prayer of even the mightiest sceptic, and that to that prayer his answer will forever be, “Here am I, here am I.” (Isaiah 65:1)

Appendix A: Metamodernism and its Impending Challenge

In Chapter Three of this eBook I made the statement that, among the trend-setters in society, postmodernism is already dead and in its wake, a new way of seeing reality is emerging known as metamodernism. In this appendix I will take a brief dive into the metamodern ideology and its impending challenge for the mission of the church.

In keeping with postmodernism, metamodernism has also yet to be adequately defined. It can also be separated into three expressions: philosophy, art and pop-culture. In its philosophical strand, you will find the same level of complexity and diversity that marks postmodernism. Hence, political philosopher Hanzi Freinacht could say, “There are many strands of thought in contemporary philosophy that could be branded as metamodern…” each of them offering an approach to “life, science, reality, spirituality, art, society and the human being.”[1]

Of course, its artistic expressions differ from the philosophical rummagings, and its pop-cultural manifestation is more diluted still. Therefore, in harmony with the rest of this eBook, I will highlight only its most common manifestation and make some practical observations. In doing so, it is my goal to explain the metamodern foundation to the non-philosophical reader, thus the following observations will be simplified. For those who want a more thorough philosophical treatment of this topic, feel free to visit the articles annotated in the footnotes and linked below.

A Simplified Look at Metamodernism

Metamodernism is not new. It is, in fact, quite old (as in 1970s old) and has recently begun to claim attention as one of the leading contenders in replacing the fading influence of postmodernity. But it's more accurate to say that metamodernism is continuing postmodernism rather than replacing it. This is because much of postmodernism remains in metamodernism with new elements introduced.

To keep things simple (much to the chagrin of the philosophically inclined) I will focus exclusively, as stated before, on metamodernisms most common manifestation. That manifestation can be best described as a non-rhythmic bouncing back and forth between "aspects of both modernism and postmodernism."[2]

But that definition does not help much, so let's zoom in a bit and try and make more sense of it. Metamodernism can be defined as an oscillation between the cynical irony of postmodernism and the naive sincerity of the modern age. In other words, modernists naively believed they could change the world through science (as one tiny example because I'm trying to keep things simple here). Postmodernists, on the other hand, distanced themselves from this belief by virtue of its failure to manifest anything it promised. So for the postmodernist, cynical irony took the place of this positive view of progress. But the cynical irony has left us bankrupt. We avoid the foolishness of believing science can save us (again, remember I am just using one tiny example from a much larger conversation here) but end up empty. So, the metamodernist suggests that the way forward is to keep the distance while simultaneously embracing the naivety. To quote Freinacht again,

> "This… perspective leads us… to see that you can be an atheist but still have a profound spiritual life and be brimming with faith in the divine; to be both Left and Right… to have a holistic perspective where all things are beautifully interconnected, yet recognizing that the universe is always tragically broken and that there is no hope for full salvation.
>
> And in that hopeless place of a broken universe, and no God, and no direction of progress, and with a guarantee that you'll always be mistaken in the end, and with the recognition that whatever you say will be misinterpreted and misused, and that you won't be the hero or the good guy in the end – you still go ahead with religious fervor, with pristine sincerity…"[3]

So what is metamodernism? If we are to focus on its most common manifestation (which practically speaking is the part that the culture will run with) then we are talking about an emerging *vision du monde* that embraces two equally opposing ideas at the same time: hopelessness and hope (again, an intentional oversimplification). However, the metamodernist is not balancing the two ideas as in a paradox, but rather swaying non-rhythmically between them.

Metamodernisms Challenge

So how does this present a challenge to Christianity? That awaits to be fully seen. Taking into account the garbled nature of pop-postmodernism, one can only assume a similar manifestation in cultural metamodernism. In keeping with assumptions, I offer a purely speculative vision of a cultural mood in which a person can be both a Christian and an agnostic, believing that God is undiscoverable while simultaneously embracing the naive sincerity

of the church-goer who thinks God is personal and intimate. Or believing that salvation is impossible while embracing the "self-deluding" scriptural promises of atonement and redemption. Adherents to this cultural shift will prove difficult to reach while appearing open to the gospel. We may even see a resurgence in church attendance, baptisms and membership without realising that many of our "converts" may very well be oscillating between their cynical hopelessness in the final fate of the universe, and the gullibility of faith in a final restoration. In other words, they won't really believe the gospel but will add it to the cynical irony they already carry. This will be, in some ways, comparable to the Hindu who receives Christ and adds him to his pre-existing pantheon of gods (the "both-and" perspective of the metamodern is preceded by Eastern synthetism and appears to be a recreation of it[4]), or to the wolf who covers his authentic-self in the garment of a sheep while never truly experiencing a metamorphosis of being and worldview.

In a Huffington Post piece titled "Metamodernism: The Basics", contributor Seth Abramson makes the following observation:

> "Metamodernism seeks to collapse distances, especially the distance between things that seem to be opposites..."[5]

And there you have it. It is this collapse between distances--this sporadic dance between sincerity and irony, salvation and annihilation, hope and hopelessness--that most clearly identifies the metamodern. From a philosophical perspective this is an insulting oversimplification, but recall, I am not concerned with the philosopher, but rather, with the broad culture that feeds on the regurgitated remains of the meal. And it is there, in the culture, that this attenuated brand of metamodernism will take its place as a new ethic for a new generation.

While this certainly poses a challenge for the disciple-maker, as in postmodernism, it also brings with it brilliant opportunities for dialogue and cultural transformation. For example, if the cultural metamodern is engaged in the oscillation between irony and sincerity then this opens up the heart to the possibility of redemption and restoration that was mocked in postmodernism. The challenges posed by its negative slant on optimistic faith as "naive" is a challenge that, as in all other systems of thought, can be overcome by a combination of meaningful dialogue and the influence of the Holy Spirit upon the human heart. But at least there is a positive openness to the possibility, even if that openness is, in all honesty, a backhanded compliment.

In conclusion, postmodernism is dead in the philosophical and artistic worlds. Metamodernism, while not the only emerging alternative, appears to be taking the lead. In due time, a diluted version of this complex system of thought will trickle down to the culture and emerge in a series of platitudes, clichés and banal axioms that will (and I speculate) fuel a whole new approach to faith as a necessary cloak for our *a priori* embrace of approaching despair. Christians will have to work hard to both understand the nuances of the phenomenon as it unfolds and, simultaneously, present to the culture an authentic Christianity that works in the lives of believers by exhibiting in them the reality and reliability of the gospel's transformative promise. And if they see that reality unfold, they will perhaps be more open to the possibility that universal redemption is true and a promise worth believing - without oscillation.

Further Reading

Metamodernism: The Basics by Seth Abramson
What is Metamodernism? by Hanzi Freinacht
The Difference Between Post- and Meta-modernism by Hanzi Freinacht
Notes on Metamodernism by Timotheus Vermeulen & Robin van den Akker
The Metamodernist Manifesto

Footnotes

[1] Freinacht, Hanzi. "Metamodernism: The Conquest of a Term," [Web: https://metamoderna.org/metamodernism-the-conquest-of-a-term; Accessed: 01/19]
[2] Wikipedia. "Metamodernism," [Web: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metamodernism; Accessed: 01/19]
[3] Freinacht, Hanzi. "Metamodernism: The Conquest of a Term," [Web: https://metamoderna.org/metamodernism-the-conquest-of-a-term; Accessed: 01/19]
[4] Williams, Jared. "Logic Battle - East vs. West," [Web: https://www.countertopministries.com/logic-battle---east-vs-west.html; Accessed: 01/19]
[5] Abramson, Seth. "Metamodernism: The Basics," [Web: https://www.huffingtonpost.com/seth-abramson/metamodernism-the-basics_b_5973184.html; Accessed: 01/19]

Appendix B: Resources for Developing Truth-Seeking Skills

ONLINE SCHOOL

The Mission Collective (Post-Modern Evangelism School)

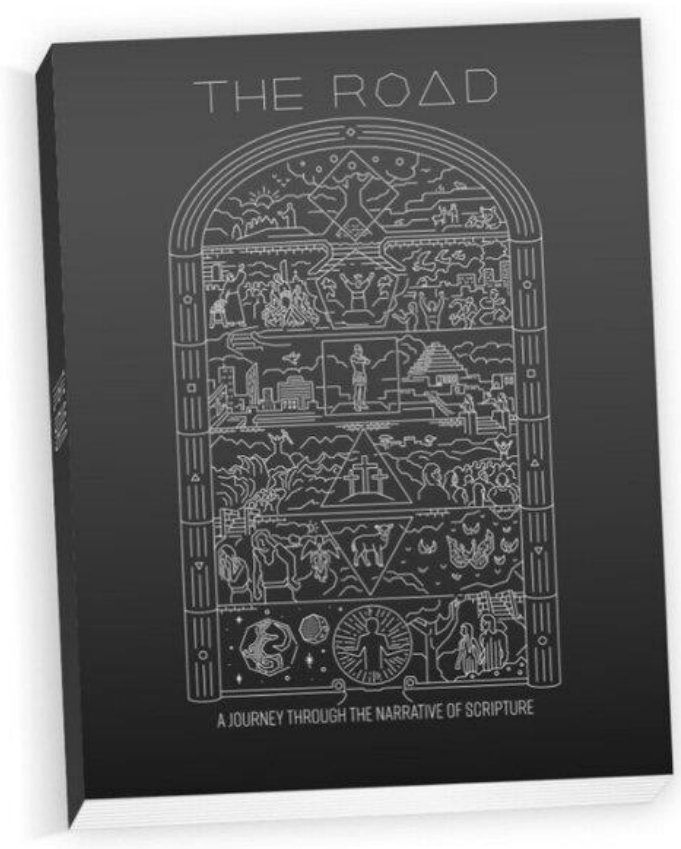
BIBLE STUDY SET

The Road: A Journey Through the Narrative of Scripture (An SDA Bible study set designed for post-church engagement) by Marcos D. Torres

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About the Author



Marcos D. Torres is an Adventist pastor in Western Australia. His biggest passion is equipping a new generation of disciples for mission in secular cities.